

ESCHATOLOGICAL NOTIONS IN POST-SOCIALIST BULGARIA

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Abstract: The text presents the most popular ideas about the end of the world that spread in Bulgaria in the post-socialist period. In the years of transition after 1989, social and political changes, as well as an economic crisis, favoured apocalyptic expectations. In contrast to the past, when the religious explanation of the world's end dominated, in contemporary times the apocalypse is more frequently related to cosmic and natural disasters or to the negative effects of human activity. A characteristic view of the end of the world is imagining it as a new beginning. In the present, there is also a transformation in the mechanism for shaping ideas about the end of the world. Modernization, globalization, and new technologies are changing both people's daily lives and their ideas about the fate of the human world. After the boom of apocalyptic expectations in Bulgarian society at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, in recent years we have seen a rationalization of the eschatological notions and their close connection with ecological and political arguments.

Keywords: apocalypse, Bulgaria, eschatology, post-socialism

Introduction

Some of the foundational questions concerning the essence of reality are those about the beginning and end of the world. In pre-industrial societies, the answer to these questions lay in the competence of a particular religious doctrine and religious experts. The great monotheistic religions and the numerous local religious teachings offer various explanations for the origin of the world, and many of them have an idea of its end (Brandes & Schmieder & Voß 2016), regardless of the linear or cyclical model in which the development of time is thought. The coming of the end of the world has been announced many times, with apocalyptic expectations being updated in the face of major sociopolitical cataclysms. Eschatological notions can take the form of apocalypticism¹ (Robbins & Palmer 1997: 4), through which people express distancing themselves from the existing social order and hope for the creation of a new world (Bromley 1997: 34). This hope is related to the creation of the “new man” and is characteristic of various teachings and doctrines, including Christianity, utopianism, communism, and new religious movements (Küenzlen 1992: 44). The establishment of the new kingdom in Jewish apocalypticism is associated with the appearance of the messiah, who is perceived as the ideal ruler in the “last days” (Petkanova & Miltenova 1993: 234). Christian eschatology is also closely related to the idea of salvation and achieving the Kingdom of God (Nedialkova 2006: 13). It offers a vision of the end of individual human destiny at the second coming (Tupkova-Zaimova & Miltenova 1996: 11). Christian eschatological ideas are primarily based on the final part of the New Testament:² the Apocalypse of John (Book of Revelation). Since the creation of the new doctrine, the Christians have lived in expectation of the end of the world. In the thirteenth century in Western Europe, the idea of the Last Judgement almost completely replaced the idea of the Second Coming of Christ (Ariès 2004: 141).

In traditional society, notions of the end of the world are influenced by both prevailing religious doctrine and apocryphal ideas. The influence of the Apocalypse of John on the folk eschatological beliefs of the Balkan peoples can be traced in the notions of drought and famine, earthquakes, the disappearance of the Sun and the blood-covered moon, the fiery rain, the invasion of locusts, and the outbreak of great war (Timotin 2005: 18). Human sins are usually thought of as the cause of the end of the world (Georgieva 2000: 48).

This text presents the most popular ideas about the end of the world that spread in Bulgaria in the post-socialist period (see also Troeva 2012). In the years of transition after 1989, socioeconomic and political changes in Bulgaria favoured apocalyptic expectations. The all-encompassing crisis that gripped society in the mid-1990s, the feeling of insecurity, the loss of perspective, and the wars in the neighbouring Balkan countries created a sense of decline and a coming end. The former socialist societies were unprepared for the capitalist reality, which at the same time was approaching “an apocalyptic zero-point” with its “four riders”, being the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, the imbalances in the system, and the growth in social divisions and exclusions (Žižek 2010: X).

The present article is a research result of an inter-academic project between the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Latvia, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. The focus of the study is on widespread notions of the causes of a possible end of the world, which are also a reflection of contemporary social, economic, and environmental problems in the Bulgarian post-socialist society. The study does not aim to present apocalyptic ideas of particular religious, prophetic, and/or millennial groups and movements that have an ideologically more structured form and function in a more closed social environment. Publications in the media, internet forums, film productions, and interviews with respondents are used as source material. They allow to trace the dynamics of the notions about the end of the world in the context of the diversification of information flows and access to them by various age and social groups. The interviews with elderly respondents from small settlements show a greater influence of tradition on their notions about the end of the world, although influences from television and the press are evident as well. If in rural areas the notions of the end of the world of the elderly are mostly the result of an oral tradition based on religious affiliation, then in the cities older people use more diverse sources of information. For example, an elderly woman from Sofia used the *Eternal Calendar* from 1918, which she inherited from her grandmother. She told her relatives that the calendar predicts many deaths for 2012. The interviews with younger respondents and internet resources give a different picture of the current ideas about the end of the world. Interviewed younger people from Sofia, in most cases, either completely rule out the possibility of an impending apocalypse or see the impending change not as an end but as a transformation and a new beginning. They draw information mainly

from the Internet, the virtual space offering numerous publications on the subject. Of interest to the ethnologist are the shared opinions of the readers of these articles. A number of online publications on the issue of the end of the world have dozens, and in some cases, hundreds, of comments that reflect the views of a younger age group.

The apocalyptic ideas in the international context of popular culture

Cinema,³ television, and access to movies over the Internet are some of the main factors in forming ideas about the apocalypse, including it in the imaginary world of popular culture. In the last few years, the Bulgarian audience has had numerous opportunities to watch productions dedicated to the apocalypse. The BTV Action Television channel showed the film *Ice Apocalypse* (with the original title *Post Impact*, 2004), according to which the Earth was hit by a meteor on October 18, 2012. The impact caused earthquakes, tidal waves, and clouds of dust that drastically changed the face of the planet. The film *2012: Doomsday* is also dedicated to 2012, and many Bulgarians are familiar with its visions. Very popular is also the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which has been broadcast several times in Bulgaria and describes a new ice age on Earth and its consequences for human civilization. Common for such films is the view of the apocalypse as caused by nature or by humans, and in that respect, they secularised the end of the world and proposed the idea of the possibility of human agency (Walliss 2009: 72–73). In 2009, BTV showed Borislav Lazarov's film *Fear for the Future*, which presents various possible scenarios for the end of the world. The first part of the film was broadcast on December 19, 2009, and the second – on December 20, 2009 (Btv.bg 2009).⁴ This film, like many others, shows the scientific perspective on the issue. For example, periodically in 2011 and 2012, National Geographic aired its popular science film *2012: The Final Prophecy*, which connects the beginning of the Mayan calendar with a sudden glaciation before 5200 years, which was reflected in people's perceptions of cyclical cataclysms. Many other films show imagined fictional worlds in which the apocalypse is a possible scenario. All of them reflect not only the concerns of the people but also the geopolitical realities after the Cold War (Walliss 2009).

During the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, a number of translated books about the apocalypse were published, as were several books by Bulgarian authors, which shaped the ideas of a wide readership. One of the most influential in this respect is Paco Rabanne's book *Apocalypse* (published in Bulgarian in 1994). In it, he talks about his vision of World War III. According to the author, the apocalypse will be a cleansing of the Earth. It will not be a final destruction but a "restructuring and revival before the New Age" (Rabanne 1994: 75). In 2001, Marvin Moore's book was also published in Bulgarian, which presents the Adventist view of the imminent end of the world and offers guidance on how to prepare for it (Moore 2001). A popular writer that a Bulgarian reader met was also Marie Jones. The author collects predictions, myths, and scientific theories about the year 2012 in a book entitled *2013: The End of Days or a New Beginning* (Jones 2009). It presents various, often opposing ideas about the coming "end": the population of the Earth will perish, and a large part of the people will be raised to a higher level of consciousness. In 2010, the book of Anna Marianis *2012 – Apocalypse from A to Z* was published in Bulgarian market, in which many hypotheses for possible causes of the apocalypse were presented. The author offers an interpretation of the apocalypse from the standpoint of the teachings of theosophy and Agni yoga, believing that the apocalyptic events will be followed by a new golden age on Earth (Marianis 2010). At the end of 2011, Frank Joseph's book *2012. Atlantis and the Maya* (the original title was *Atlantis und 2012. Warum die Prophezeihungen der Maya aus Atlantis Stammen*) was translated into Bulgarian (Joseph 2011) and offered in newsstands in the country. In it, the author connects the Mayan calendar with the sunken city of Atlantis. He hypothesises the possibility of a new ice age, the danger of solar storms, and a change in the poles of our planet.

Bulgarian authors also dedicate books to the apocalypse. In 1999, a book by Aleksandr Liubenov, entitled *Is the End of the World Coming?* was published. In it, the author aims to dispel the "misconceptions" about the coming end of the world in the year 2000 (Liubenov 1999: 152). In 2009, the *Standart* newspaper published a book called *2012: The End of the World*. It sets out various popular hypotheses about the possible causes of the end of the world, such as the influence of the planet Nibiru and solar eruptions. The notions of the end of the world and of December 21, 2012 were considered in connection with other popular esoteric topics, such as the symbolism of cereal circles, indigo children, and the coming of the sixth race on Earth (Staridolski & Grigorova 2009).

The media also offer information about possible causes for the future end of the world. For example, the *Monitor* newspaper in 2000 informed its readers about some possible scenarios for an apocalypse, including a collision with a comet or other body from space, the explosion of a supernova, the onset of an ice age on Earth, and the suggestion that by 2050 the Earth will collide with a space object (Milanov 2000: 21). Thus, in contemporary times, apocalyptic notions are not an isolated phenomenon, but the contexts that give rise to them are different. The main media for translation are completely new, as are some of the images in which the end of the world is thought.

On the occasion of natural phenomena, notions of the end of the world are also updated. For example, on August 11, 1999, during a solar eclipse, a number of Bulgarian villages were deserted because residents (especially the elderly) hid in their homes, fearing that the eclipse was a harbinger of the apocalypse. The Pernik earthquake of May 22, 2012, caused strong fears and associations with the coming end of the world. The approach of the year 2000, which raised the expectation of a cataclysm, has renewed notions of the end of the world.⁵ In the first years of the new millennium, the mass consciousness had already been conquered by a new image – the “Mayan prophecy” about the end of the world on December 21, 2012 (Sitler 2006).

Apocalypse as seen through the categories of religious doctrine

(Post)modernity offers a variety of scenarios in which the apocalypse is thought of, and in most of them there is no religious element. However, it continues to be present in some of the attested notions, usually with references to the Book of Revelation. An example is the opinion (from 2008) of an internet user, who refers to her vision as well as to texts from the Revelation. According to her, we were the last generation to experience “the biblical truths of the end times. Everything that is foretold for the coming of the Antichrist, who will present himself as Jesus, we will experience” (Forum.xnetbg.net 2008).⁶ A lasting element in contemporary notions of the end of the world, influenced by the religious worldview, is the belief that the apocalypse is a kind of punishment for human sins. One internet user shared the view that all who believe in God will have a good destiny, as Jesus will come down to Earth to take them with

him. According to him, all good people will become angels and enter heaven, and bad people will remain on Earth, where the apocalypse will occur (2010) (Apokalipsis 2008). Another person commented (2011) that as long as there are good people on Earth, the end of the world will not come (Dnes.bg 2011a). An internet user shares (2009) that the cause of the apocalypse is the sinfulness of the people (Apokalipsis 2008). The belief that we live in the “last days” (Bnews 2011) is shared by a number of people. Disasters, floods, earthquakes, crises, unemployment, disunity, and greed among the people are cited as signs of the end of time that are already present (2009) (Apokalipsis 2008). In addition to traditional signs of the approaching end (as earthquakes and floods), current political events (the crisis in the European Union, the unrest in the Middle East, and wars) are also perceived as precursors of the coming apocalypse.

The impossibility of determining the time of the end of the world is argued with the authority of the Bible: “The truth is in the Bible – believe in it or not, everything that is written will happen! No one knows when the end of the world will come” (Dnes.bg 2011a). Often, those who express their opinion about the end of the world believe that one cannot know when the end of the world will come because this is the only prerogative of God – “Only God knows when and no one else” (Tracheva 2019); “Only God the Father knows when the end of the world will come. Read the Revelation of John. There will be a series of events that will destroy humanity. The Earth will perish in fire. There is no sign yet that the Antichrist has come” (2020) (Blitz.bg 2017).

War

The idea of the sinfulness of people and the resulting future punishment is also related to the vision of war as a possible end to the world. This traditional view of the end of the world is still valid today. The memory of the devastation caused by the two world wars in the twentieth century, the threat of a new world conflict during the Cold War, and possible uses of nuclear weapons, the war against terrorism (Germanà & Mousoutzani 2014: 1) make the fears of a global armed conflict very real. In the 1990s, in unison with the growing socio-economic crisis in Bulgaria, apocalyptic expectations and fears intensified. They, in turn, stimulated the appearance of compensatory notions, as for example about the new national pilgrimage center Mount of the Cross (*Krastova gora*), which

respondents believed would remain safe during a future world war (Troeva 2011: 102–103). The stories recorded in 1994 that the Mount of the Cross protects Bulgaria from war were also considered a reaction to the military conflict in the former Republic of Yugoslavia at that time (Karamihova & Valtchinova 2009). In the mid-1990s, the proximity of the war to the country's territory naturally made a war the most common threat to the existence. As the military conflict in the former Yugoslavia got the characteristics of a religious clash, it is natural for the people of Bulgaria, who live in region mixed in religious and/or ethnic terms, to be more sensitive to the events. At the same time, the notion from the same region that during the flood only the region around Krastova Gora will survive and the people there will “eat with golden spoons”⁷ has particular traditional mythological and religious elements.

The constant military conflicts in different parts of the world add a great deal of realism to the scenario of a military cataclysm as a reason for the end of the world. It should be noted that the apocalypse has also been a geopolitical phenomenon (Quinby 2014: 18), reflecting power struggles. The inevitability of a new world war is often argued by citing prophecies ascribed to Nostradamus or to the Bulgarian seer Vanga. After some shared notions, Nostradamus has predicted that the global nuclear war that will destroy humanity will begin in 2018 (BNews 2011; Dnes.bg 2011a). It was also believed that Vanga predicted a chemical war for 2014, when millions of people would be struck with purulent ulcers, skin cancer, and other diseases (BNews 2011). Following another prediction of the prophetess, World War III would begin after the war in Syria in 2020 (Standart 2019). According to an opinion shared on social networks,

All the prophets and Buddha and Christ and Muhammad, and all others have said and taught PEOPLE to live in peace, love and understanding. The most important thing is to love our neighbour! If the wars continue, if we do not take care of people, animals and the WHOLE nature, bad things await us!!!! (Khristova 2018)

Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 heightens fears of a third world war (Actualno.com 2022).

Ecocatastrophes caused by humans

Many people associate the end of the world with ecocatastrophes caused by human activity. These notions can be seen as a form of “environmental apocalypticism” (Fedele et al. 2013). Nuclear energy is pointed to as a threat, and the Fukushima accident is cited as an example of that: “It has been clear for years that we will destroy ourselves; we do not need any planets X – see Fukushima!” (Dnes.bg 2011a). A new threat from human technology is seen in the Large Hadron Collider at CERN (opened 2008), whose launch has sparked widespread fears that it will have catastrophic consequences for Earth (see, e.g., Ilieva 2009). A much-discussed topic in recent decades has been global warming and its possible consequences, including the disappearance of human civilization. Scientists alarmed about the possibility that global warming could stop the warm Gulf Stream and cause the continent of Europe to enter a new ice age (ibid.). This danger is perceived as very real by many (News.bg 2016). The commented consequences of global warming are the destruction of a large part of the Earth’s fertile lands, famine for humanity, and massive floods, which will render parts of the land uninhabitable (BNews 2011).

Geocataclysm

Though most people associate the threat to life on Earth with a danger coming from space, some believe that such a threat can be found in a possible geocataclysm. It is expected in the form of powerful earthquakes and eruptions of supervolcanoes. The change in the Earth’s magnetic poles is not uncommonly pointed to as a possible cause of the end of the world (Ilieva 2009). The phenomenon is periodic in the history of the planet, and according to scientists, there is no reason to expect a change in magnetic polarity in the near future or to expect adverse effects on life if this happens (Dnes.bg 2011a). Proponents of the apocalypse, however, think differently: “If the poles really shift, don’t you think it will be an apocalypse...?!?!? With so many earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis? We’ll see what happens then...” (2011) (Mystics.eu 2009). Another mentioned cause is the imagined displacement of the tectonic plates in 2022–2025, which will lead to the sinking of a number of countries. The last prophecy is attributed to Peter Danov and the Bulgarian prophetess Slava

Sevryukova (2019) (Tracheva 2019). The expectation of the eruption of the supervolcano under Yellowstone is also mentioned as the “most real threat to the end of the world” (Khristova 2018; Dnes.bg 2017).

Asteroids

Various assumptions about the cosmological cause of the end of the world have been launched on the Internet and in a number of media sources in recent years. The inevitable end is justified by the great cataclysms that our planet has experienced in the past. An example is the catastrophe caused by the fall of a large asteroid at the North Pole 250 million years ago, which led to the extinction of 80% of living organisms on the planet (Dnes.bg 2011b), as well as the extinction of dinosaurs 65 million years ago as a result of such a collision. Possible future threats to our planet include the asteroid Apophis, which will approach the Earth in dangerous proximity in 2029 and 2036 and in 2068 could possibly crash into it (BTA 2020). Numerous publications with similar content, as well as films featuring the plot of an asteroid colliding with the Earth, contribute to this being one of the most popular end-of-the-world scenarios. The expectations that the apocalypse will be caused by a collision of our planet with an asteroid are also supported by the frequent media reports about the next asteroid passing by our planet.⁸

The Planet Nibiru

A variant of the notion of an upcoming cosmic collision is the relatively new hypothesis of the Earth colliding with the hypothetical planet Nibiru. According to popular belief, it revolves around the Sun in a distorted orbit and periodically approaches the Earth, causing disasters (Tracheva 2018). Claims that Nibiru is a planet and was known to the Sumerians are refuted by scientists. Nibiru is a name from Babylonian astrology, sometimes associated with the god Marduk. According to David Morrison of the NASA Institute of Astrobiology, claims that Nibiru, a supposed planet discovered by the Sumerians, is headed for Earth are based on the artwork of Zecharia Sitchin. According to this author, the planet Nibiru orbits the Sun with a period of rotation of 3600 years, which is reflected in Sumerian legends about “ancient astronauts” (the Anunnaki)

visiting the Earth (Dnes.bg 2011a). According to the discussed ideas, the approach of Nibiru will cause a change of magnetic poles and change the orbit of the planet, and a giant flood will submerge the continents in water and destroy life on Earth (BNews 2011). The forums are full of opinions and detailed descriptions of the planet Nibiru (Forum.xnetbg.net 2008).⁹ According to what was shared on the Internet, “a killer planet is flying to Earth”. It will cause huge destruction – tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic activity (Dnes.bg 2011a).

Aliens

One of the products of the twentieth century is the notion that there is a threat to Earth from an alien civilization. The theme is one of the favorites exploited by Hollywood (for example, in the films *Independence Day* (1996) and *War of the Worlds* (2005)). This is also one of Stephen Hawking’s fears about the end of our civilization, which has been popularised in the last years (Dnevnik.bg 2010; Nauka Offnews.bg 2016). Clearly expressed pessimism about this scenario for the end of the world stands out in the comments on the subject (Dnes.bg 2015). However, according to some opinions expressed on Bulgarian websites, our planet is threatened by aliens from Orion, and the satellites of Mars, Phobos and Deimos, are their ships. On Earth, they have underground bases and are trying to create a new world order (Dnes.bg 2011a).

Lining up of celestial bodies in a row

Another possible cause for the end of the world often mentioned is the ordering of celestial bodies in a straight line, although this phenomenon is often observed without adverse consequences (Dnes.bg 2011a). Many sites discuss the ordering of the planets of the solar system in a row (parade of the planets), which could lead to catastrophic consequences for the Earth’s climate (Mikhailova 2012).

Solar activity

Information and comments on solar activity as a possible cause for the end of the Earth are not rare (OffNews.bg 2014). Some of those sharing their opinions

in the forums link the information about increasing solar activity with the era of global warming (Dnes.bg 2011a). Many opinions are based on actual scientific hypotheses about the end of the solar system in five billion years (Dnevnik 2018), when our star will run out of fuel, turn into a red giant, and probably engulf the Earth.¹⁰ Another scientific hypothesis is commented, according to which the galaxies Andromeda and the Milky Way will collide in a few billion years, resulting in the end of the Earth (Khristova 2020).

December 21, 2012

The most widespread fears of the coming end of the world were associated with the date December 21, 2012. The expectations for the end of the world on this date were based on the found in Mexico so-called “Monument Six” – a stone tablet with a Maya inscript indicating the end of one chronological period (Dnes.bg 2012). Since the 1980s, the 2012 prophecy has gradually gained popularity worldwide (Fedele et al. 2013: 168). This has resulted in increased interest and dissemination of information about the Mayan calendar issue in a variety of media. Despite the opinions aimed at reassuring society, many people shared the belief that some of the apocalyptic scenarios listed so far will be realised on December 21, 2012. At the same time, 2012 was considered the beginning of a new stage in the development of our civilization, with the predominance of the spiritual over the material. Similar tendencies were also observed in other south-european countries as part of the so-called “process of spiritualization” (Fedele et al. 2013: 173). In the years after 2012, apocalyptic expectations in Bulgaria decreased, and the arguments for this were that the end was scheduled many times but the predictions did not come true: “Nothing will happen, because in 2012 they said, but nothing happened” (Tracheva 2019).

The end as a beginning

A number of interviews and opinions shared on the Internet express the idea that the upcoming global cataclysm is not really the end but the beginning of a new phase in human development. These ideas are generally characteristic of religious eschatological expectations of collective salvation by a divine power.¹¹ In our time, such notions are typical of the New Age movement with its hopes

for social transformation and the emergence of a new type of people in a new, better, and more harmonious world.¹² Examples of such views were/are very common: “There will be no end to the world. We will reach ‘almost the end of the world’, but this will be a turning point for us to the new life” (Dnes.bg 2011a); in 2012 will come “the end of the old world and the beginning of the new one”; “2012 is the beginning of a new world and the end of the present one” (2011) (Mystics.eu 2009). The apocalyptic notions are closely linked with social criticism, and thus they also include the idea of a transformation of the world and of the mankind (Rosen 2008).

Pandemics

A popular idea for the end of human civilization is the outbreak of a deadly pandemic. The theme has been developed in a number of films: *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Outbreak* (1995), *28 Days Later* (2002), *Pandemic* (2007), and *Contagion* (2011) (Sega 2020). In 2020, the pandemic from SARS-CoV-2 was described in some media as a harbinger of the biblical Apocalypse (Newsfront 2020) and has been associated with its fourth horseman (Dein 2021). Even the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called in September 2020 the pandemic the “fifth horseman of the Apocalypse” (UN.org 2020). In Bulgaria, Vanga’s prophecy that “the corona will tread over us”, which some associate with the current pandemic, has come to people’s attention in the late 2020 (Blitz.bg 2020). At the same time, opinions that the pandemic from SARS-CoV-2 will put an end to the human race are limited (Khristova 2020; Webcafe.bg 2020).

Politics

Many of the end-of-the-world opinions on the Internet also shared numerous political comments.¹³ They cover both domestic and foreign policy issues. Some of the expressed negative opinions are regarding the political transition in Bulgaria in the last 30 years and the social, political, and economic crises in the country: “We are in a long apocalypse of 20 years with no hope of a near end” (Vasileva 2011). The idea of a possible end to the world provokes also very

human thoughts about the commitment of people and the loss and loneliness that would follow the cataclysm (Ilieva 2009).

Conclusions

Bulgaria's first post-socialist decade after 1989 was marked by a growth in apocalyptic expectations reflecting the fear of social insecurity, economic crisis, unemployment, war conflicts, and ecological threats. It is not accidental that these have been recognized as the signs heralding the apocalypse. The global economic crisis, the problems of the European Union, the Arab revolutions, and the wars are also considered as such. The country, like many others, was gripped by fears of an upcoming end to the world around 2000 and 2012. Religious and secular scenarios for the end of the world are substantiated with references to authorities – scholars' arguments are used, but so are predictions of prophets and quotations from the holy books. Too often, notions of the end of the world are actually compilations of more than one hypothesis. This is particularly evident in the December 21, 2012 ideas. The reasons why the end of one of the cycles in the Mayan calendar has become the most popular date for the expected apocalypse can be sought in different directions. On the one hand, people tend to attribute secret knowledge inaccessible to modern civilization to ancient cultures such as the Maya. For every contemporary who believes in the apocalypse the proximity of the date in question in time is important, as it is already thought of as the near end of his/her own life. The date concentrated all the potential dangers for the Earth, which are also observed as separate end-of-the-world scenarios. In the information age, any such sensational hypothesis quickly travels around the globe and becomes accessible to broad strata of society. The idea of the future end of the world exists in many cultures and is periodically associated with current events and dates, and December 21, 2012 is just one of a series of identifications of the apocalypse.

The apocalypse is thought of in different images in different historical periods. In contrast to the past, when the religious explanation of the world's end dominated, in contemporary times the apocalypse is more frequently related to cosmic and natural disasters or to the negative side effects of human activity. Improper human behaviour was cited as the cause of the end of the world in the past and continues to be so nowadays. In traditional beliefs, it is a sin.

Its modern equivalents are the unscrupulous attitude towards nature, which has been destroyed as a result of human activity and technologies. Thus, human behavior and ethical notions of good and evil continue to be thought of as determining Earth's fate and reveal one of the characteristic features of the notion of the world – its anthropic nature. A characteristic view of the end of the world is imagining it as a new beginning. Thus, the linear model of time imposed by the great monotheistic religions turns out to be included in a larger cyclical model, through which the mass consciousness edits the idea of the end of human history. This cyclical model proposes the idea of progress, which is perceived mainly in moral terms. A number of contemporary ideas about the apocalypse representing a new beginning could be connected to the New Age movement. They present a two-way process. On the one hand, the eschatological idea has been secularized, with a number of religious elements removed. On the other hand, personal spiritual development is set as a goal, supporting the process of spiritual transformation of the world. This is one of the new forms of religious and spiritual expression today.

In the present, there is a transformation in the mechanism of shaping ideas about the end of the world. Scientific discoveries, the educational system, the media, and the Internet all contribute to a very dynamic process of forming new ideas about the fate of the world and the potential threats. The tradition of oral transmission of knowledge is increasingly giving way to drawing information from various sources – television, cinema, literature, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet – as communication, sharing and online discussions are typical for younger people. Different generations live in different information flows, which determine the significant differences in their worldview and, in particular, in their ideas about the apocalypse. Modernization, globalization, and new technologies are transforming both people's daily lives and their ideas about the fate of the human world.

The apocalypse itself is imagined as coming from outside the Earth. According to religious notions, it is God's punishment, which is poured on the Earth as a flood or devastating fire. Nowadays, the danger to our planet is also often seen in outer space in the face of asteroids, comets, supernovae, the Sun, or aliens. Unfulfilled prophecies in the last ten years have led to growing scepticism in the general public about the upcoming end of the world. After the boom of apocalyptic expectations in Bulgarian society at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, in recent years

we have seen a rationalization of the eschatological notions and their close connection with ecological and political arguments, i.e., a predominance of a secular apocalypticism.

Notes

¹ The word *apocalypse* is of Greek origin and means ‘revelation’. Being associated with the Apocalypse of John, over time the term began to be used to mean the end of the world. For apocalyptic expectations in different historical periods and cultures, see Cohn 1957; Himmelfarb 2010. For apocalyptic notions in Islam, see Filiu 2011; for apocalyptic notions of the Muslim Bulgarians, see Lozanova 2000; Troeva 2012.

² Eschatological notions are also characteristic of the Old Testament. On the issue, see Shivarov 1999.

³ For the influence of cinema on the formation of apocalyptic notions, see Bendle 2005.

⁴ An edition of the show “The Day Begins” (November 23, 2010) was dedicated to the topic of the end of the world and of the film. Available at <https://www.btv.bg/shows/deniat-e-prekrasen/videos/shte-nastapi-li-krayat-na-sveta-prez-2012-godina.html>, last accessed on 3 December 2022.

⁵ More on that issue see in Patkin 2009.

⁶ The internet sources are cited in the text with their year of publication on the Internet.

⁷ See Troeva 2011. Similar notion also exists in region of Chepelare (Liubanska 2005: 148).

⁸ For example, on November 9, 2011, a 400-meter asteroid was reported to have passed the previous day. The article reminds us of the threat of a collision of our planet with a large asteroid in 2028 (Dnes, 2011, No. 118, 9 November, p. 6). The “Retro” newspaper from May 26–30, 2012, No. 21, p. 6, warns of a possible collision with a large asteroid in 2013 or in 2020.

⁹ The expected end of the world following the collision was April 23, 2018 (Smolyan. bgvesti.net 2018).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Kalinkov 2004: 11. The author defines the assumptions of scientists about the end of the world as “physical eschatology.”

¹¹ On the question of millennialism, see, e.g., Wessinger 1997.

¹² For the New Age movement in a post-socialist context, see Potrata 2004.

¹³ Political references are also present in the apocalyptic narratives in other European countries, see Brzozowska & Laineste 2014.

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