# Brink Porn

## Temporal Narcissism

Most of us spend a lifetime waiting for the stars to align; and get through the day by supposing that such alignment might be very, very soon.  (Horizons are appealing because of what we imagine to be just beyond them.)  This seemingly innocuous proclivity can be easily exploited by shrewd operators who know how to push the right psychical buttons.

To wonder what fate holds in store for us is part of the human condition.  Speculation about when “the time has come” is always in the back of our minds; and it is tempting to suppose that it might be ANY DAY NOW.  The notion that better days are ahead–and that a longed-for destiny may even be immanent–helps us sleep at night.  The prospect of possibly being on the brink of something wonderful–a

breakthrough, an epiphany–gets us out of bed each morning. After all, today might be THE DAY. It is a game we all play with ourselves; as it keeps us going. We ALL need something to look forward to; and we must believe that it's not too far off.

But more than immanent culmination (a reckoning that is close at hand), this leads to an abdication of worldly responsibilities beyond one's own salvation. Ironically, being obsessed with ONE thing entails apathy about, well, everything else. "No need to be concerned about the distant future; it's all in god's hands. Sustainability? Why bother? God has it all under control. The End Times are nigh anyway!"

It is thus tempting to believe that one is living at an auspicious moment not just in one's own life, but in all of human history. Consequently, one is prone to think that one is serendipitously situated at a pivotal juncture, when a major sea-change is about to occur. The implication is that "NOW" the stakes are higher than ever before. Given our primally-hardwired tendency to respond impetuously when seized with a heightened sense of urgency, there are few better ways to get people's attention that to persuade them that the fate of their eternal soul hangs in the balance, and that the pivotal moment is nigh. For the impresarios of this theological gimmick knew that people would be willing to make drastic decisions if they perceive themselves to be in existential duress.

The critical faculties become hamstrung in a panicked mind, to put it mildly. Hence an artificially-induced sense of urgency is a prime way to manipulate a credulous audience. This is why every politician likes to say that THIS election is the most consequential of our lifetime, time after time after time. And it is why we are all tempted to fall for the line, time after time after time.

This is why Francis Fukuyama was inclined to pen his over-eager (and laughably wrong-headed) "The End of History And The Last Man" in the advent of the implosion of the Soviet Union c. 1991. {1} It was an air of triumphalism that tempted the over-zealous Fukuyama–earnest yet intoxicated–to indulge in the self-satisfying delusion–embraced by many at the time–that the world was teetering on the cusp of history. Providence had seen fit to bring the Cold War to a glorious culmination, with magnificently capitalist, stentorian United States at the helm.

This conceited view of history is impelled by the ubiquitous urge for self-congratulation–something we all experience whenever we feel our cause vindicated by the course of events. It is natural for the in-group to suppose that watershed

moments are always about “us” and OUR AGENDA; and the rest of the world should therefore take heed. This is the central conceit of “brink porn”; for fashioning ourselves as the protagonists in history’s pivotal juncture FEEDS this tendency to exalt ourselves.

A charismatic leader who proffers such Brink Porn in a compelling way is sure to capture the attention of those who are disaffected, disoriented, insecure, and–above all–credulous; and so hankering for something that will give them hope.

The slings and arrows of life–the trials and tribulations we are forces to endure–often makes WORLDLY hope difficult, as the future always looms forebodingly on the horizon, like gathering storm-clouds. With an ominous worldly future, one is forced to look to what Nietzsche cheekily dubbed “True Worlds”. When DIS-enchanted, people yearn for a source of RE-enchantment. A telos gives people a sense of purpose, a sense of DIRECTION, and a kind of reassurance that everything is–as it were–heading somewhere (somewhere that’s worth heading).

This is why new religions tend to crop up during times of turmoil and unrest–the optimal climate for roiling Messianic fervor. Impresarios of cult activity are quick to exploit the anxieties endemic to this pathos. It is a gambit to justify their cause when people are highly receptive to flights of fancy.

In case after case, we find that when the moment is ripe, charismatic leaders both thrive off of–and so foment–the mania / hysteria (two sides of the same coin) that characterize the Messianic impulse that fuels their following. (Note the pattern in “The History Of Exalted Figures”.)

Let’s grant the (obnoxiously narcissistic) supposition that the entire universe exists as a venue for homo sapiens here on this third planet from Sol; and ALSO leave aside the mystery of why the Abrahamic deity bided his time for almost 14 billion years before finally deciding to bring them about. This is anthropocentrism on steroids.

9:29 in the Koran reminds us how paramount belief in “the Last Day” was for the early Mohammedan movement. Indeed, this verse indicates that the authors of the Koran deemed such a belief to be a fundamental criterion for their new Faith. For without an eschatology, they would not have been able to convey a sense of urgency. Moreover, without a teleological framework, they would not have had the carrots and sticks necessary for motivation.

Our hunger for prophecy goes back thousands of years (discussed forthwith in “Legacy Of Mages”). The gimmick is the same today as it has been since time immemorial: Be as vague and as provocative as possible, and one will SEEM to be clairvoyant. {2}

Brink-porn works like a charm. For it is much easier to catch people’s attention when they can be convinced they are on the verge of something spectacular. One is on the cusp of determining one’s FATE? Gadzooks! The thinking goes: It is therefore critical that one play one’s cards right; and all the more pressing that it be done NOW. A hefty dose of Brink Porn eventually convinces everyone: The day of reckoning is upon us!

This is why it was during the Exilic Period that Judaism was codified by the Hebrew scriveners of Babylon. And so it went with Pauline Christianity, from its days as a Judaic movement in the Second Temple Period…through its pre-Nicene phase over the course of the next three centuries. It is clear from his letters that Saul of Tarsus was thoroughly convinced that the End Times were immanent. Note his admonition to the Romans: “You know what time it is, that it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now that when we first became believers. The night is far gone, the day is near” (13:11-12).

In the letter to the Hebrews, the opening line states that–in the past–god spoke with ancestors at various times in various ways, but IN THESE LAST DAYS he has spoken via the Christ. In other words, the Last Days were IMMANENT.

This sense of urgency–predicated, as it is, on the imperiled existence of their eternal soul–persists in the Christian mind to the present day, TWO MILLENNIA LATER. Islam has followed suit, employing this gimmick to the maximal degree.

And so it went: Saul believed that Christ’s return–to usher in the Day of Judgement–would occur within his lifetime. This conviction was also made clear by his first letter to the Corinthians 7:28-31, in which he tells his male followers that if they’re not married by now, they shouldn’t even bother going to the trouble of finding a wife. The apocalypse was nigh–a glorious culmination that we mustn’t miss, and it’s going to happen ANY DAY NOW. (The “catch”, of course, is that “any day now” is always the case. We are wont to speculate about what lies just beyond a

perpetually receding horizon.)  Even in the original Gospel (that of Mark), it is foretold that the Second Coming is immanent in the opening verse of chapter 9 (also ref. 13:30).  This is echoed in:

- The Gospel of Matthew 16:28
- The Gospel of Luke 9:27
- The first chapter of Luke's "Acts Of The Apostles" (verses 4-5)

The refrain is: "Hang in there!  For in the end, it'll all pay off."  The impression that the End Times were immanent was clearly prevalent amongst the authors of the canonical texts.

There are perverse repercussions to this delusive cosmic view.  Concerns for "akhira" (the afterlife) trump concerns for affairs in THIS (the only real) life.  To the degree that we feel obliged to prep for an imaginary afterlife (to obsess over what Nietzsche called "True Worlds", a task that is held to be the sine qua non of human existence), the less devoted we will be to the future of the real world.

We are all tempted to posit our own glorious eschaton–a final destination toward which history is inexorably marching.  That is: We are all inclined to indulge in some kind of teleological thinking–be it finding our soul mate (we were destined to be together) or enjoying the spoils that we were denied during our Earthly life.  It is an eschaton that makes it all worthwhile, the ultimate End that justifies everything else.  A Final Cause helps us make sense of anything–and everything–that happens.  Moreover, it helps us orient ourselves in the world; as it gives us something to SHOOT FOR, and thus furnishes us with a sense of a purpose.

Yet as history unfolds, every culmination is revealed to be a mere transition; every climax turns out to be yet another stage along the way.  Along the way to what?  Well, there is no pre-determined course.  The future is not a destination; it is a perpetually-receding horizon.

A dependable system of orientation is extremely useful in that it attenuates the existential vertigo that may otherwise afflict us–precluding the bewildering sense of being lost at sea (what Sartre dubbed "nausea").  One not only finds ONESELF with a sense of direction; everything in one's life is given a kind of trajectory.  The world is made to MAKE SENSE. {3}

Life is but a sequence of junctures, each of which holds promise. So we are chronically inclined to speculate that our destiny lay JUST AROUND THE CORNER… even after having turned the previous corner. The anticipation keeps us hooked on whatever program offers guidance through this propitious hour. Those who seek to bait us can take advantage of this impression–the impression of being on the cusp of something momentous. For, we are notified, THEY will inform us of the crucial move that will lead us to the Promised Land (see my essay, "The Island").

And so we find the same schtick in the Koran: "Then do they wait, except that the appointed hour should come upon them unexpectedly? But ALREADY there have come its indications" (47:18). Behold: We are ON THE CUSP of End Times. Throughout Islam's holy book, we are told repeatedly that the appointed hour is near–a point reiterated in 22:6-7, 33:63, and 42:17. {4}

Such alarmist rhetoric not only creates a false sense of urgency; it has the immensely gratifying effect of furnishing believers with a way of MATTERING (or at least feeling like they are a part of something tremendously important). The message is hard to ignore: This is it! Things will turn out magnificently for you…IF you play your cards right. So you better get with the program!

Virtually every charismatic leader has used this schtick since time immemorial. Indeed, this gimmick is timeless. It generally takes the form: "A momentous occasion is just around the corner; so we must WATCH OUR STEP…lest we miss our divine calling." The key is to convince everyone that they need not wait much longer: "Just hang in there a little bit more; and we'll make it!" Such prognostication was in keeping with what we read in the original Gospel–that of Mark: "Verily I say unto you, that there be some who stand here who shall not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of god come with power" (9:1). The Gospel even begins by announcing that "the kingdom of god is AT HAND" (1:15). The sentiment is echoed in the Gospel of Matthew, when we are notified that John the Baptist proclaimed that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). Meanwhile, JoN himself stated: "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (24:34).

The immanence of the End Times was reiterated in the first letter of John, which mentions the anti-Christ "who you have heard is coming; and is even now already in the world" (4:2-3). That's right: The series of events depicted in the Book of Revelation was believed to have already been set in motion at the time it was written. Christian fanatics spent the subsequent two millennia waiting for the

Second Coming to materialize…even as their scripture clearly stipulated that it was already afoot by the end of the 1st century A.D.  This takes “keeping the dream alive” to stratospheric levels.

The foreboding prognostications in the Book Of Daniel would have undoubtedly served as fodder for self-proclaimed prophets.  Such captivating teleological asseverations could be used–and, indeed, were used–to stoke Messianic fervor throughout the Roman Empire, especially during JoN’s lifetime.  This included events like a giant, horned beast coming from the sea (a take-off on Tiamat…thus betraying the material’s basis in Babylonian myth), lots of fire and destruction, and a great resurrection event.  (There’s also a rock becoming a mountain that covers the entire world…thus betraying the authors’ conception of a flat earth.)  By touting signs of the End Times, the text fuels trepidation.  This is, of course, by design; as an audience in a state of desperation is much easier to manipulate.

The fascination with (purported) harbingers of the End Times continued throughout the Middle Ages–as demonstrated by the “Quindecim Signa Ante Judicium” [“Fifteen Signs Preceding The (Last) Judgement”], which started with seven signs…and then expanded to fifteen (presumably people were looking for more material).  The work was originally composed in Late Antiquity, and seems to have been a spin-off of the Apocalypse of Thomas…which was itself a spin-off of the Book of Revelation (a work of anti-Roman propaganda couched in fantastical eschatology inspired by the Book of Daniel).  Look for omens, and you will find them everywhere.

What we find, then, is an abiding obsession with the fact that the End Times were just around the corner; and that the course of human events was about to come to fruition ANY DAY NOW (read: in OUR OWN time).  This historiographical conceit has tremendous allure.  After all, we want things to–ultimately–be all about US.  That is: WE are perched at the culmination of human history…teetering on the brink of some monumental event, a final reckoning to which everything in OUR history has been building.  Thus: We are center stage.  What’s not to love about THAT?

SENSE OF URGENCY: Everything that has happened in the past comes down to what we do NOW.  So it’s ALL up to us.  Our mission is simply fulfill our destiny…and bring everything to its triumphant conclusion.

So we might ask: According to Mohammedan lore, what sorts of things would augur the End Times?  According to the most vaunted Hadith: The death of MoM himself, an ensuing fitna in Dar al-Islam, and the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem (Bukhari

4/53/401). All these things came to pass in short order. {5} In other words: Portents for Judgement Day were events experienced by the Salaf…in the 7th century. {6}

The pathos continued, unabated, for votaries of all three Abrahamic Faiths–as attested by the on-going stream of claimants of Messiah-hood enumerated in "The History Of Exalted Figure". When, in 1095, galvanized denizens of Christendom undertook their Holy Crusade, they were convinced the Apocalypse was nigh–demonstrating, yet again, that once people get swept up in the fervor of apocalyptic thinking, it takes on a cultic dimension. Christendom witnessed this manufactured sense of urgency–even hysteria–on each subsequent Crusade for the next few centuries. The End Times were–interminably–at hand, it seemed. The conviction did not diminish as the generations came and went, without the eagerly anticipated eschaton materializing.

And so it went: The apotheosis of human history was always RIGHT NOW; so we must ACT. Drastic measures are warranted when the culmination of human history might be tomorrow. Yet along with way, what with the perpetually receding horizon, tomorrow never quite arrives.

This line of thinking–enthralling as it is–helps us believe something quite bewitching: that the future is in the palm of our hands; and–even more reassuring–that Providence is on our side. Brink Porn indulges all these cravings. It is no wonder, then, that so many are held in the thrall of captivating narratives that make use of this gimmick.

The psychology here is relatively straight-forward. We all want to believe that there shall be a "moment of truth"; and we all like to think that it's just around the corner. "Any day now! Just hang in there!" Moreover, we all want a chance to prove ourselves. And what better way than to show how we'll fair should an apocalypse befall mankind?

In terms of a collective, the thinking becomes even more hyper-dramatized. The fate of humanity hinges on what WE do; and–more to the point–what we do NOW. Thus "we are the chosen" goes from tribal to temporal. Such magical thinking can be extremely gratifying. For one gets to assert: "Finally! The chance for VINDICATION is close at hand." Judgement Day is not just an occasion for just deserts; it is an occasion for one's comeuppance.

Groupthink takes over–replete with mass-mania–and those “taken in” by the narrative are held in its thrall indefinitely. For the supposition is forever on the verge of being corroborated. One can relish the anticipation throughout the course of one’s life; and it never wanes. There is an undeniable appeal to notion that the world is perpetually on the verge of a (final) reckoning; and one will finally–at long last–be able to demonstrate one’s worthiness.

The key, then, is to believe that the appointed hour is near. It is tremendously gratifying–even invigorating–to be able to say: “It all comes down to THIS!” This might be called “temporal narcissism”: a present-centric view of history that privileges one’s own epoch in a grand cosmological scheme. According to this historiographical conceit, the CULMINATION of human history is at hand; and WE shall be the stars of the show. Such thinking is extremely alluring; yet it easily mutates into hubris.

Making use of this compelling narrative helps us make sense of everything that happens in a world that is often dismaying. Demagogues have a habit of getting time-tables intimated in scripture to fit one’s own time. Thus John Calvin (a religious fanatic if one ever existed) referred to the Book of Daniel as “a mirror to the age”; and found in its verses every rationalization he needed. He did so by–as it were–reading between the lines. (Interpretation, it turns out, is oftentimes more eisegesis than exegesis; whereby one simply projects the desired meaning onto chimerical subtext.) “The apotheosis is upon us. The time is NOW. We have arrived at our destiny!”

These particular dogma-peddlers were effectively pimps of the apocalypse–currying favor with credulous followers by hawking the eschaton. The opening verse of (Paul’s letter to the) Hebrews chapter 11 illustrates this. It defines Faith as “hypostasis” [conviction] in the credence of that which is hoped for. Faith helps to make the illusory seem real, and so enables those who are delusive to have credibility.

And so it goes: Brink Porn serves as a surefire remedy for despondency. Indeed, it is an antidote for existential lassitude. Such a narrative also gives one a sense of direction, of purpose, orienting one in a bewildering world. Thus it cures even the most severe cases of existential vertigo. We all yearn for something that we can look forward to; yet with an uncertain future, we have nothing CONCRETE to look forward to. By positing some glorious event that is certain to happen in the not-too-

distant-future, we are given something to get excited about. In the midst of all that is disheartening, disenchanting, we are given something that will make it all worthwhile.

By seeing things in this (gratuitously provocative) manner, all that happens–whatever it may be–can be seen as a resplendent unfolding of a divine plan. An unfolding must have a telos; so the plan must culminate in a glorious ESCHATON, bringing all our highest hopes to fruition. Believing there is a REASON FOR everything makes everything MAKE SENSE. Knowing how everything will "come to together" and "work itself out" in the end is the ultimate consolation.

Hence the lurid portrayals found in Abrahamic eschatology. The proposition is very enticing: Rather than tumbling, unbidden, toward an ominous fate; we are marching in lock-step toward a glorious destiny. For everyone who feels short-changed by their lot in life, they are guaranteed a final SETTLING OF ACCOUNTS–a moment of Truth, when everyone will–FINALLY, at long last–get what's coming to them. Even more enticing: This come-uppance is JUST AROUND THE CORNER. It awaits us…if only we march onward.

And so it goes: Don't stray from the path; just stick with the plan. Such a sales-pitch proves quite effective at keeping an audience captivated–which is to say: holding them captive. What we must keep in mind is that belief often stems from a NEED TO believe. Believe what? Well, to believe SOMETHING. Believing that, no matter how dire things get, something wonderful is held in store for us, is tremendously useful.

Contrived immanence is the key. There is no better way to capture an audience's attention than to say: Shit's about to go down! And YOU can be a part of it if you'd like. (But beware; 'cause it's gonna be MONUMENTAL, and you don't want to wind up getting the shaft.) Keeping the hope alive is the optimal way to keep people "signed up" for the program.

The "catch" is that one sees an existential precipice wherever one looks; and ANYTHING can be seen as corroboration of the supercharged presentiment–no matter how delusive that presentiment ends up being. Starry-eyed supplicants find themselves "waiting for Godot" on a cosmic level.

The sense that things will soon be finally–at long last–coming to fruition can be entrancing, and irresistible, especially in trying times. It is what draws people to apocalyptic-ism in all its outrageous forms. In the 19th century, Joseph Miller

recognized this; which is why his following only kept growing each time his prediction of the end of the world proved to be wrong.  When it comes to magical thinking, countervailing evidence is moot.  If anything, countervailing evidence encourages True Believers to all-the-more vociferously cling to their delusion; as believing its veracity becomes increasingly urgent.

A fascinating case-study of this phenomenon was done by Leo Festinger in the early 1950's when he studied the "Brotherhood of the Seven Rays" (a.k.a. "The Seekers"), an apocalyptic cult in Chicago  that was an offshoot of Scientology founded by the self-proclaimed prophetess, Dorothy Martin (discussed in Festinger's 1956 book, "When Prophecy Fails").

Religious zeal is only exacerbated when it meets resistance; as it becomes all-the-more-urgent that it be vindicated.  Ever-more drastic measures are required to sustain the illusion; thereby bolstering the cause.

The key to stoking–and exploiting–neuroses is keeping people eternally on edge; leveraging manufactured neurosis to one's own advantage.  People who are insecure are far easier to manipulate.  The stratagem is simple: Keep people in a state of high alert in perpetuity.

This is a reminder that mass-mania and mass-hysteria are symbiotic.  As neurosis and false hope are two sides of the same coin.  EITHER can be engineered; and to engineer one typically involves engineering the other.  A perpetual state of anticipation and a perpetual state of un-ease keeps people hooked.  BOTH involved an engineered delusion.  This is how cult leaders like Cotton Mather and William Miller kept their followers even after their apocalyptic predictions kept failing to materialize.  With each iteration, proponents of the delusion will insist: "This time it's different!"  Just before his death, the founder of the Watchtower Society (Charles Taze Russell) insisted Judgement Day was about to happen.  Jehovah's Witnesses have been revising the year ever since. {7}

It is easy to convince ourselves that THIS is finally going to be the appointed hour… simply because we are all inclined to temporal narcissism.  Indeed, we all like to think that history is culminating with US.  This is the central conceit of brink-porn, and the primary reason apocalypticism maintains it allure–going back to Hilary of Poitiers c. 365.  From the Joachimites (an apocalyptic Franciscan cult from the 13th century) to New Age aficionados' quirky readings of the Mayan calendar in 2012, the phenomenon is timeless.

The degree of conviction is almost always proportional to the magnitude of the delusion. The 2nd-century Christian cleric, Irenaeus of Smyrna was certain that the appointed hour would come in the year 500. Pope Sylvester II was certain it would be the year 1000. Anabaptist, Melchior Hoffman was certain it would be in 1533… and when that didn't come to pass, Jan Matthys was certain it would be the very next year. Martin Luther proclaimed the appointed hour would be in the year 1600. And on and on and on.

The rationalizations for such outrageous claims are endless. During the 17th-century, Jewish mystic, Sabbatai Zevi of Smyrna used the Kabbalah to support his claim that the end of the world was nigh. Meanwhile, Scottish mathematician, John Napier predicted that the end of the world was nigh with a flourish of arithmetic acrobatics. People will believe precisely what they are determined to believe; and a charismatic leader need only furnish them with ample rationalizations. Likewise, people will see only what they want to see. Thus harbingers of the Last Day can be seen in virtually anything–from foreboding apparitions to the passing of a comet (ref. the zany theories surrounding Hale-Bopp in 1997). No matter how dire things get, we are encouraged to see events as portending some kind of Valhalla (assuming we sign up for the program on offer).

It is one thing to undertake a mendacious form of manipulation; it is quite another to maintain it in perpetuity, without anyone ever catching on that it is a ruse. Brink porn enables impresarios to keep followers in line, by perpetually reassuring them: "Don't worry, any time now. Just hang in there." The trick is to keep false hope alive: "Just stick with it, and you'll be in for a real big treat!" Whatever happens, it can be seen as a portent to wonderful things that lie in store for you…IF you play your cards right.

The ultimate incentive is an other-worldly Paradise that nobody can actually see, held in store for True Believers AFTER death; so the claims can never be corroborated. If the audience is held sufficiently rapt (to wit: captive), this illusion can be sustained indefinitely. In other words: If implemented with savvy, the jig will never be up. (I discuss an allegory of this kind of scam in the essay, "The Island".)

The trap can be exploited in myriad ways. Indeed, the same psychical mechanisms are at play in the mind of a credulous man at the mercy of his libido, who is assured by a conniving seductress: "I promise, just ONE MORE favor, and maybe you'll get a chance to take me to bed." Such a man–clinging to a thread of hope–can be strung

along for all eternity.  Pace the libidinal impulse, similar psychical mechanisms explain this that explain the appeal of brink porn–be it in a religious or political context.

The yearning for a final reckoning is, of course, understandable.  We are ALL eager for ultimate justice to be visited upon–well–EVERYONE, and as soon as possible. (This is especially so considering so many wonderful things happen to horrible people, while so many horrible things happen to wonderful people.)  So we'd all very much like to think that this comeuppance is just around the corner.  (After all, what good is a final reckoning TO US if it is too far over the horizon?)

The timeless allure of believing in a glorious apotheosis transcends culture.  And so it went with the emergence of the Abrahamic Faith in the 7th century, when Messianism swept through Arabia and became all the rage.  As is explicated in the Addendum, MoM capitalized on the same kind of Messianic fervor that has driven most other apocalyptic movements throughout history.  Once more, True Believers anxiously awaited the moment of Truth to finally arrive.

Generally speaking, most of what one does is predicated on the expectation of a specific outcome; and so suspected outcomes invariably dictate ones behavior.  This is a matter of sheer practicality; and so does not necessarily require a fantastical teleology.  Historicism–especially insofar as it is fixated on a hair-raising eschatology–maps this heuristic to cosmic proportions.  Doing so enables one to translate such thinking to an existential–as well as global socio-political–context.

Hence we find ourselves with two paradigms–diametrically opposed to one another. Progressives are focused on bringing about a new beginning (that is: moving forward).  Reactionaries, on the other hand, are focused on bringing about an apotheosis (and doing so by harkening back to tales of old).  The idea of re-constructionism is to RESURRECT, which mandates some kind of reversion–that is: a perceived mandate to bring things BACK to the way they (purportedly) used to be.

Such an enterprise requires a tantalizing telos–a destination to be assiduously pursued at the expense of EVERYTHING ELSE.  The aim is to usher in a CULMINATION; so the pursuit becomes–existentially speaking–the sine qua non of human existence.  Anticipation of this impending culmination bestows one with a sense of satisfaction.  For, as it turns out, I MATTER; as I have a role to play in this grand scheme.  The eschaton needs to be brought about, and I can be part of it! This is fantastic.  How could one possibly turn down such an opportunity?

Pace Karl Marx's fanciful notion of a worker's paradise (historicism loves its panaceas!), it is almost exclusively RIGHT-WING thinking that is characterized by utopianism. {24} The key is to exploit this longing for an (impending) utopia. This exalted state can take the form of a kingdom of god (à la Augustine) or an anarcho-capitalist Valhalla (à la Ayn Rand). Thus utopias can be cast in either socio-economic or theologic terms–whatever the occasion warrants. (See my discussion of a "New Jerusalem" in my essay, "City Of David".)

Indeed, a compelling narrative vehicle can be tailored to suit one's predilections. A sense of urgency (the supposition that THIS is a pivotal juncture in mankind's history) impels people to act on such expectation–often resorting to fanaticism to ensure the realization of their vision; or even to tolerate the direst of straits with the expectation that it will all be worth it in the end (see "The Island"). The allure of this cosmic view is plain to see: No matter how dire things might get, we are assured that "it will all be well worth it in the end." Credulous flocks, captivated by this narrative, can be strung along indefinitely. Indeed, such reassurances will keep them at peak truckle in perpetuity.

So long as an enticing eschaton is dangled before the eyes of the credulous, they will be willing to endure any tribulation. Indeed, a sufficiently compelling telos can be concocted to justify any kind of deprivation or depravity. It is no coincidence, then, that it is amongst the most fanatical elements of a religion that "brink porn" has the most purchase. (In Judaism, there is a reason it plays such a prominent role in Revisionist Zionism. In Christianity, there is a reason it plays such a prominent role in American Dominion-ism. In Islam, there is a reason it played such a prominent role in Daesh.) There is a reason we don't hear such talk from, say, Quakers.

And so it went with William Miller's prediction of the Rapture in the 1830-40's, Edgar C. Whisenant's prophecies in the 1980's…and most recently, Harold Camping apocalyptic pronouncements, which attracted lots of media attention for about a month, and was promptly forgotten when his appointed day came and went.

By WHY is this "just around the corner" way of stringing people along indefinitely is so incredibly effective? The neuroscience behind this is relatively straight-forward. Dopamine rushes are largely about the ANTICIPATION of reward, not about the reward itself. That is, it is the IMPRESSION of an impending reward that counts. Even more striking: It is the MAYBE (rather than a certainty) of the anticipation that makes the dopamine secretion go through the roof. The neurotransmitter spikes

when the anticipation stems from the sentiment, “Maybe TODAY will be the day, but I’m not sure…so I better get my act together!” (Or maybe the day will be TOMORROW.) This is what keeps people captivated–or, as the case may be, held captive (as illustrated by the parable of “The Island”).

This predilection can be exploited, which is how casinos stay in business; and why people play the lottery.

The “teetering on the precipice” trope is seductive–and oftentimes extremely intoxicating. It always seems to work because we are always still JUST HUMANS, susceptible to the same ol’ gimmicks of yesteryear–though with new packaging. It is tempting to place ourselves at the culmination of, well, EVERYTHING. As we are, by definition, NOW at the point that everything until now has led up to! For those involved, such a conceit comes off more as lucidity than as hubris. Who needs to worry about a distant telos–exasperatingly out-of-reach–when we’re just about already there? Destiny is so much more enticing when it is at our doorstep. When it comes to fate, there’s no time like the present!

And so it is no surprise that, throughout history, around the world, we encounter the supposition that WE are moving inexorably toward a foreordained destination. As I show in the next section, eschatological motifs around the world, throughout history, have depicted an End Times that is glorious and exciting; and thus worth looking forward to.

Anyone who claims that we are ON THE CUSP is simply exploiting the penchant for temporal narcissism that we all have. {8} But such historiographical conceit is not a good thing; it is a surefire way to view one’s place in history in delusional ways. Today is just another one of the future’s many bygone eras.

History is not a pre-ordained plot-arch; it is an open-ended process that could go any number of ways, depending on our own decisions. There is no destination; there is only an array of possibilities open to us…regardless of who we are. That was the case a thousand years ago; and it will be the case a thousand years from now.

Don’t worry; there’s a point to it all; and in the end it’ll all make sense. Take heart, it will all be worthwhile in the end; just hang in there. All the necessary planning has been taken care of already; everything has already been figured out. Trust that everything will eventually work out as it should. God has everything under control; and won’t forget about you.

God has everything taken care of, and makes no mistakes.  So if things currently aren't working out for you, you have nobody to blame but yourself.  (Implication: You aren't pious enough.  Be more subservient!)  And if you curry favor with the powers-that-be, you will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams.  The Church of Latter-Day Saints promises men their own planet…over which they will rule AS A DEITY. (!)  We are all heroes-in-waiting in our own dramatic production, seeking a portent of some glorious destiny so that we might realize our calling.

This isn't just about giving us something wonderful to look forward to…no matter how grueling life may be.  Visions of an after-death "life" in a nebulous hereafter were designed to allay anxieties about our mortality.  When we encounter anything that brings the (illusory) credence of that psychical / social construct into question, we end up experiencing the very anxiety those constructs were designed to allay.  So we either have to jettison the construct (for what?) or push back against whatever it is that is threatening to undermine it.  (The best work on this issue is Ernst Becker's "Denial Of Death".)

The prospect of abandoning the (gilded) dogmatic edifice on which one stands is not an enticing one; especially when one see that one is surrounding by a roiling ocean of uncertainty.  So when one's sacrosanct beliefs are challenged, one's dander invariably goes up; and one is more apt to dig in one's heals than bother with the hard work of critical reflection.  When one's worldview is in jeopardy, the natural reaction is to circle the wagons and lash out at anything that dares approach.

# Judgement Day

Eschatology involving the End Times goes back to the Vedic account of “Kali Yuga”, an epoch that mankind is currently experiencing.  According to the ancient “maha-rishi” (great sage), Makrandeya, signs that the End Times are upon us are rulers becoming unjust, women remaining un-wed, and people becoming addicted to intoxicants.  In addition, gurus will no longer be respected.  To top it all off: avarice, lust, and violence will become commonplace.  In other words: For anyone at any point in history, it sounds like things were yesterday and how things will probably be tomorrow.

In Judaic lore, the End Days are referred to as “Aharit ha-Yamim”; while the resurrection of the dead is referred to as “[t]Zadikim”.  Note that the End Times is also referred to in Messianic terms, such as the “Day of the Chosen One” (First Book of Enoch 61:5).  Judaic lore even posited a literal (physical) resurrection of the dead–as in Isaiah 26:19 and Ezekiel 37:12.

Prognostications of resurrection went into overdrive in the New Testament–as in the Gospel of Mark (8:31, 9:9/31, 10:33-34, and 14:28). And recall that the Gospel of Matthew stated that many were ALREADY resurrected, after Jesus (qua Christ) was himself risen from the dead (27:52-53). This oratorio of balderdash captured the minds of many throughout the Roman Empire…as well as Coptics in Egypt and Syriac peoples of the Middle East. This is attested by some of the texts in the Dead Sea scrolls (spec. the so-called "War Scroll"), which describe a final, apocalyptic battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness–replete with an eternal blaze being held in store for the damned. This was echoed in the original Gospel (that of Mark), which describes "Gehenna" (the Koine Greek rendering of "Ge-Hinnom", meaning "valley of Hinnom") as a place of unquenchable fire. Authors incorporated memetic accoutrements from Hellenic lore (spec. regarding Tartarus) into their foreboding portrayals.

Bear in mind that the "Book of Revelation", penned by a John of Patmos, was little other than a phantasmagorical screed–designed more as anti-Roman propaganda than as a serious eschatological treatise. It was recognized to be contrived by the Council of Laodicea c. 363 Key figures like Marcion of Sinope and Eusebius of Caesarea concurred. It was primarily the Nicene Christian fanatic, Athanasius of Alexandria who lobbied to include this dubious tract in the official canon.

In Islamic eschatology, this final battle is known as "Malhama" / "Malahim", adopting the apocalyptic alarmism of Messianism found in the "Book of Revelation"…in which all of human history culminates in this grand, cosmic clash. And Judgement Day is depicted in lurid detail as a sensational cataclysm–wherein everyone gets what's coming to them. It is THE FINAL settling of accounts (for which we are supposed to spend our lives preparing). This penultimate occasion is variously dubbed "Yawm ad-Din" (Day [of Reckoning] of the Righteous Way of Life), "Yawm al-Ghadab" (Day of Wrath), and "Yawm al-Qiyamah" (Day of Resurrection). It is announced by the blowing of a celestial trumpet (blown by archangel "Israfil")–as propounded throughout the Koran (6:73, 18:99, 20:102, 23:101, 27:87, 36:51, 39:68, 50:20, 69:13, 73:8, 74:8, and 78:18). Such fanfare is, of course, just a repeat of the angels-blowing-trumpets routine found in the New Testament's "Book Of Revelation". That the authors of the Koran deigned to recycle the ramblings of John of Patmos should give us pause. (In reality, they were probably more influenced by the writings of 4th-century Syriac writer, Aphrahat of Ashuristan, who based his menacing eschatological musings on the Book of Daniel.)

According to the Koran, the blowing of the trumpet occurs along with a potpourri of other ominous signs: the blackening of the faces of the damned (3:106, 7:46, 10:27, 39:60, 55:39, and 67:27), the destruction of mountains into dust (18:47, 19:90, 52:10, 56:5, 69:14, 77:10, 78:20, 81:3, and 89:21), earthquakes (73:14, 79:6, and 99:1), the sky turning red like ointment (55:37) and becoming like boiling oil / molten lead (70:8), the sky spinning (52:9), the sky splitting (25:25, 77:9, and 84:1), the moon splitting (54:1), the moon joining with the sun (75:9), the stars falling down from the sky (81:2 and 82:2), the appearance of two gigantic columns of darkness / smoke somewhere on the horizon (77:30-32), etc. And, don't forget, the wall staving off the dastardly foes, Gog and Magog will be rent asunder (21:96).

To add to the mayhem, there will be thunder and floods and famines and plagues and–most foreboding of all–lots of hedonic indulgences. (Goodness gracious!) All this calamity is said to culminate in god rolling up the Earth and sky in his hand (39:67), a feat that only makes sense if the Earth and sky were things that one could, well, ROLL UP.

At some point during all this pandemonium, the saved will be whisked away to Paradise–in groups, with angelic escorts. They will be magically transported up to the heavens while the condemned will be frog-marched down into "the Blaze"…that is, after everyone has been literally (physically) resurrected from their graves (27:67 and 54:7).

A final day of reckoning is a common theme in religions. It is invariably an occasion for sentencing to one of two afterlife destinations (see my essay: "A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell").

According to the Koran, all accounts are settled in an especially spectacular fashion. Like fanatical Christian pre-millennialists, the authors of the Koran eagerly anticipated the promised cataclysm with both relish (for their own anticipated fate) and schadenfreude (for those who didn't play along with their agenda). Indeed, they looked forward to gloating while their fellow man–misled as he was during life–suffers in excruciating agony for all eternity (for the unforgivable crime of "not getting it").

The Koran offers a cartoonish eschatology. While John of Patmos' propagandistic ramblings (in the "Book of Revelation", composed at the beginning of the 2nd century) are couched in overwrought metaphor, the Koran's descriptions of the apocalypse are explicit. Both are sensationalized to the nth degree: confabulations

of lurid spectacle designed to instill both hope and foreboding. However, the former was comprised of euphemisms and symbols while the latter was intended to be taken literally.

As with the “Book of Revelation”, the authors of Islam’s holy book emphasize spectacle over theological nuance, providing sensational imagery in a manner that befits a CGI-saturated Michael Bay film. The pandemonium on the appointed day is an overwrought mishmash of fantastical events–many appropriated from the depictions provided by John of Patmos. The bottomless pit, “Haawiyah”, was the Arabian version of “Abaddon” in the Book of Revelation…which itself was a recycling of the Greek, “Apollyon”. {9}

The climactic cosmic imbroglio features a hyper-dramatized, Manichean (good vs. evil) account of what happens to the damned vis a vis the saved. As we’ll see, the allotment of divergent fates transpires amidst a macabre panorama of natural cataclysms–intended as harbingers of the terminal valuation. Seen through the right lens, every burden, every set-back, and even every tragedy augers some Grand Finale…wherein all of us who had Faith will get our just deserts.

Antecedent Abrahamic versions of the Apocalypse (most notably, that of John of Patmos in his Book of Revelation) involve a great cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. Such a clash is standard in “end of days” portrayals. The Koran’s version of the celestial extravaganza on Day of Judgement (typically dubbed “Yawm ad-Din”) leaves everything in the hands of the Abrahamic deity.

Mohammedan syncretism knew no bounds, adopting leitmotifs from whatever happened to be available. The Islamic account of damnation even pilfered the idea of a narrow bridge to the hereafter (from which the condemned fall into hell) from Zoroastrian theology. In the original (Persian) version, the set-piece was dubbed, “Chinvato Peretum” (a.k.a. “C[h]invat”): the bridge to “Takamagahara” (where souls are judged by “Rashnu”). In the Hadith, the bridge is simply re-named, “Al-Sirat” (alternately, “Sirat al-Mustaqim”)…as if referring to it in CA lent it a sheen of authenticity.

The idea of a magical trestle leading to a celestial Valhalla is not uncommon–as we know from Jacob’s dream of a “ladder” in the Book of Genesis (typically represented as a stairway). Indeed, the bridge-to-heaven leitmotif can be found in myths from all over the world, from “Bifröst” / “Asbru” (the rainbow bridge to Asgard / Himinbjörg in Norse mythology, where souls are judged by “Heimdall”) to “Ama-no

uki-hashi" (the bridge to the afterlife paradise, "Takama-ga-hara" in Shinto Japanese mythology). Even Scientology has the sacred "Bridge To Freedom" (comprised of the progressive stages of "Operating Thetan").

People have been telling tales about the end of the world since the Zoroastrians posited "Frashokereti". It's not merely that Mohammedan lore–like any lore–was fabricated; it's that it was OBVIOUSLY fabricated. Bereft of nifty ideas of their own, the composers of the Koran were disposed to scavenge the Middle East for extant memes–incorporating anything useful into their hybridized narrative: Judaic, Gnostic, Hijazi pagan, Zoroastrian, et. al.

Other familiar tid-bits appropriated from the Zoroastrian apocalypse, "Frashokereti":

- The mountains will crumble
- The sun will be blotted out
- All the dead will be resurrected to face judgement

Portrayals of this fateful day involve lots of fire and mayhem–replete with the obliteration of sunlight, floods and earthquakes, and general global devastation. The lurid depiction is enough to terrify almost everyone, including children…as well as giraffes and gerbils.

In Mohammedan cosmology, "Yawm ad-Din" occurs at an undisclosed point in the future. 80:21-22 indicates that all will lie in wait from the day they die until Judgement Day, at which time they will finally be resurrected. And, per passages like 27:67, 36:78-79, 54:7, 75:3-4, and 79:10-11, when that day arrives, we will literally (physically) be brought out of our graves. (!) Due to this fantastical event, Judgement Day is also referred to as "Yawm al-Qiyamah" (alt. "Qiyamat"; Day of Resurrection). This is an indication of the degree of superstition underlying the Koran's composition. But it was nothing new. In Judaic tradition, the End Days ("Aharit ha-Yamim") also involves a raising of the dead ("Tehiyat ha-Metim"). {10} And the Christian Gospels foretells the same event: the physical resurrection of the entire human race (on the Last Day).

The Hadith provides even more garnish on the Koran's fantastical eschatology. For example, it foretells the "Masih ad-Dajjal" (impostor Messiah). {11} We are notified of the impending arrival of a nefarious figure, the appearance of whom will serve as a harbinger for the "second coming".

The authors of the Koran were convinced that Judgement Day was immanent. 53:57 (the End draws nigh), 54:1 (the hour draws nigh), and 75:34-35 (near to you is destruction, and nearer again, nearer to you and nearer). Again, we see that instilling a sense of urgency was a useful rhetorical trick–persuading the audience that the day of reckoning was close at hand (so they better get with the program!) That was fourteen centuries ago.

The Hadith bear this out. In Muslim's Hadith, MoM is purported to have said the "my coming and the coming of the hour are concomitant; indeed the latter almost arrived before me." (Gadzooks!) We are told that MoM once pointed to a young man and proclaimed: "The hour will arrive before he reaches old age" and "If he lives long, he will not grow old before the last hour will come." Elsewhere: "Some of those who see me, or hear my words, will live to see [the coming of the 'Dajjal']."

"Dajjal" will serve as the ultimate foil for the coming Mohammedan Messiah, the "mahdi". In Millenarian Christian eschatology, this character is comparable to the "anti-Christ" (alt. "the "Beast"), a motif inspired by the "Book of Revelation" by John of Patmos.

THAT had been based upon the Judaic notion of "Armilus", chief antagonist of the coming Messiah in Judaic eschatology, who's arrival shall augur the arrival of the long-awaited Messianic Age, "Olam Ha-Ba". {12} And THAT character was likely cribbed from the Zoroastrian antagonist, "Ahriman" (and his nefarious emissary, "Aka Manah").

Since the Final Revelation was delivered to mankind (i.e. since MoM's ministry), "Dajjal" has been chained up on an island somewhere in the Erythra Sea ("Bahr al-Ahmar" in Arabic; a.k.a. the "Red Sea"). As the story goes, at the appointed time, this diabolical imposter-Messiah will become unchained and usher in a time of drought, famine, and pestilence. The idea is that he will wreak havoc so that he may then pose as the savior.

In due course, the "Dajjal" will rise to power, with fawning crowds–in the thrall of his bedazzling charisma–earnestly rallying around him. This is, of course, a regurgitation of the End Days scenario found in Christian Millenarianism, in which a sinister character associated with Rome (i.e. the anti-Christ; a.k.a. "The Beast") becomes a global leader. One needn't be a philologist to recognize that this "Whore of Babylon" was the basis for the hair-raising tales of the "Dajjal" we find in Mohammedan lore. {11}

While Christian eschatology holds that the venue for the final showdown will be located in the valley proximate to a hill in northern Canaan named “Tel Megiddo”, Mohammedan eschatology posits the Amuk valley (proximate to “Dabiq”) in “al-Sham” (northern Syria) as the location for the ultimate clash (ref. Muslim’s hadith 41/9/6924). However, other versions claim it will all happen in al-Quds (Jerusalem). Meanwhile, it is supposed that the nefarious armies of God and Magog (from the Torah) will make an encore appearance.

All this mayhem will occur until the prophet, Isa (Jesus of Nazareth) descends from the heavens to Damascus; and saves the day.

The notion of a Kingdom Come is commonplace in ancient eschatology. A key component in the narrative seems to be a super-villain with whom the forces of good shall wage battle in a climactic shown-down (at the end of times). This nefarious character shall rival the cosmic forces of righteousness–thereby providing an enthralling set piece for the impending extravaganza. The spectacular confrontation thus involves an arch-nemesis pitted against an exultant personification of the forces of salvation.

In Ancient Norse eschatology, this arch-nemesis is “Surtr” (representative of the banished “jötnar”), hailing from the fiery realm of “Muspell”. Not only will the jilted “Surtr” return with a vengeance, there will appear the great beast, “Jörmungandr” (the Midgard serpent) to presage the arrival of the apocalypse: “Ragnarök”. Surtr’s sinister designs include engulfing the world in flames. So, the story goes, we must beware the impending day of reckoning…lest we meet our doom.

Again: The arrival of a menacing anti-savior figure augers the culmination of human history.

The Ancient Norse rivaled John of Patmos in their sensationalized depiction of the foretold “Last Day”. As mentioned, upon the arrival of “Ragnarök”, the ominous “Surtr” will engulf the world in flames as he battles the “Aesir” (the most vaunted gods). Meanwhile, Thor will battle the Midgard serpent, “Jörmungandr”; while Odin battles the giant wolf, “Fenrisulfr” / “Hrodvitnir” (a.k.a. “Fenrir”). All this mayhem will transpire on the plains of “Vigridr” / “Oskopnir”. Then, the monstrous “Hati” will swallow “Mani” (the moon)…while a leviathan named “Sköll” swallows “Sol” (the sun). Meanwhile, the unworthy will burn in the global conflagration.

To reiterate, much of the ominous fanfare was merely a regurgitation of Pauline Christology, in which we're told that celestial trumpets provide the score for Judgement Day. (Yes, Armageddon has a soundtrack.) Clearly, the authors of the Koran heard this account and thought it was a nifty idea; so they incorporated it into their own foreboding prognostications of an impending apocalypse. (For more on the role of eschatology in a Grand Narrative, see the Addendum.)

In the modern era, Abrahamic Millennialism has taken the form of so-called Messianic / apocalyptic cults–where the focal point is the "End Days" (the end of the world; according to some interpretation of Abrahamic eschatology). Such groups–from Revisionist Zionists to Daesh–are now recognized by level-headed people as deranged; yet we should bear in mind that they all reflect a Weltanschauung that was commonplace in the Middle Ages–for Jews, for Christians, AND for Muslims. Such delusional world-views are animated by Providentialism (replete with talk of the fulfillment of prophecy), whereby the chosen few eagerly await their destiny.

This makes sense. For the question that all humans are inclined to ask, "Is THIS all there is?" (alt. "Is this ALL there is?") begs for an answer. {14} It is an existential itch that needs to be scratched–sometimes desperately so. Anyone that offers a quasi-plausible answer to this will command attention. Such a captivating eschatology also serves as a way to "make sense out of" everything: life, the world, the ineffable. The answer to "So what the heck is the point of all this?" is something we can't help but ask; and we all yearn to have answered. A well-crafted eschatology is thus an effective narrative vehicle: captivating, compelling, and tremendously useful.

On Judgement day, we're told, god will employ a peculiar calculus, dolling out tawdry rewards by multiplying good deeds ten-fold…while macabre penal measures will be exacted in direct proportion to bad deeds (6:160-1, 27:89, 28:84, and 42:23). So righteousness is instrumental in deciding one's fate: It is an investment (which, we're told, will yield dividends in the hereafter); with debits incurred each time god is displeased. (Life is given a valuation, whereby one's destination after death is determined by one's status on the ledger: the "illyun".) Thus the value of piety is its utility: one does it to secure benefits for oneself.

Yet, then again, god will VOID bad deeds and only count the good deeds (46:16 and 29:7). Question: Can this clear discrepancy be chalked up to shoddy translation? Answer: No. It is there in ANY language.

As I discuss in “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”, there are usually two possible destinations, but there also needs to be some sort of segue–an EARTHLY culmination of events. Supplicants long for a reckoning in THIS world, prior to being ushered into the next. {13} It seems that those who consider themselves pious want the satisfaction of seeing their god smite anyone who dissents from them. (Judgement Day, it seems, proceeds from a craving for schadenfreude…both for supplicants AND for their deity.) The notion of just deserts (that everyone is getting what’s coming to them) is tremendously gratifying for those who see themselves as having enduring tribulation in order to maintain piety. The assurance that there will be a final “settling of accounts” is what makes it all seem worthwhile.

It is tempting for religionists to say: “WE may not be able to cleanse the world of the impious, but–rest assured–GOD will eventually be able to take care of it. Hurray!” Such an apotheosis provides them with this satisfaction ex ante; whilst establishing a TELOS to boot. And if there is a TELOS, we may as well make it as dramatic as possible. On the appointed day, there shall be a spectacular celestial melee…which involves carrots and sticks. The maudlin portrayal is comprised of:

- a tumultuous crucible of terrifying cataclysms–replete with dazzling pyrotechnics–befalling the un-chosen
- a sumptuous medley enticing perks–replete with oodles of tasty treats and on-demand sex–showered upon the chosen

With an incentive structure firmly in place, all we have left to do is await instructions.

“Outsiders will rue the day they dared to question us! And, boy-oh-boy, are we going to enjoy seeing them punished…whilst we receive our splendrous rewards!” The promise of “just deserts for all” is hard to turn down…which explains why the idea has traditionally had purchase in both Christianity and Islam.

Hinduism handles this via karmic justice…which requires a series of reincarnations (since it is obvious to everyone that karma does not work within the context of a given lifetime). Ancient Egyptian theology handled it via “Maat”, according to which judgement was performed by weighing a person’s heart (presided over by Anubis) in order to determined whether the person would be admitted to the Reed Fields [“Sekhet-Aaru”] (analogous to Elysium)…or would be doomed to eternal unrest in

“Duat” (analogous to Hades in Greek cosmogony or “Sheol” in Hebrew cosmogony). And, yes, their heaven and hell had GATES (see my essay, “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”).

The End Times were foretold in Hebrew Bible (e.g. Zephaniah 1:14-16; as well as the foreboding prognostications in the Book Of Daniel). And what of Messianic designs? The Mikra culminates with the promise of the return of Elijah (Malachi 4:6). We might recall that Elijah never died; he ascended to heaven…a leitmotif that should sound oddly familiar. Those in the Abrahamic tradition have been anxiously anticipating the “second coming” ever since…from the Jewish Messia[c]h to the Shia “twelfth imam”.

Our fate in an imagined hereafter thus trumps worldly concerns. Rulers relish this narrative. For the rabble are persuaded to resign themselves to their sad lot in life (it’s all part of god’s plan)…knowing that they’ll get their just deserts AFTER life. As we’ve seen above, it’s a boondoggle; but people continue to fall for it.

There is not a human that has ever existed who has not been enticed by the notion that everyone will eventually get what’s coming to them–for positive or negative. Indeed, we all want to believe in karma in some form or another. The “catch” is that any given party wants to believe that, on the great karmic ledger, IT is in the black whilst its adversaries are in the red. Being convinced of this is tremendously gratifying. “This hasn’t all been for nothing!” one can say, even as one endures tribulation. “It’ll all pans out in the end.” Hallelujah.

The telos proffered by the Koran is ultimately about saving your own hide. The Koran mentions that on the appointed day, siblings and spouses will run away from each other. Indeed, parents will even forget about their own children. The only thing with which each person will be concerned is saving his own ass. Thus, agape is anathema when all the cards are down. (Perish the thought of human solidarity.) This takes “every man for himself” to epic proportions–another testament to the moral degeneracy of the Koran.

And so it goes: “If you didn’t spend your life groveling before the designated deity, you deserve eternal anguish,” is the moral of the story. And while you suffer, the impresario of the cosmos will gloat. (What sort of divine super-being resorts to taunting, one might ask? Well, the one depicted in the Koran, of course.)

The problem is that the raison d’etre for this particular day is unclear. If, since

Mohammed's ministry, everyone has been either condemned to hellfire or whisked away to paradise after dying (according to the terms stipulated in the Koran), then why the need for a specific "Day of Judgement" (scheduled for some undisclosed, discrete point in the future)? Hasn't everyone now deceased already been judged?

Or have all those now deceased merely been "in holding" during the interim? (Sentence pending.) This existential limbo is a sort of "barzakh" in Arabic parlance. In this ontological state-of-suspension, are souls simply biding their time until the worldly arrival of the pending "sa'at" (terminus of the world's timeline)? What would be the nature of these provisional accommodations? Is this "holding" place like purgatory? (This idea can actually be found in the Jewish Apocalypse of Ezra 4:35.)

In any case, we are exhorted to believe that all "nafs" are kept in this state-of-suspension until "Yawm al-Qiyamah", at which point each soul shall be remitted to corporeality; and subsequently remanded to the appropriate destination.

Those consigned to perdition for having demonstrated insufficient piety will be directed to hellfire, where they shall be chained and shackled and forced to endure an eternity of excruciating pain (each afforded a perpetual replenishing of their epidermis so has to ensure perpetual agony). Meanwhile, those who earned the favor of the cosmic overlord will be admitted to Paradise (presumably sans hang-nails, abdominal cramps, flatulence, itching, sneezing, and headaches) to enjoy all the worldly pleasures they'd hankered for on Earth–in perpetuity.

According to the theology proffered by Islam's holy book, EVERY day (nay, every moment of every day) is an on-going occasion for myriad judgements, as people are always dying. Barring those still living, has not everyone in history has already been directed to the appropriate afterlife destination (upon death)? (They died; and have presumably been there ever since.)

So what, exactly, will change when the appointed day of reckoning arrives? If anything, that final day would, well, just be THE END (of mankind's Earthly existence). That is to say, the "testing" process would be complete. But, on that final day, there would be nothing special about the judgement per se; as it would operate according to the same algorithm that it always had (though, apparently, with much more fanfare). Thus, that auspicious date would simply be a worldly termination point; not some kind of ultimate verdict on each person's fate in the "hereafter". The verdict for each deceased person is "already in".

YET…Koranic verses like 2:212 and 39:74 intimate that said judgement WON'T happen until the eventual day of reckoning. The future tense in such verses is either GENERAL, or it pertains to the future FOR EACH PERSON–as their own death is in their own future. In other words, the future tense is relative to each person's lifetime, not to the world's timeline. That said, the fact that there is nobody in heaven / hell YET is intimated in these verses.

This entails a different cosmic scheme. For, in the meantime, we can only presume, the sentencing is pending. So perhaps every deceased person in history is currently "in holding" after all. (6:158, 11:103-108, 36:51, 45:27 indicate that the deceased are still awaiting their destination.) These verses use the future tense of what shall befall mankind, insinuating that the ultimate fate does not immediately come to pass. {15}

The closest we get to a description of the interim period for those deceased consigned to perdition is 23:99-100 (in which we're told that there is a "barrier behind them" until Judgment Day). This indicates that the condemned are effectively "in holding". Damnation for them, therefore, is pending (at least from OUR point of view, here on Earth).

Presumably, said "barrier" means that the condemned are not allowed to reverse their sentence via repentance. The Koran is adamant about the fact that no amount of contrition (after one dies) can redeem one once one has been condemned (note, for example, 2:167 and 23:65-66). There's no turning back. Upon death, damnation is irreversible. The Koran even goes so far as to give dialogues in which the condemned plead and repent…to no avail. In fact, the book's protagonist seems to relish the fact that they are begging in vain.

But, then, why is it often supposed that people are NOW in heaven / hell? If 2:212 and 39:74 are true, then they CAN'T be…YET. Rather, everyone who's ever lived is in some kind of "limbo"…for the time being. So we might wonder: Have they been conscious all this time? They must be extremely bored! Do they at least get to watch the goings-on down here on Earth in the meantime? Assuming god knows where each of these people will EVENTUALLY be going, is there a different holding place for the heaven-bound than there is for the hell-bound? It seems unfair for them all to be in holding TOGETHER…for all that time.

Thus the question remains: If people are promptly judged as they die, then why does there need to be a JUDGEMENT Day someday? On the other hand, if the "recompense" has not yet taken place, then both heaven and hell should currently be vacant. Yet the discussion of BOTH destinations in the Koran indicates otherwise. There are only two possible ways to resolve this eschatological problem.

First: The intervening time (between any given person's death and J.D.) can be assumed to be instantaneous from the point of view of the deceased–as both the judge and the respective destinations exist in eternity (i.e. a-temporally). (16:77 indicates this may be the case.) However, even in this scenario, the existence of a J.D. would be gratuitous (superfluous). Moreover, if god were doing all this from a timeless perspective, he would not need a ledger to "keep track" of things, as the Koran repeatedly says he does.

In any case, the REAL problem with this resolution is that it creates a new theological snafu. If heaven and hell are timeless, then it is impossible for denizens of the locations to enjoy / suffer from the experience of being there (as it would need to take place over the course of time).

Second: In dying, maybe souls are instantly time-warped straight to J.D. From the perspective of the deceased, then, J.D. would thereby "arrive" immediately. But this entails that the deceased are not able to witness the goings-on back here on Earth during the intervening period. After death, many centuries (or even millennia) may elapse back here on Earth before judgement occurs. (The interim has already been almost 14 centuries…and counting.) This "fast-forward" means that loved ones who were "saved" don't get to see / hear those who remain back here in Earth. It also means that, from our perspective back here on Earth, nobody is YET in either heaven or hell. The implications of all this don't jive with how votaries think about the deceased. This is a not insignificant glitch in the theological machinery. {16}

Meanwhile, what about all the world's infants and toddlers on that fateful day? As with infant and toddlers who die young IN GENERAL, they will have never been afforded the opportunity to become either deniers or believers. Are they given a pass? What would be the "cut-off" age for such consideration, exactly? (Or, if not an age, a quantifiable maturity level?) What about the mentally handicapped? What about those who were visually- and hearing-impaired, thereby unable to receive the relevant information without a severe disadvantage? What about those in remote / isolated locals, who therefore never had the chance to make the choice

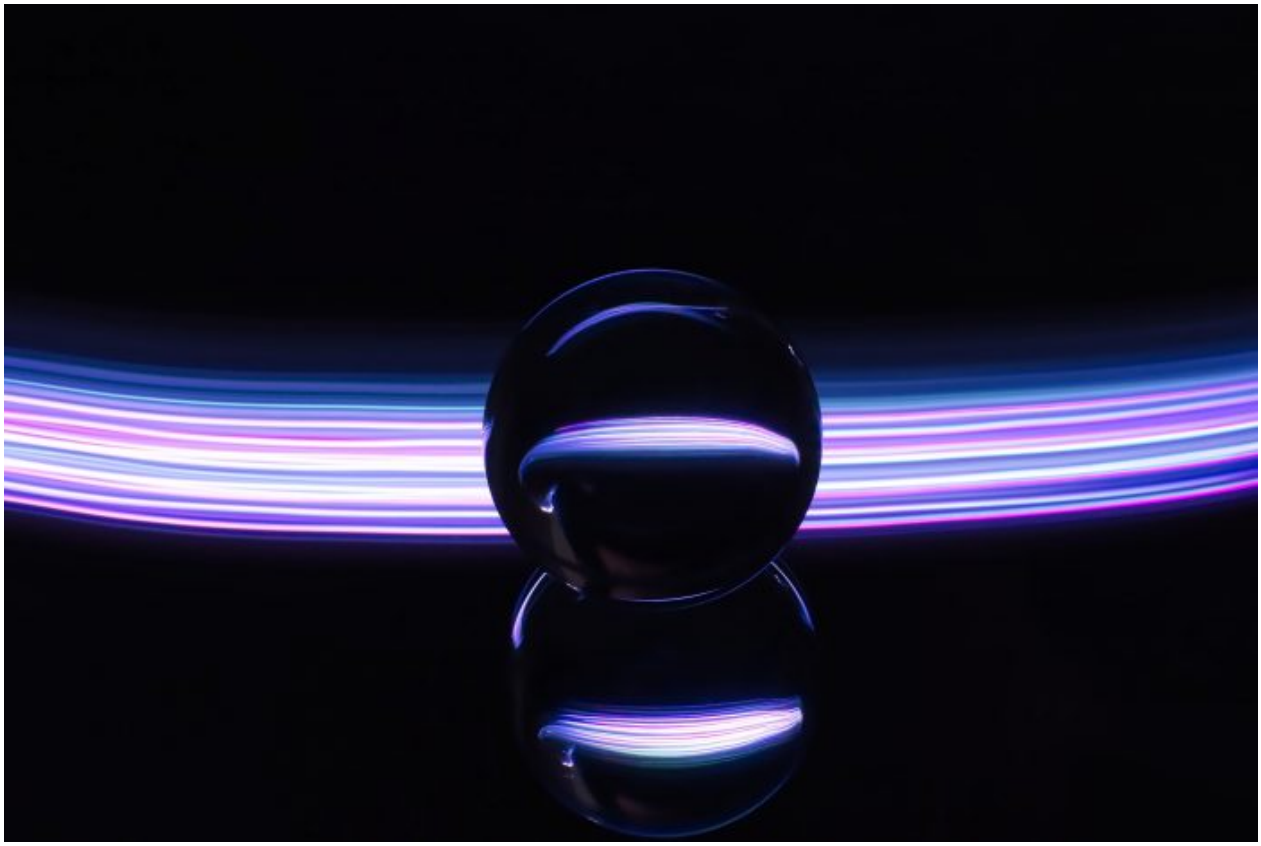
one way or another? It might be noted that the Christian “rapture” encounters the same quandaries. But fear not about fetuses; 22:2 notifies us that all pregnancies will be aborted on the appointed day.

One way to “solve” a puzzle is to demonstrate that the puzzle never existed in the first place. Apologists often attempt to do this by arguing that critics are just misrepresenting things, concocting a predicament that isn’t really there. I am open to the possibility that I may be guilty of this mis-step. But an apologist would need to show how the existence of a J.D. can be reconciled with the notion that there are already people residing in heaven / hell…or that, when it comes to the deceased in the interim, there is no eschatological state-of-suspension.

So there we have it: The Creator of the Universe has an impending reckoning with his own creation–many of whom are condemned to eternal torture before they were even born (per the doctrine of pre-destination). Short of a pathological degree of sadism, how does this make any sense?

Meanwhile, as far as votaries are concerned, celebrating the immanent fate of unending agony to be inflicted on all humans in history who happened not to be Muslim seems not to be consummate with probity. One must wonder: Is any decent person capable of such a mindset?

Progressively-inclined religionists have the wherewithal to resist this temptation. They are willing to update their eschatological musings by acknowledging the metaphorical nature of their cosmogony. This requires recognizing that Reform is an on-going process that is forever open-ended. It is a process that is not smooth; as it is punctuated by watershed moments (memetic saltations), many of which might be rather uncomfortable. Progress is journey that never truly ends. That is to say: Progress is never conclusive; it is always provisional…and open-ended. While we can be shooting for the stars, there is no temporally-discrete eschaton. And history knows no timeline that has fore-ordained the present moment.



# Legacy Of Mages

As humans, we are all inclined to see magic where it doesn't exist.  This stems–in large part–from inferring causation where there is only causation; thus seeing design where there is only coincidence ("apophenia"), and seeing intentionality where it doesn't exist (i.e. in the natural world).  Such hyperactive agency detection attributes naturalistic phenomena to the wily machinations of ethereal beings–and thus of supernatural forces.

It is one thing to hawk this or that prophecy, as seers have been doing since time immemorial.  It is quite another thing to engage in conjuring.  Both involve the (alleged) summoning of supernatural powers to make incredible things happen.  Hence both can be used to beguile.  Whether channeling or conjuring, snake oil has always been a hot seller.  When it comes to brink porn, this predilection is salient; as it captures the imagination, and can be used to manipulate people en masse.

Belief in magic (sorcery, shamanism, etc.) stems from the same superstition as animism: assigning the “intentional stance” to all of nature.  It is the immature mind that is prone to such delusive thinking; and those who are insecure that are most susceptible to cultic thinking.

We all WANT TO believe in magic; and for some, this predilection translates to believing THERE REALLY IS magic.  We all want to be enchanted, and are often apt to indulge in musings about the mystical.  Anything that might SEEM mysterious (if we let our imaginations run amok) is something we are prone to suspect might be REAL.  We entertain the notion because it intrigues…and before we know it, we end up fancying it to be TRUE.  We are often EAGER to believe things to be miraculous even when they are not. {20}  Consequently, we indulge in flights-of-fancy even if the thing we suspect happened DIDN’T EVEN HAPPEN.

It should come as no surprise, then, that there are some people to exploit this.

In “The Long History Of Exalted Figures”, I discussed the role of the demagogue (esp. qua charismatic leader) vis a vis cult activity.  It should also be noted that, when cult activity involves belief the the supernatural (as it often does), the savvy cynosure claims to command some kind of preternatural abilities–esp. divination. Powers of clairvoyance (esp. prophecy) and of healing (esp. magically bringing about certain events) are typically ascribed to the revered leader, thus justifying his vaunted stature.

In his “The Sociology of Religion”, Max Weber even went so far as to equate the demagogue with the magus: “the magician is the person who is permanently endowed with charisma.”  Here, “charisma” meant more than just acumen in manipulating people; it was indicative of a (purported) supernatural endowment…at least in the minds of the followers.  For Weber, magic played a central role in cult activity.

It is no coincidence, then, that those who are believed to have preternatural abilities often end up being the leaders of cults; and the leaders of cults often end up claiming preternatural abilities.

Of course, this means that people must first believe that magic exists, and that it is possible for certain “special” people to harbor it.

The notion of magical figureheads is not limited to miracle workers. The idea of MAGIC has bewitched people since time immemorial. The ancient Greek notion of “goeteia” (charm / sorcery) inspired occult practices of theurgy [alt. “goetia”] during the Middle Ages. Anglo-Saxons referred to it as “dry-cræft”.

The Druids had the “draoi”. The Vikings had the “seidrmann”. The Sami had the “noaidi”. The Balinese had “siwa”. In Vedic lore, mystics were said to be imbued with magical powers were called “siddhis”.

There is a timeless intrigue regarding shamans who purport to have preternatural abilities–typically involving powers of divination or the ability to summon supernatural forces and bend them to their will. One of the earliest instances of such legend was Egyptian sage, Im-hotep, dating from the 27th century B.C.

According to the Roman chronicler, Celsus (early 2nd century A.D.), throughout the Middle East, there were myriad figures who were said to have accomplished wonders; and even Jesus Christ HIMSELF spoke of them. (That is: JoN was aware that he was one of many figures who claimed supernatural feats.) The archeological records supports this. Indeed, various papyri from the era tell of sorcerers who (were said to have) performed miracles as healing the sick, conjuring food, and even stilling storms.

Apocryphal tales of warlocks / witches, sorcerers / sorceresses, wizards, soothsayers, and other kinds of magicians have proliferated since Classical Antiquity–largely due to the universal human fascination with the paranormal. {18} Note, for example, the Apollonian Sibyllae [sorceresses] of Cumae (a.k.a. the “Cumaean Sibyl”; most famously, the Cimmerian sibylla, Carmentis of Cumae), of Tibur, of Samos, of Pythia (a.k.a. the “Delphic Sibyl”; not to be confused with the later “Oracle of Delphi”), of Dodona / Epirus, and of Erythrae (a.k.a. the “Erythraean Sibyl”).

Other notable examples in the ancient world include:

- Hellenic oracle, Trophonius of Livadeia [Boeotia]
- Tiresias of Thebes
- quasi-mythic Hellenic prophetess, Kassandra of Troy
- Ionian oracles, Mopsus of Klaros and Calchas of Argolis [Anatolia]
- Apollonian priest, Abaris of Hyperborea
- Greek sorceress, Circe of Aeaea [alt. “Aiaia”]
- Athenian prophetess, Diotima of Mantinea
- Egyptian oracle of Per-Wadjet at Buto

- Egyptian oracle of Amon at the Siwa Oasis [alt. “Ammonium”]
- Egyptian sorcerers Jannes and Jambres {27}
- Iberian sorceress, Medea of Colchis {25}
- Greek oracle / witch-doctor, Erichtho of Thessaly
- Greek soothsayer, Melamp[o]us of Pylos / Argos [ref. the Amythaides; ref. Hesiod’s “Melampodia”]
- Canaanite medium, the witch of Endor
- Etruscan prophetess, Vegoia of Tarchuna
- Roman “rex” [king] of Nemi (lake) at Aricia
- Hasmonean (Maccabeean) “cohen gadol”, Yohanan [h]Urkanos (alt. Ioannes of Hyrcania; a.k.a. “John Hyrcanus”)
- Cypriot (Jewish) magician, Atomus of Caesarea
- Bructeri (Germanic) priestess, Veleda of Batavia
- Samaritan sorcerer, Simon Magus; and his (Simonian / Gnostic) apprentice, Menander
- Greek sorceress, Aglaonice of Thessaly
- Anatolian magician, Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus of Antioch (a.k.a. “Cyprianus”)
- Athenian seer, Lampon [associated with the fountain of Thurii / Thurium]
- Libyan queen, Lamia (in Greek lore)

…to name 26. {21}

Magic was an integral part of the Abrahamic tradition.  In Genesis, Joseph used a silver goblet for divining (44:5).  Scrying was the practice of gazing into a cup or bowl to see the future; and was used through the Middle Ages.  Jacob’s wife, Rachel, used magical potions to become pregnant (30:14-22).  In Exodus, the High Priest [“kohen gadol”] used Urim and Thummim (a pair of divining objects) to ascertain the will of the Abrahamic deity (28:30).  Moses turned his staff into a snake on two occasions (4:3 and 7:10).  In Numbers, we hear of the insolent Bilam of Moab (alt. “Balaam) in chapter 22.  In First Samuel, King Saul disguises himself and visits the local witch, asking her to call up the ghost of Samuel so that he may receive council on how to defeat the Philistines (28:11–15).  In Second Kings, Elisha uses an incantation to curse 42 boys who have taunted him.  The boys are then mauled by a bear (2:23-25).  And in Second Chronicles, the prophet Azariah ben Oded is said to have channeled messages from the Abrahamic deity (to King Asa).

Throughout Judaic lore, we are treated to tales of various mages–most notably: Huldah the prophetess, Gad the Seer, Iddo the Seer, and Ahijah of Shiloh.

The dichotomy of miracle vs. magic is a false one–creating a superficial distinction without a fundamental difference. The former is used for instances that are endorsed (the workings of the designated deity); the latter for instances that are not endorsed (demonic forces). A wondrous miracle is GRANTED; whereas dark magic is SUMMONED. The former is seen as a blessing (associated with Faith); the latter as a curse (associated with the occult). While the semiotics is adjusted according to our interests (think of the specious categorization of religion vs. cult), the underlying phenomenon is the same. Either way, we imagine supernatural forces that bridge the gap between our wishes and our capabilities. Magic exists in the gap between what we WANT to do and what we KNOW HOW to do–a gap that narrows with scientific understanding. Whether we call it “belief” or “superstition” only reflects our biases.

And so it went. During Late Antiquity, Proclus of Athens (a disciple of the Syrian Neo-Platonic mystic, Iamblichus of Qinnasrin) composed his “Elements of Theology”, which merged theurgy (esp. a fascination with the Chaldean Oracles) with Neo-Platonism.

Around the time that Mohammed of Mecca would have lived, there were tales of the Gaelic prophet, Ruadan mac Fergusa Birn (a.k.a. “Rowan”). The Koran mentions an Arabian prophet, Saleh of Thamud, over and over again (7:73-79, 11:61-69, 26:141-158, 54:23-31, and 91:11-15). He was likely the subject of local (Hizaji) legend; and was incorporated into the revamped Abrahamic lore.

The notion of “mysticism” derives from the Greek lexeme for “conceal”; with the connotations of that which is concealed (from what is normally seen). This invariably had cultic implications–as demonstrated by “mystikos”, a term that intimated initiation (that is: some sort of sacred rite).

Until the advent of modern medicine (a.k.a. ACTUAL medicine), the line between witchcraft and “medicine” was usually blurred. Note, for example, the medieval Anglo-Saxon books of remedies / cures, the “Lacnunga” and the so-called “Medicinale Anglicum” (referenced as “the book ordered by Bald and compiled by Cild”), which offered charms and incantations. Such sources offered nothing in the way of bona fide medicine; yet were used as medicinal guides.

In the 11th century, magic / astrology was being passed off as “science” by the Andalusian polymath, Maslama al-Majriti of Cordoba. In the late 15th century, the Florentine thinker, Marsilio Ficino composed the “Vita Libri Tres” [Three Books on

Life], which conflates magic / astrology with medicine. Even as late as the 20th century, Roman Catholics were trying to cure ailments by exorcizing demons. In the Muslim world, some still believe in “djinn”.

It should be noted that the term “occult” is a misleading one. We tend to describe something as “occultist” / “cultic” when it emphasizes an esoterica (esp. in the form of mysticism) over prevailing institutionalized dogmas–prizing the arcane over the mainstream. In other words, we characterize cult activity as an instance of “the occult” when it is weird or unconventional–operating at the margins of society in ways we find to be strange, or even creepy. This taxonomy says more about us–and what we find to be normal–than it does about the merits of the activity being described.

Occult magic is often dubbed “shamanism” by the cultures that embrace it. Such a vocation has existed in countless forms since time immemorial; in cultures around the world. Shamanistic traditions can be found throughout history, in which seers of countless sorts (from voodoo witch-doctors to carnival fortune-tellers) are consulted to proffer information unavailable to the rest of us; and/or to invoke invisible powers to make certain things happen (e.g. Faith healers and spell-casters). From Mali’s “Dogon” to Mongolia’s Tengri-ists to India’s Shaiva “Aghori”, the shamanistic tradition is ubiquitous in primitive cultures.

During the Dark Ages, witchcraft was a prominent concern–as attested by the 7th-century “Paenitentiale Theodori” (alt. “Iudicia Theodori”), an alarmist tract composed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus. The “The Pactus Legis Alamannorum” (also in the 7th century) mentions witchcraft as a crime. Pursuant to an influx into Europe of texts on magic and diabolism from the Islamic world (during the early 12th century), the practice of necromancy became popular. Fascination with demonology may well have come from the Arabian conception of “djinn”: evil genies comprised of fireless smoke. {22}

In Dar al-Islam, fascination with the occult permeated Sufi circles–as demonstrated by the Andalusian mystic, “Maslama” Abu al-Qasim al-Qurtubi al-Majriti of Cordoba in the late 10th century. Also note the Maghrebi mystic, Ahmad ibn Ali al-Buni, who composed a grimoire entitled the “Shams al-Ma’arif wa Lata’if al-Awarif” [The Sun of Gnosis and the Subtleties of Elevated Things] in the late 12th / early 13th century. In the Muslim world, such arcana (variations of theurgy and Hermeticism) was variously known as “simiya” [signs], “ruhaniya” [spirituality], and “ilm al-hikma” [knowledge of the wisdom].

When it came to embellishing historical figures, the Greeks told tales of princess Deianeira of Calydon.  Such fanciful musings suffused folklore. Preternatural qualities were ascribed to Lilith (Abrahamic), Eisheth (Kabbalistic), the “qarinah” (Arabian), and the Succubus (Greco-Roman). Subsequently, there emerged legends of:

- the Egyptian sorcerers, Jannes and Jambres in Judaic lore
- the mysterious phantom-queen, “Morrigan” in Gaelic lore {26}
- the ethereal “Ceridwen” in Welsh lore
- the “volva” [wand-carriers] and “seidkona” [practitioners of “seidr”] in Norse lore
- the heroic “Väinämöinen” in Finnish lore
- the Germanic priestesses / prophetesses, Albruna, Veleda, and Ganna of the Bructeri (1st century) and Semnonian / Egyptian seer, Waluburg of Elephantine (2nd century) in Saxon lore
- the nefarious sorceress-queen, Louhi of Pohjola in Karelian lore
- the Azna sorceress-queen, Sarraounia Mangou in Hausa (West African) lore
- the Yayoi shaman ruler, Himiko / Pimiko of Yamatai-koku [Wa] in Japanese lore
- the Lakota prophetess / sorceress, “Pte-Ska-Win” [White Buffalo Calf Woman] in Native American lore

…and countless other enchantresses around the world.

Throughout Renaissance Europe, witchcraft became a source of paranoia for Roman Catholics after German theologian, Johannes Nider of Swabia wrote “Formicarius” in the 1430’s.  Witches were referred to as “maleficarum” (“malefica” / “maleficium” means malevolent / dark magic; a.k.a. sorcery).  The church’s obsession with “diabolism” was put into overdrive by (German) Dominican Inquisitor, Heinrich Kramer in the late 15th century, with his “Malleus Maleficarum” (c. 1487).  Even King James of England wrote a tract on the topic: “Daemonologie” (c. 1597).  The idea became such a source of intrigue, Ambrosian (Italian) priest, Francesco Maria Guazzo wrote a successful witch-hunter’s manual, “Compendium Maleficarum” in 1608.

Sorcerers / Sorceresses have bewitched crowds around the world since before the modern age.  There have been myriad prominent instances of such folkloric figures since the Middle Ages.  Some of the more renown include:

- Lin Moniang of Guang-zhou / Fujian [later deified as “Mazu”] (10th-century China)
- “Onmyoji” [wizards], Kamo no Yasunori and Abe no Seimei (10th-century Japan)
- Cyrridven of Llyn Tegid / Gwynedd [a.k.a. “Kerdwin”; “Ceridwen”] (12th-century Wales)
- Angéle de la Barthe of Toulouse (13th-century France)
- Malian [Mandinka] sorcerer-king, Soumaoro Kanté of the Sosso (13th-century West Africa)
- Alice Kyteler of Kilkenny (14th-century Ireland)
- Aradia of Tuscany (14th-century Italy)
- Abra-melin (15th-century Egypt)
- Maria Lionza of Yaracuy (early 16th century Venezuela)
- Agnes Sampson of Keith (16th-century Scotland)
- Jack of Kent (16th century Wales)
- Ursula Southeil of Yorkshire [a.k.a. “Mother Shipton”] (16th century England)
- Agnes Waterhouse of Essex (16th-century England)
- Balthaser von Bernbach of Fulda (late 16th- / early 17th-century Germany)
- Maret Jonsdotter of Blakulla (17th-century Sweden)
- Catherine Montvoisin [a.k.a. “La Voisin”] (17th-century France)
- Florence Newton of Youghal (17th-century Ireland)
- Baba Keenaram of Varanasi (early 18th-century India)
- Oromo sorceress, Makhore of Jimma (18th-century Ethiopia)
- Hassidic seer, Yaakov Yitzchak [Jacob Isaac] Horowitz of Lublin (late 18th / early 19th century)
- Voodoo priestess, Marie Catherine Laveau of New Orleans (19th-century America)
- Alphonse Louis Constant [a.k.a “Eliphas Levi”] (19th-century France)
- Gerald Brosseau Gardner (20th-century England)
- Edith Rose Woodford-Grimes of New Forest [a.k.a. “Dafo”] (20th-century England)
- Purepecha witch-doctor, Don Pedro Jaramillo of Guadalajara [a.k.a. “the healer of Los Olmos creek”] (20th-century Texas)
- Sathya Narayana Raju [a.k.a. “Sathya Sai Baba”] (20th-century India)

There are a plethora of tall-tales about “miracle working”; but the most absurd are found in Christendom–primarily due to the institution of saint-hood.  For any figure canonized, he/she is required to have (purportedly) performed “miracles”…which is, of course, impossible given that “miracles” (in the supernatural sense) do not exist. Consequently, fantastical anecdotes must be concocted post-hoc (and thus retro-actively imputed to the vaunted figure) in order to “beautify” the designated figure. This daffy Vatican practice continues to the present day. {22}

Fortune telling is especially effective when a sense of urgency is propounded. The same goes for narratives, which is why any cosmogony that tells us that we are on the verge of monumental events will captivate those of us eager to be captivated.

The human fascination with miracle-workers persists, often with New Age packaging.  So long as there is credulity coupled with a thirst for enchantment, there will always be charismatic hucksters peddling mysticism.  Our insatiable urge to believe in magic is what drives us to “magic shows”…even when we realize that nothing paranormal is really happening. It is enough that we WANT to believe. And belief often trumps Reality.

# Footnotes:

{1 Fukuyama had already written a piece entitled “The End of History?” in the right-wing rag, “The National Interest” in the spring of 1989–betraying his eagerness for the confirmation of the triumphalist narrative (which he would soon thereafter parlay into a lucrative book). Fukuyama’s catchy thesis–part triumphalism, part wishful thinking–was an exercise in self-congratulation to which many succumbed; as the implosion of the Soviet Union seemed–at the time–to validate the dubious narrative that the entire modern age could be boiled down to a feud between champions of the free market and the dastardly minions of Soviet-style “communism”. The errancy and shortsightedness of this (laughably myopic) lens became blindingly apparent within just a few years of Fukuyama’s publication. China would persist in its flagrant illiberalism–nay, authoritarianism; and fascism would continue to rear its grotesque head across the globe. There was no “Last Man”. History was very much still unfolding–presenting age-old problems in new guises.}

{2 Ideologues see the world through a lens tailored to their own preconceptions, then interpret it accordingly. One of the most touted “prophecies” Christian apologists use to rationalize the deification of Jesus of Nazareth is chapter 53 in the Book of Isaiah. To their ears, this is an indubitable prediction of their Messiah. Canny exegetes read into a text what they want to read. Such “eisegesis” is made possible by framing things in whatever way suits one’s purposes. The meaning ascribed to the text does not inhere in the text; it is projected onto the text. When hawking prognostication, the trick is to be vague enough–yet provocative enough–to strike a nerve. (Nostradamus used this gimmick to staggering aplomb.) So it should come as no surprise that the harbingers of the End Times found in Abrahamic scripture are–in general terms–things with which everyone at ANY TIME can readily identify. Prognostications found in the New Testament are especially comical when it comes to this perfidious gambit. Peter’s second letter says that Judgement Day will occur during an era of scoffers walking after their own lusts (3:3). Check. Paul’s second letter to Timothy notifies us that it will arrive in perilous times–characterized by self-love, covetousness, boasting, pride, and children disobeying their parents (3:1). Check, check, check, check, and check. He adds that another sign will be high-minded people who love pleasures more than they love god (3:4). Check. (“Wow! That must be US,” said everyone ever.) We find similar rigamarole in Islamic lore. Children will be insolent. Check. Treacherous people will be considered trustworthy, while trustworthy people will be accused of treachery. Check and check. Liars will be seen as truthful, while those who are truthful will be accused of

lying. Check and check. Hypocrites will rule; and perfidious people will run the marketplace. Check and check. And lots of musical instruments will be all over the place. Gosh-golly, it sounds like today!}

{3 The point of an eschatology is as much to provide a sense of purpose as it is to provide us with explanations for why things are the way they are. That is: It meets existential as well as epistemological hankerings. Once one has something to LIVE FOR, the rest is–as they say–icing on the cake. Everything in the world can be explained in terms of THAT NARRATIVE.}

{4 The Shakers of northeastern United States died out for having considered sexual intercourse pointless, given the immanence of the Second Coming of Christ. (If the End Times are going to occur any day now, then why even bother procreating?) There has been no better demonstration of survival of the fittest with respect to memes. Indeed, the Shaker memeplex had the mechanism for its own demise built into it. Many of the "Desert Fathers" (itinerant monks starting in the 3rd and 4th centuries) supposed that procreation for ANYONE was pointless, as the End Times were nigh. So far as they were concerned, their asceticism would all be worth it, as bountiful rewards awaited them in the hereafter. Peddling false hope is one of the best ways to control people en masse, especially if one wants to persuade them to cope with a dire existence.}

{5 The Muslim takeover of the City of David was on the verge of happening at the time of MoM's untimely death. Sure enough, the momentous event came to pass within six years of the prophet's passing. That was almost 14 centuries ago…and counting. Yet the occurrence–and prospects for its reprise–has kept hopes alive ever since. For it seems to promise that the final reckoning will happen ANY TIME NOW. This particular prophecy has become all the more dubious since the "Nakba" of 1948.}

{6 And pray tell: What were these ominous signs, exactly? Consulting vol. 41 of Muslim's Hadith, we find that prophecy-mongers held that the appointed hour will be heralded by a celestial trumpet, blown by the angel, "Israfil" ["he who burns"] from the Dome of the Rock (no. 7023). We are also notified that the anti-Christ ("Dajjal") will be coming from Isfahan (no. 6931 and 7034); while a (black) menace from Abyssinia will destroy the Meccan Kaaba (no. 6951). (MoM averred that Satan himself resembled a black Ethiopian.) Thus Dar al-Islam was furnished with both a Persian and an African nemesis (see footnote 11 below). And that wasn't all. The Romans would seize Dabiq, Syria (no. 6924); and the looming menace of Gog and

Magog [rendered “Ya-juj and Ma-juj”] would appear from the Eurasian Steppes, presumably to wreak havoc on the Ummah (no. 6931). (See footnote 17 below.) But fear not, because JoN [“Issa”] shall return to Damascus and slay the anti-Christ (no. 7015)…as well as exterminate Jews and pigs. (Also ref. Koran 43:61 and Bukhari 3/43/656.) Finally, we are told about a sign of the End Times that clearly reflected the concerns of Arabians at the time: A contingent of apostates will once again circumambulate the original (Yemeni) Kaaba–contemptuously referred to as “D[h]u al-Khalasa” [alt. “Dhul Khalasa”] (Bukhari 9/88/232); see my essay on “Mecca’s Cube”. It is impossible not to notice how comically-dated such foreboding prognostications are. As it happens, the Koran is rife with fantastical harbingers of the apocalypse. For instance, we are notified that the moon will be split in two (54:1)…even as the sun and moon will be joined (75:9). (Which is it?) But how will we know it is eventually coming? In Islamic scripture, omens for the End Times include such travesties as female singers becoming popular (MoM despised lyrical poets), women walking in the marketplace with thighs exposed, people dancing at night, people imbibing, men wedding [“nikkah”] men, women wedding [“nikkah”] women, women seducing men, and nubile women deciding not to have children. (Spoiler alert: How things have been everywhere, at every point in history…and continue to be to the present day.) What is touted, then, is–effectively–a general description that was as accurate a thousand years ago as it will be a thousand years from now. That such ominous signs turn out to be quotidian banalities is, of course, THE POINT (see footnote 2). The most renown commentary on the signs of the Last Days was composed by a student of the fanatic, Ibn Taymiyya (the Syrian theologian, Ibn Kathir) in 14th century. (Saner heads, like Ibn Khaldun, thought such outlandish eschatology was hogwash; and announced this to those not prone to delusion.) For more on the ominous depiction of Judgement Day in Mohammedan lore (as well as examples from myths around the world). For Judaic antecedents of this menacing eschatology, see the Books of Hos[h]ea [“Yehoshua”] and of Daniel. For Christian antecedents, see the Book of Revelation.}

{7 We find the same schtick in politics: “I realize that things haven’t worked out as we’d hoped. But trust me, THIS time, it’ll be different.” Keeping the (false) hope alive is the trick. The pitch is effective in ALL contexts. “It’s morning in America.” “It’s time to seize our destiny. Our time is now!” “The moment is upon us!” The simplistic message has an undeniable appeal. Everyone–especially anyone who is existentially beleaguered–likes to be told: “Take heart! Things will work out in the end.” For a parable that makes this point, see my essay: “The Island”.}

{8 Again, this derangement is not limited to Jewish and Christian fanatics. Apocalyptic Messianism is found throughout Dar al-Islam as well. As I write this (in 2016), the most popular Muslim-American proselytizer, “shaykh” Hamza Yusuf, declared: “We are in the age of the Dajjal. This is it, people. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the end game.” It seemed not to occur to him that “People of the Book” have been saying the same kind of thing for over two thousand years. What ominous signs does Yusuf cite for this zany alarmism? Technology of the space age (which he considers tools of the devil). Note that Yusuf is considered by many in the American Muslim community to be a “moderate”. Moreover, he does not believe in evolution, and believes that the video game “Tetris” and all Disney movies are evil. Even so, Yusuf is widely seen as a serious intellectual–a shining light in America’s Muslim community. God help us.}

{9 Jehovah’s Witnesses actually associate Abaddon / Apollyon not with a morbid place, but with an exalted being. Per the lore concocted by the impresarios of the Watchtower Society, Apollyon is synonymous with the Archangel Michael…who, along with JoN, was considered a personification of the Abrahamic deity. This involves portraying the tri-fold divine personage as a sword-wielding, swashbuckling Messianic hero.}

{10 alt. “Tzadikim”; resurrected from the dreary valley, “Gehinnom” (alt. “Gehenna”), likely referring to “Gai ben-Hinnom”.}

{11 “Dajjal” means “false”. The alternate moniker for the anti-Christ is “D’Abbatul Ard”. This nefarious character (the “Masih ad-Dajjal”; false Messiah) is never mentioned explicitly in the Koran. There is also foretelling of the coming of the nefarious “Sufyani”: progeny of Sakhr ibn Harb, leader of the demonized Quraysh tribe during MoM’s life.}

{12 This moniker, coined in the 7th century, was likely a variant of the name of the Roman (Byzantine) Emperor of the time, Heraclius, who persecuted the Jews during the first three decades of that century. The reference appears in the “Seref Zerubbabel”, a work named after the 6th-century B.C. king of Judah (who ruled at the end of the Exilic Period, and purportedly initiated construction of the Second Temple). In Judaic eschatology, “Olam Ha-Ba” is a resplendently Edenic world, which will be ushered in after the apocalypse. During this era, the wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie with the goat, in accordance with Isaiah 11:6.}

{13 "The day of reckoning is nigh! So you better get your act together!" The Koran's authors picked up where the Book of Revelation left off. "If you don't sign up for the program, you'll be sorry." Gosh-golly. The combination of hope (for paradise) and fear (of perdition) creates a potent incentive structure. Damnation vs. salvation: NOBODY wants to get out of line when the stakes are so high. Why take the chance? And so it goes: Trying to remain in god's good graces (and avert his wrath) is what motivates fealty (and thus piety). When life is all about not rousing the ire of a temperamental super-being (poised for drastic action in the immanent future), then everything we do is about preparing for the cosmic extravaganza awaiting us at the end of human history. Supplicants enjoy the gratification that, no matter what befalls them during life, there will be a final "settling of accounts" in their favor.}

{14 An alternate way of posing this query: "Where is this all going?" Someone who answers such a pressing inquiry, and does so decisively, will tend to catch our attention. "Jeepers. Is THAT what is held in store for me? Well, then, I better get in line!" And so, when we look around ourselves at a bewildering world (and upwards at a mysterious night sky), we can't help but ask, "This is all for WHAT, again?" When it comes to cosmogony, the answer typically involves a culmination point.}

{15 This would reflect the interpretation found in 2 Peter 2:9 of the New Testament, which explains that god will "reserve the unjust unto Judgement Day to be punished"; meaning there's nobody in hell YET. This affirms the statement in Matthew's Gospel: "So shall it be in the end of this world [that] the Son of Man shall send forth his angels; and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire" (13:40-42). (Also note 5:28-29 in John's Gospel.) None of this comports with the Koran's descriptions of what is happening to those who are ALREADY IN hell.}

{16 Note that 10:45 comports with both these interpretations. Either way, it will SEEM to the deceased that barely an hour had elapsed when the day of judgement eventually arrives. Or so we are told.}

{17 In such passages, we hear echoes of the anti-Roman propaganda–as well as undercurrents of seething contempt for the heretical Romans–that could be found in "The Book of Revelation". This makes sense, as the both the Byzantines and the Holy Roman Empire continued to be an adversary (Dar al-Kufr, and thus Dar al-Harb) to Dar al-Islam throughout the Middle Ages. And what shall happen when the day of reckoning arrives? In 21:104, the Koran's protagonist promises that he will "roll up

the heavens like a scroll”…punctuating the verse with: “We will do as we promised!” In other words: You’ve been forewarned. This idiom is telling, as it indicates that the Abrahamic deity will soon be finished with the whole cosmic scheme–the scheme that he has laid out for us. Such is the case when one announces that one is about to ROLL EVERYTHING UP. When might that be? Well, in due course. (Again: see 33:63, 42:17, and 47:18 for the immanence conveyed in the Koran.) The implication is unequivocal: You best be prepared when the time comes. It could be any day now.}

{18 The folkloric figures listed here aren’t to be confused with entirely fictional characters–such as Hecate and Circe of Aeaea (Greek); Huld[a] (Nordic); Muma Padurii (Romanian); Morgan[a] La Faye (English); the Germanic witches, Alrune, Heid, and Haegse; or the Moorish sorcerers, Maugraby, Adbaldar, and Thalaba of Domdaniel. Hence I don’t count mythic oracles like Tiresias of Thebes. Nor am I counting alchemists–such as the fabled Gnostic, Zosimos of Panopolis (a.k.a. “Zosimus Alchemista”; see footnote 23), and the Augustinian, George Ripley of Bridlington. Mystics (Nostradamus, John Dee, Helena Blavatsky, Grigori Rasputin, Aleister Crowley, etc.) don’t qualify as mages; as this survey is only concerned with those touting “magic”…as apposed to, say, those simply claiming powers of clairvoyance (see footnote 19 below). Finally, I am not counting any of the charismatic leaders listed in “The Long History Of Exalted Figures”; as their notoriety is primarily that of demagogy.}

{19 A major proponent of the occult was 15th-century Hermeticist, Marsilio Ficino of Florence, who incorporated the more esoteric elements of Neo-platonism with a fascination with the fabled Chaldean Oracles. Ficino’s resounding promotion of the occult (he was patronized by the Medici family) was largely responsible for the craze in mysticism during the High Renaissance. Quacks like John Dee in London (who had the ear of Queen Elizabeth of England) would ride the wave thereafter, duping people–even savvy monarchs like Elizabeth–with mesmerizing mystical hogwash.}

{20 Many of us have horrible statistical intuitions. Indeed, we only notice the coincidences that come to pass–failing to take into account the trillions upon trillions of possible coincidences EACH MINUTE that never happen. At any given moment, there are innumerable one-in-a-million coincidences occurring in a given person’s orbit. Every so often, some of these coincidences are noticed–especially when they are salient and consequential. When that occurs, our natural reaction is beguilement.}

{21 The Greek oracle, the Pythia of Apollo at Phocis [a.k.a. the “Oracle of Delphi”] (who resided on Mount Parnassus, and was associated with the titaness, Phoebe) was not a specific person; and did not perform magic (she was a seer). The “Pythia” was more a station than an individual. The same goes for the Chaldean Oracles, the Sibylline Oracles (a.k.a. “sibyls”), the Tibetan “Nechung” Oracle, and–more recently–the Igbo “Ibini Ukpabi” at Arochukwu. Generally, there have always been people considered prognosticators of some sort, for some reason (usually some combination of seers and heelers): the Karelian “tietäjä”, the Norse “Spækona” / “klok gumma”, the Celtic “Drai” [a.k.a. Druids], the Anglo-Saxon “hægtis” / “burgrune”, the Germanic “hexenmeister”, witch-doctors in the Voodoo and Santeria traditions, and Latin American “curanderos”. Shamans in Mongolia come from the Tengri tradition, while shamans across Africa come from countless local animist traditions. Note that the Old Norse “spæ” referred to prophesying–as in relaying a message delivered from the gods.}

{22 It is, in a way, the flip-side of demonology–in which designated “exorcists” are believed to have the power to extirpate evil spirits from their victims. Human hosts being infiltrated by nefarious entities is a topic found in many cultures–including Islamic cultures. Demonic “possession” has been used to explain anything from sickness and despair to errant behavior and heresy. For more on “djinn” and the imagined machinations of satanic figures (via proxies, like demons).}

{23 He supposedly lived c. 300 A.D. The history of alchemy is a long one; and is connected to the occult (most notably, Hermeticism). The vocation serves as a prime case-study in superstition and credulity that lies outside the purview of conventional (formally codified) religion. There has never been an official institution of alchemy; it was only ever a cottage industry. See also the discussion of Theurgy in my essay on “Prayer”.}

{24 The most persuasive case for tying historicism–and thus utopianism–to “Leftist” thinking (read: socialism) is Karl Popper’s “The Open Society And Its Enemies” vol. I and II. His suspicions of utopian thinking were warranted; but his conclusions were significantly flawed; as he ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater.}

{25 Medea, priestess of Hecate, is a staple of Greco-Roman legend. She is likely apocryphal, though possibly based on a real figure. First found in Apollonius of Rhodes’ “Argonautica”, then in Ovid’s “Metamorphosis”, she eventually inspired Shakespeare’s villainous “Sycorax”.}

{26  She was the basis for Morga[i]n le Fay[e] in Arthurian legend.}

{27  Rendered Jamnes and Mambres in Latin.  They are possibly apocryphal, their story originating in Judaic lore.  However, they are mentioned in various accounts–including the New Testament, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and the Targumim.}

# Postscript:

Reactionary thinking typically entails conceiving of all things in simplistic terms–as with the binary taxonomy indicative of a Manichean worldview.  Such false dichotomization serves as the lens through which Reactionaries view the past, the present, and the future.

The harbingers enumerated in scripture enjoin the Pollyannas-at-heart to see every quirky occurrence as just another thing heralding the glorious End Times, whereupon there will be a final settling of accounts.  We all yearn for a reckoning; so we are enticed by the message: “Just hang in there, and stick with the program; and everything will work out in the end.”  Such perpetual anticipation–a chronic feeling of immanence sustained by intermittent reassurances–keeps the (false) hope alive.

So True Believers will be showered with rewards.  Meanwhile, those who fail to curry favor with the powers-that-be shall be consigned to an eternity of perdition.  Damnation is, of course, nothing but a scare-tactic to keep people in line.  Fear can take the form of dread and of insecurity–a point that Ernst Becker made in his landmark work, “The Denial of Death”.

Using fear to control people is just as common–and every bit as effective–as using (false) hope.  In social / political contexts, the use of fear for propagandistic purposes (i.e. as a tool for mass manipulation) takes the form of “alarmism”.  This invariably involves enmity toward THE OTHER (portrayed as an ominous and baleful force, ready to pounce the moment we let our guard down).*  THE OTHER, then, is equated with those from whom we need to be protected and/or those whom we need to attack (and thereby eradicate).**  In this artificially-constructed Manichaean scheme, the out-group is vilified while the in-group is glorified.  Such a tendentious worldview enables the legitimization of whatever WE feel that WE are entitled to do.  The trick, then, is to exclaim, “WE are the best” so as to ensure everyone is gung-ho about the agenda that is currently being peddled by the powers-that-be.

Insecurity and false pride are symbiotic.  In between every ornery declaration that we should be very proud of ourselves (typically for some specious reason), there are admonishments that we should be AFRAID of something nefarious (lurking somewhere out there); something that is supposedly out to get us.  (An extreme version of this paranoia is the siege mentality, made all the easier if the in-group is seen as dwelling an ABODE, as with Beth Israel or Dar al-Islam.)  This feeds off of insularity (read: parochialism), in which there is an inward-turning.  Couple this with the paranoia resulting from a siege mentality, and the reaction is to “circle the wagons”, and so to project hostility outward toward a (demonized) OTHER–who is perceived as lurking “somewhere out there, trying to GET US; so we should GET THEM first!”

Collective narcissism invariably manifests as Exceptionalism (“Behold, WE are better than–and thus more important than–everyone else!”).  This self-image can be extremely intoxicating, even addictive.  In order to assert how great we are, though, a rationalization is typically required (god chose us; we kick ass; we are morally superior, etc.)  The key is that the rationalization is COMPELLING, irrespective of whether or not it has any actual credence.  Rationalizations tend to seem more plausible when we fashion ourselves as WINNERS.  This is where the fear comes in.

Alarmism is useful insofar as it affords us the opportunity to prevail in some sort of grand confrontation. By declaring (pending) victory, we justify our indulgence in a magnificently burnished self-image. Hence the utility of triumphalism in getting people to rally around a grandiose cause. People fancy being on the winning team (that is: on the team that they PERCEIVE to be winning; or on the team they ANTICIPATE will–eventually–be victorious the end.) So the appropriate narrative is fashioned.**

The efficacy of saber-rattling can be explained in this manner. Getting people's dander up is a sure-fire way to galvanize them (as anyone knows who has ever attended a well-orchestrated pep rally, whether for politics or sports). Such agit-prop works best when we see ourselves (the hyper-romanticized in-group) as pitted against a menacing nemesis (a demonized out-group); and thus as participants in a righteous crusade…in which we shall eventually prevail…but only if only we get our act together. What animates this is a fear of–and/or contempt for–the menacing caricature of the designated foe. The toxic cocktail of hostility and dread is typically married with an obsession with tribal honor; as false pride can be leveraged to impel people to do even the most asinine things.

In "The Island", the illusion of SAFETY made the sham work so well. Within the prison-disguised-as-sanctuary, residents felt entirely at ease. There was no battle to fight, no impending peril to worry about. The eerie thing was that NOBODY in the film was afraid…of ANYTHING.*** The outside world was a nasty place from which they were being protected by the gracious corporation into who's hands they had been delivered.

And so it went: In the compound of "The Island", there was no need for alarmism because everybody felt secure, and grateful to be under the protection of the powers-that-be. Moreover, everybody was deluded by a lingering hope (eager anticipation of eventually making it to "the Island"). This (very potent) false hope was stoked enough to keep them going each day (that is: acquiescing to the prescribed routine, without questioning things). After all, why be suspicious of the heroic people who are keeping one safe? Everyone slept well at night AND had a compelling reason to wake up each morning. Visions of the "Island" got them through each day.

The thing about exploiting fear is that you need to drum it up first. The more fear there is, the more there is to exploit. This parallels the logic of creating demand in the marketplace. To sell a consumer product, the trick is to create the perception of a need–spurious as that perception might be. People will drink the Kool-Aide if they FEEL parched. (There is a reason that guzzling ocean-water does not quench thirst.)

But fire and brimstone does not have to be credible to work; it just needs to SEEM plausible to the credulous listener. The lurid punishments outlined in the Koran are simply employing the same strategy used by John of Patmos in his foreboding "Book of Revelation". While carrots (Paradise) can be extremely compelling; so too can sticks be employed to goad people into acting a certain way.

The ultimate disincentive is the raft of horrors wrought upon the world on Judgement Day: the crushing of every person in his own grave until his ribs break; the agonized screams at the terrifying site of the apocalypse; etc. All the terrible things in store for those who don't get with the program are every bit as persuasive as are the wonderful things that are in store for those who sign up. When the alternatives are that stark, the choice is a no-brainer (insofar as one BELIEVES them). I explore this ultimatum in "A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell".

Whether false hope or drummed-up fear is the primary motivating factor, the underlying logic is the same: Create the (perception of) a dire existential ailment, then offer the (purported) cure-all. The authors of the Koran–as with the author of the phantasmagorical "Book of Revelation"–understood this all-too-well. The more horrifying the threat, and the more fantastical the reward, the more persuasive the gimmick (again, see "A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell").

Contrast the scenario in "The Island" (all false hope; no fear) with the scenario proffered in the Koran: BOTH false hope AND fear. The Mohammedan narrative is so incredibly compelling due to the promise of Paradise coupled with the threat of damnation.

{* Take, for instance, Nazis' characterization of "communists" and "Jews", Stalin's characterization of "Kulaks", Revisionist Zionists' characterization of Palestinians, the West's domino theory of "communism", America's war on drugs, the so-called "war on terror", etc. This involves more than just the derogation of the out-group as subaltern–as with the "Dalits" in India or black people in Apartheid South Africa

(where the other-ized people are seen as simply inferior, not as a threat). The characterization we're concerned with here involves hostility, even aggression. In other words, the aim is not just to subordinate; it is to ERADICATE.}

{** This inverts the sports adage, "The best offense is a good defense." A militaristic society proceeds as though the best defense is a good offense. If nothing else, the siege mentality (and an abiding persecution complex) engenders militancy. After all, hostility is a hallmark symptom of neurosis. It can't be emphasized enough: Even in the midst of a siege mentality ("We're surrounded by the nefarious other, so we need to take drastic action for our self-preservation!"), demagogy is impelled by the projection of and air of STRENGTH ("Support us, because WE are [going to be] the winning team.") Those who are susceptible to suggestibility tend to be drawn to–and intoxicated by–auras of power.}

{*** …pace the wariness of venturing outside into the (purportedly) despoiled world beyond the compound. "Don't go out there; it's dangerous! Remain in here, where you'll be sheltered and safe; and we can watch over you."}