

# The Influence of Apocalyptic Concepts on Social Life

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**Abstract:** Throughout human history, apocalyptic ideas – namely conceptions of the end times, the Day of Judgment, and the ultimate destruction of the world – have consistently existed as significant religious-philosophical phenomena. These ideas have left a profound imprint not only on systems of religious belief but also on the social, political, and cultural life of societies. In particular, in the formation of new religious movements, apocalyptic thinking has played a central ideological role, encouraging collective belief, radicalization, and often violence among followers. Therefore, apocalyptic notions are regarded as objects of study that hold not only theoretical but also practical importance for contemporary sociology, religious studies, and political science. The article analyzes the influence of apocalyptic ideas on social life, with special attention to the role of eschatological and millennialist views in the emergence of new religious movements. It interprets the violent actions of apocalyptic groups – against both society and their own adherents – as a source of social instability. Furthermore, the study highlights the most dangerous aspects of apocalyptic sects, including their tendency toward isolation from society, their function as instruments of political manipulation, and their contribution to the foundation of religious extremism. The paper also provides an extensive examination of the activities of

groups such as People's Temple, Children of God, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, focusing on mass suicides and terrorist acts. In this light, apocalyptic ideas are evaluated not merely as a religious-philosophical phenomenon but as a serious threat to social stability and global security.

**Keywords:** Apocalypse, New Religious Movements, End Times, Eschatology, Radicalism, Violence, Isolation, Political Manipulation, Religious Extremism, Sect

## Introduction

From their earliest stages of emergence, new religious movements have consistently sought to distinguish themselves from traditional systems of belief. This aspiration has manifested itself in the uniqueness of their doctrinal structures as well as in differences in ritual practices and forms of worship. Communities of varying size, gathered around the ideas of charismatic leaders, were persuaded of their distinctiveness from the wider society. In the words of Wessinger, these “destructive millennial movements” took shape around eschatological notions of the apocalypse and accordingly constructed their systems of belief. They proclaimed that the end of the world was imminent and devised corresponding strategies of action. Drawing primarily on biblical literature, they prepared – both ideologically and physically – for an impending apocalypse beginning with the battle of Armageddon. While some groups accumulated weapons in anticipation, others directly embraced death by engaging in acts of destruction. The majority of these movements became notorious for their inclination toward violence. Under the conviction that the end

was near, they legitimized and enacted diverse forms of violence, whether directed internally among their own members or externally toward broader society.

## Methodology

However, what most prominently introduced new religious movements (NRMs) to the world were the acts of violence directed against ordinary members of society who neither followed these groups nor accepted their teachings, and who were therefore classified as “others.” The Turkish scholar Emina Battal categorizes such outwardly directed violent actions of NRMs into two distinct forms: the first consists of destructive acts committed against individuals who had never joined any new religious movement; the second refers to violence perpetrated against those who had once been members of a movement but subsequently withdrew from it.

The violence exercised by these movements against those who were not part of them has been interpreted as an attempt to deliver a peculiar message to societies perceived as morally corrupted, increasingly degenerate, and renouncing their inherited values. In such a context, no distinctions were made – everyone was declared an enemy, and their elimination was deemed necessary. The resort to weapons and the adoption of violence as a primary instrument by these groups were carried out precisely with this objective in mind.

Apocalyptic ideas have exerted a profound influence on the social, political, and cultural life of societies. These notions have played a crucial role in shaping people’s worldviews, life values, and social relations. The concept of the “end times” represents one of the most significant religious, philosophical, and cultural phenomena in human history. It encompasses themes such as the destruction of the world, the final judgment, divine justice, and the advent of a new order. Apocalyptic thought has left a lasting impact not only in the religious and philosophical domain but also across the social, political, and cultural spheres of human existence.

The emergence of new religious movements (NRMs) across the globe has exerted a significant influence on modern societies and on the spiritual world of individuals. The aforementioned sects have appeared not only in predominantly Christian countries but also in regions where Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam hold sway. In particular, a remarkable proliferation of new religious movements has been observed in regions such as Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa. Until the 1970s, however, there was limited scholarly knowledge regarding these groups, largely because the disciplines of the history of religions, sociology, and theology had shown indifference to them. This neglect stemmed from the fact that these academic fields traditionally focused on the study of the so-called “world religions,” as well as indigenous, tribal, and ancient religious beliefs, rituals, doctrines, and cultures.

There are several reasons why new religious movements initially received little scholarly attention. For instance, Christian theology rejected religious movements that emerged within its own tradition as erroneous and heretical. For a considerable period, Christian theology regarded Christianity as the culmination and ultimate endpoint of religious history. As a result, Christian theologians sought to disregard or dismiss new religions. According to Bryan Wilson, new religions often begin as sects. Christianity itself

initially existed as a movement before the formation of the institutional church. However, once the church was established, it systematically repudiated all new movements. Due to its rigid institutional structure and monopolistic claims in religious matters, official Christianity proved to be more sensitive and uncompromising than other world religions toward emerging religious trends. The adherents of such movements were not only condemned as heretics but also branded as rebels. The church's rejection or marginalization of these groups was often employed as a justification for political repression.

In the past century, alongside Christian-majority countries, new religious movements also emerged in Muslim-majority states of the Mediterranean region, including North Africa, the Balkans, Asia Minor, and Egypt. As noted above, transformations likewise occurred within the religions of Asia, leading to the rise of new sects. Indeed, South and East Asia became major centers for the proliferation of such movements. In recent decades, new religious groups have increasingly appeared in countries such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In Indonesia, for example, the so-called "Cargo Cult" emerged, while in Brazil the "Umbanda Cult" and "Kimbanda Cult" developed. In North America, among many other groups, the "Native Church of America," founded by indigenous peoples and originating from the "Peyote Cult," came into existence. Additionally, movements established by populations brought to America as slaves can also be included in this category – for instance, the "Black Muslims" movement is considered part of this phenomenon. In Iran, a movement that first appeared in the nineteenth century within Shi'a Islam, initially known as "Babism" and later as "Baha'ism," eventually presented itself as a new religion and is classified in the West as one of the new religious movements.

By the late twentieth century, new religious movements had gained widespread popularity and attracted significant attention within academic circles. Scholars became particularly interested in the dynamics of their separation from established religions, the economic foundations of their development, their transnational activities, the appeal they held for young people, the role of members within these communities, and the gendered dimensions of their internal social relations.

When new religious movements (NRMs) first emerged in the United States, they were not initially perceived as a social problem. However, the rapid growth of these movements and the increasing public attention they attracted in the U.S. and other Western societies quickly altered this perception. The deep loyalty of members to their communities and the radical transformations in their lifestyles soon revealed the true nature of these groups. At first, such movements were regarded merely as temporary distractions that appealed to disoriented youth seeking to satisfy hedonistic desires, and thus failed to capture the attention of wider society. Yet the withdrawal of affluent young people from their studies, their conversion into missionaries for these groups, and their active fundraising in public spaces drew increasing concern. For example, in the case of The Children of God sect, female members engaged in prostitution to raise money for the community, reinterpreting this activity as a form of missionary work. The founder of The Children of God, Moses David Berg, openly endorsed communal living, exploited women as sexual slaves, and encouraged practices that fueled widespread public disapproval as similar communal groups proliferated.

## Result and Discussion

In the United States and other Western societies, appeals to state authorities to restrict or even ban these groups were initially disregarded because constitutional protections of religious freedom prevented decisive action. Moreover, since most of the adherents were legally adults, the state had little authority to intervene directly. As a result, some parents, unable to rely on legal measures, resorted to extreme alternatives, including abducting their own children to rescue them from these harmful movements. Over time, however, in countries where religious freedom was not guaranteed by law and where states exercised stricter control over their citizens, government intervention became more pronounced. Apocalyptic movements, in their self-understanding, perceive themselves as “chosen groups” preparing for the “final battle.” They interpret existing social systems as embodiments of “evil” and view their destruction as a divinely mandated mission.

James Beckford identifies the principal factor that brought new religious movements (NRMs) to prominence as the increasing frequency of deaths and acts of suicide among their adherents. Indeed, instances of both individual and collective suicide by members of various sects have been recorded in numerous countries.

Since 1979, several episodes of mass suicide influenced by religious movements have occurred in Europe and America. The most infamous of these took place in 1979 in Jonestown, Guyana, where 900 members of the People’s Temple sect collectively took their own lives. In September 1985, sixty-eight members of a nature-related religious movement in the Philippines committed mass suicide simultaneously. Two years later, in August 1987, the bodies of thirty-three factory workers who had committed suicide together were discovered on the roof of a building in South Korea. In April 1993, in the United States, the Branch Davidians, led by David Koresh, engaged in a fifty-one-day armed standoff with the FBI at a ranch in Texas, which ended with the deaths of Koresh and eighty-six members in what was essentially a collective suicide. This event was broadcast worldwide by major television networks.

On 5 September 1994, fifty-three members of the Order of the Solar Temple sect committed suicide in Fribourg, Switzerland, with further collective suicides by the group occurring in December 1995 and March 1997. In March 1997, in the United States, thirty-nine members of the Heaven’s Gate sect likewise ended their lives together. In addition, Heide Fittkau, a psychologist affiliated with the Brahma Kumaris sect, orchestrated a mass suicide with thirty-three of her followers.

Another incident that shocked the world occurred in Japan in the final decade of the twentieth century. In 1984, the Aum Shinrikyo (Teaching of Aum Truth) sect was founded by Shoko Asahara, who in March 1995 planned a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Although the plan was ultimately thwarted, the act represented not suicide but an attempt at mass murder through terrorism. Initially suspected to be the work of a conventional terrorist organization, it was later revealed to have been conceived by a religious sect. When apprehended and questioned as to his motives, Asahara bizarrely responded, “For the sake

of God's approval." According to his belief, the world had already reached the end of its physical life span, and humanity faced an impending apocalyptic death. To spare people from this suffering, he claimed to have chosen to kill them with poison gas. Furthermore, Asahara argued that materialism was oppressing spiritual freedom and that by destroying people he was in fact liberating and saving their souls.

The most recent case of mass suicide that shocked the world occurred in Uganda in 2000. On 17 March of that year, in the village of Kanungu (often reported as Manangu), more than 500 individuals set themselves on fire in a coordinated act of collective suicide. Media coverage broadcast the incident live, and some reports suggested that as many as 1,000 sect members perished. Among the victims, over 78 were children. When considered alongside the Jonestown tragedy of 1979 in the United States—where of the 900 victims, 256 were children – it becomes evident how severely destructive and dangerous suicide-inducing sects can be for societies. These and similar catastrophic events have directed global attention toward new religious movements. Moreover, scholars emphasize that mass suicide represents an even greater societal threat than individual cases, given its collective and often coercive dimensions. Particularly alarming are pseudo-humanistic and esoteric groups that claim to be "saving the world" but, in practice, envision the annihilation of humanity as a path to redemption – thus posing a persistent global security threat.

Other movements have employed different methods of recruitment and control. For example, groups such as the Raelian Movement attempt to attract new adherents by organizing lavish rituals and celebrations in luxury hotels marked by hedonism and sexualized ceremonies. At first, the lifestyle of unrestrained pleasure, indulgence, and entertainment is presented as a symbol of liberation. Yet, once members are fully immersed in the group, their fate may culminate in staged collective suicides, dramatized as ultimate acts of devotion. The case of Heide Fittkau, who orchestrated a mass suicide that resulted in the deaths of 33 individuals, stands as one of the most striking examples of such practices.

Another major social threat posed by apocalyptic ideas is social isolation and collective radicalization. Apocalyptic groups often separate their members from the outside world and enforce strict obedience to internal hierarchies. Such processes of isolation lead to the severance of ties with family, friends, and broader society. Members come to believe that the entire world is arrayed against them, and they perceive safety and belonging only within the authority of the leader or the confines of the movement. This dynamic was starkly evident in the Jonestown (People's Temple) tragedy, where leader Jim Jones relocated his followers to the Guyanese jungle, cutting them off from the outside world and ultimately coercing them into mass suicide.

Due to their capacity to undermine mental health and exert psychological pressure on communities, apocalyptic sects represent a profound danger to social life. These ideas exert particularly deep psychological effects on young people and individuals already experiencing emotional instability. The constant fear of an "imminent end" fosters anxiety, depression, and passivity. Moreover, such an atmosphere detaches individuals from normal

social participation, diminishes motivation for family life, and undermines engagement in education or professional activity.

Another significant social threat linked to apocalyptic ideologies is political manipulation and the destabilization of society. Apocalyptic discourses are at times employed as instruments of political strategy. Through religious populism, certain political actors summon the public toward an alleged “final path of salvation,” simultaneously branding dissenting voices as agents of “evil.” This rhetorical framework fosters polarization and contributes to political and social instability.

For example, certain evangelical groups in the United States justify their political alliance with Israel through apocalyptic prophecies of Armageddon. Apocalyptic ideas can also serve as a source of radical extremism, representing a major social threat. By employing a dualistic worldview of “us” versus “them,” apocalyptic groups portray themselves as the saved, while construing all others as a category destined for destruction. This interpretive framework provides the ideological foundation for extremist movements. Such dualism is also evident in global jihadist organizations, which often conceptualize their struggles as eschatological battles.

Many new religious movements can further be likened to theatrical spectacles, consisting of successive stages in which various performances are enacted. The first stage resembles a promotional scene filled with seductive imagery. Here, highly attractive and irresistible figures dominate, stimulating emotions and desires. Through performances that exploit sexual impulses and fantasies, potential recruits are drawn into closer contact with the group, their hearts captivated. In this process, human sexuality is deliberately used as a primary motivating force, with practices of both individual and collective sexual relations between members – often across gender lines – employed as techniques of initiation.

Subsequently, the second stage begins with the introduction and widespread consumption of narcotics and other recreational substances, designed to heighten sensory pleasure and dependency. Within this stage, members are also subjected to practices of spiritual purification, individual therapy, and collective therapy, which further reinforce group cohesion.

The final stage is marked by a dramatic shift. Having exhausted every material pleasure, adherents, now trapped in a state of insatiable hedonism, become disillusioned and vulnerable to manipulation. At this point, they may be encouraged to embrace the ultimate form of “pleasure” through participation in ritualized collective suicide. Followers are persuaded with false promises of resurrection, divine rebirth, or the beginning of a new existence as gods. Their minds are subjected to intense indoctrination, often reinforced with hallucinogenic substances, placing them in an intoxicated state of altered consciousness. At this irreversible stage, the theatrical performance concludes with its final act: death.

The three-stage process interpreted in the form of a theatrical performance is most commonly observed in movements whose doctrinal beliefs emphasize the imminence of the apocalypse and promote ideas of collective or individual suicide. However, in other sects that do not advocate suicide, only the first two “acts” of the theatrical performance tend to

be applied. Movements characterized by vegetarian practices (plant-based diets), for instance, generally refrain from the use of narcotics or pleasure-inducing methods, although such groups remain relatively few in number.

## Conclusion

Apocalyptic ideas – namely, conceptions related to the end of the world, the final days, or “Judgment Day” – occupy a significant place within various religions as well as in the framework of new religious movements (NRMs). Yet, in the modern context, apocalyptic thought, particularly in its millennialist and eschatological forms, is increasingly regarded not merely as a religious-philosophical phenomenon but as a serious threat to social security. This section has examined the modes in which such ideas manifest as social threats, analyzing them from sociological, psychological, and political perspectives.

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