Cosmic catastrophe always there if you look for it

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In one of his last works, written a decade after he had defined - enlightenment as "daring to know", Immanuel Kant identified what he regarded as one of the greatest threats to reason: the human tendency to seek, in ever-changing realities, a sign of the End of Days.

Some people, he observed, "find those signs in the triumph of injustice, the insolence of the rich, the waning of public trust"; many others "see them in violent and unusual changes in nature, in tempests, floods and earthquakes". Inferring from natural disasters that the world is coming to an end, they abandon their faith in progress and in society's capacity to address the challenges it faces.

Today, apocalyptic thinking surrounds us. From bushfires to hail storms, climate change to the coronavirus, every crisis strengthens the sense of dread and fuels the cry for immediate action to avert unimaginable consequences.

As yet more terrifying images flash on to our screens, panic has become the default response, bringing with it the perception that normality has succumbed to a permanent state of emergency. The only question is whether democracy, with its checks and balances, weighing competing interests and a reluctance to make drastic changes, can respond to the threats confronting mankind.

There is, of course, nothing new in the belief that time is running out. A cosmic catastrophe looming at the end of history, a violent struggle between good and evil, and the resolution of that struggle in the destruction of the Earth are recurring elements in the great religions,

particularly Christianity.

But in the classic religious model of eschatology, the climax is an adventus, "that which arrives", and the apocalypse is, literally, the revealing of all things, the manifestation of their essence which lies latent before "that which arrives" opens the way to a new start.

There is, in that sense, an inextricable connection between revelation and redemption, hope and doom, in which the one gives meaning to the other. And there is also, most starkly in the Pauline portrayal of the apocalypse, the powerful presence of the "katechon" (the being that restrains) who, in the words of Thessalonians, holds back "the opponent of the will of God" and prevents "the mystery of lawlessness" from destroying life until the times are ripe for redemption.

In some ways, that model survived secularisation, with Marx transposing it into a narrative in which capitalism, as it headed to inevitable collapse, would set the foundations for the final transition from "the realm of necessity" to "the kingdom of freedom".

But a distinctive aspect of secularisation was the emergence of a current of thought which retained all the terror of the apocalyptic vision while stripping it of any promise of redemption.

Indeed, Byron, writing in the midst of an unusually cold Swiss summer, gave that current one of its highest literary expressions, castigating man's destruction of nature. The march towards doom began, his poem "Darkness" says, with people consuming all available resources — the meadows, the forests, the "habitations of all things which dwell".

Then the symbols of human achievement disappeared, when "palaces" and "thrones" were, in desperation, used as combustibles. And once the institutions of social order had crumbled, humans lost their humanity, as "some lay down / And hid their eyes and wept" while "others fed / Their

funeral piles with fuel".

Finally, in a last horrific step, people were reduced to frantic, senseless beings who, deprived of every natural resource, breached the ultimate taboo and resorted to cannibalism, so that as "men died, their bones tombless as their flesh, / The meagre by the meagre were devour'd".

Byron was entirely unaware of it, but the freezing days he had experienced — in which, at the peak of summer, "the fowls went to roost at noon, and the candles were lighted as at midnight" — were due to the volcano Tambora on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, whose eruption in 1815 had ejected immense residues of ash and sulphur into the upper atmosphere.

However, the bleak strain of apocalyptic thought he helped inaugurate hardly receded after those residues had subsided. On the contrary, just as socialism's utopian fantasies flourished, so their dystopian twins experienced periodic renewals, most markedly after each world war.

But the fall of communism changed the picture. With the prospect of heaven on earth lost, all that was left of secular futurity was the fear of an ending which, from the 1960s on, circled back to Byron's vision of an impending environmental cataclysm.

That vision has now become an immense global movement. No doubt, its trappings are modern; but its features, particularly in their more extreme forms, are indistinguishable from those the medievalist Norman Cohn identified in the apocalyptic cults of centuries ago.

Like its predecessors, it elevates into dogma deeper forces it claims to have proven for all time and whose manifestations it sees in every event. Like them too, its members believe every decision, rather than requiring a balancing of costs and benefits, involves an absolute choice between life and death, perdition and salvation: each lump of coal is a step to the

climate apocalypse, every new mine a lurch toward destruction.

And no less similar to earlier doomsday cults is the tendency, which Freud had already noted, for the movement's leaders — when their strident prophecies go unheeded — to combine the paranoid's conviction that opponents are not merely ignorant but evil with the narcissist's acute sense of wounded pride.

Yet perhaps the most enduring feature of the apocalyptic mindset is the disdain for cautious deliberation, and for the democratic decision-making which gives a voice even to those who fail to grasp its hunger for drastic action.

Magnified thousands of times over on social networks, as well as on many media outlets, that mindset, which raises all events into crises that demand a war footing, has defined the mood of the age and pervaded every sphere of life.

None of that implies that environmental degradation or viral pandemics should be ignored. But as Kant intuited, when apocalyptic thinking replaces practical reason all that remains is fear itself, with the waves of collective hysteria it generates compounding the problems and making solutions harder and costlier to find.

Little wonder we stagger from panic to panic as if we were always teetering on the brink of extinction. And little wonder governments are under mounting pressure to join the stampede. It may not be the end of times, but it certainly makes one wish for it.