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Vaccine Hesitancy and the Apocalypse

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Abstract

Some forms of vaccine hesitancy have their roots in religious beliefs about future apocalyptic events. Such beliefs engender fear of centralized governmental authority as manifested in public health mandates involving vaccines or masks. The author's upbringing as a religious survivalist provides perspective on why some people display vaccine hesitancy. The author also discusses several ways to address these fears.

In 1972, soon after I started high school, a cryptic billboard campaign emerged in the west Texas city of Lubbock, near where my family lived. The billboards started out by saying "The END is coming." After a few weeks, additional information was added: "The END is coming—June 19th." People started speculating about the meaning of the advertisement. Lubbock was a somewhat religious city, and some residents subscribed to an apocalyptic tradition that assumed future violence would precede the Second Coming of Jesus. In my house, the speculation approached panic. My parents were semi-survivalists with a 10-acre plot of land outside of town which they were preparing to help us survive future disasters that were supposedly foretold in biblical texts. Although their biggest fear was an economic crash that they saw coming in the next few years, my parents were open to the possibility of other catastrophic events as well. The date of June 19th gave them a hint as to what would cause the advertised "end" described on the billboards. In Texas, June 19th has important significance to the Black population because that is the day, in 1865, when the Emancipation Proclamation was first announced in the state, in the city of Galveston. For many African Americans, it is a major day of celebration. For my parents, it seemed like the perfect day for violence. The billboards were simply ways of gathering the Black forces together for a giant race riot.

As the ominous date approached, my parents made plans to shelter in place at the little farm. They made sure there was plenty of ammunition for the motley collection of small-caliber pistols and rifles that my stepfather had collected for self-defense. They stored canned food in hidden caches around the acreage—and then waited. On June 19th, there were no obvious signs of a riot anywhere: no fires, no smoke on the horizon, no warnings on the radio. We had no television, so we could not check that news source—and this was long before the internet—so eventually my mother decided to drive into town to reconnoiter the area. Always skeptical of the race riot theory, I went with her out of curiosity. One of the billboards was only a couple miles from our house, and as we drove up to it, my mother's face turned a bright red. In big letters, the billboard proclaimed, "The END is here … K-E-N-D at 1590 on the end of your AM radio dial, playing the best in top 40 hits, 24 hours a day." For once, I was discrete and did not say anything. As a matter of fact, nothing was ever said about the incident in our house—ever.

I was recently reminded of this incident during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am a professor of public health at a state university in Missouri, and I was involved in a project to find out why there was so much vaccine hesitancy in the local population. Many of the people I talked to had rational reasons for choosing to forego vaccination. Some did not want to receive the vaccine until it was approved by the FDA. Some were concerned about reports of myocarditis. These were the legitimate concerns of informed, intelligent people.

However, there were some other, surprising comments that referred to "End Times." As I spoke with these people, I learned that some of them were convinced that the pandemic was a sign of the coming Apocalypse. One expressed a fatalistic view that what was going to happen had been predetermined, and it was inevitable that the end was coming soon. This perception was not new to me given my upbringing, but I was puzzled by how this apocalyptic vision was linked to the hesitancy to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. As I considered the comments made by these people, I was reminded of the eschatological thinking that drove my parents to abandon a relatively comfortable life in town and start their own survivalist compound on an old cotton field in west Texas.

This is the real point of this article—that this apocalyptic thinking helps drive vaccine hesitancy. It may not be a major contributor to the overall problem, but I believe it is part of it. In

this article, I try to establish a link between the Apocalypse and vaccine hesitancy through a description of my family's sojourn with survivalism.

I was 15 years old in 1972 when my parents sold their house in town and started the move to the 10 acres of barren soil south of Lubbock. In a local salvage yard, they found a large military barracks that was missing a wall on one end, then had the building moved onto the old cotton field they had recently purchased. It was the start of a venture that consumed all their time and money for many years, as well as most of their children's time. They had begun their marriage with 10 children as a mixture of previous marriages, but when they started their survivalist adventure, only four were still at home. I was the oldest.

Over the next few years, we gutted the building and rebuilt the interior, built the west wall, installed plumbing and power, planted a seven-acre garden, raised livestock and poultry, and built a solid fence around the entire acreage. My stepfather was a rather quiet man, but my mother constantly spoke about why all this work was necessary. Both agreed that an economic collapse was imminent. Their concerns about the economy came from a mishmash of religious teachings and popular books. Among their most important influences were *How to Prepare for the Coming Crash* and *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. The first was an indictment of the Federal Reserve and a prediction of economic disaster that would exceed that of the Great Depression, something both of my parents had vague memories of living through when they were children. The second book combined literalist translations of biblical apocalyptic literature with interpretations of current events in a description of an inevitable slide into End Times disaster.

Verses selected from the Bible in support of their actions were also important influences. Fundamentalist theologians have connected these scriptures to form a timeline that is important to the narrative. The timeline starts with the Great Falling Away, a corruption of the people that reduces their faith in God and that develops into a time of ever-increasing catastrophe. As a result of the demands of the people for greater governmental support to alleviate suffering from this catastrophe, a strong political figure steps forward to establish a one-world government. That leader is called the Anti-Christ in some accounts, the Son of Perdition and The Lawless One in others; according to some, he is the Beast. The one-world government leads to greater suffering and repression of God's people, eventually developing into the Great Tribulation. In the end, a triumphant Jesus conquers the Anti-Christ and his representatives on earth, establishing a thousand-year reign of prosperity and peace. This is a simplified version of the prophecy. The Second Coming initiates the great Rapture, in which all the dead but resurrected Christians and those still alive are caught up together in a flight up to the clouds to meet the returning, triumphant Jesus. These are the essential predictions of End Times theology as embraced by many Christians. The various denominations interpret the sequence and the participants differently, but this was the sequence of events that my parents believed would happen, or at least begin, while they were still alive

This timeline and the description of future events are results of a literalist translation of certain scriptures. Probably the most famous states, "There will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes; lawlessness will abound and the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:7). Another important biblical image is that of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, a vision of riders who spread war, famine, disease, and scarcity throughout the world. Most of the images come from the last book of the New Testament, usually called "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," or simply "Revelation." However, the Bible also quotes Jesus as describing a time of great trouble in the future. Matthew 24:15–21 states,

> When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place (let him who readeth understand). Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains; Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house; neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day. For then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be.

My parents were not the first to take these warnings literally or to have their fear inflamed by popular literature. Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year" is a fictional account of what happened during the Great Plague in London, but it is based on events from Defoe's own childhood. It tells of panic induced by London's own doomsayers during the epidemic that killed nearly one quarter of the city's residents from 1665–1666:

> Books frighted them terribly; such as *Lilly's Almanac, Gadbury's Alogical Predictions, Poor Robins Almanack*.; also several pretended religious Books; one entitled, *Come out of her my people, lest you be partaker of her Plagues*; another *Fair Warning*; another *Britain's Remembrance*, and many such; all, or most Part of which, foretold directly or covertly the Ruin of the City: nay some were so Enthusiastically bold, as to run about the streets, with their Oral Predictions, pretending they were sent to preach to the City; and one in particular, who like Jonah to Ninevah, cried in the streets "yet forty Days and London shall be destroyed."

This quote demonstrates the way popular interpretations of these traditions have convinced people of the necessity of evacuating a city, for instance, or hoarding food and essentials. However, another part of Defoe's account is very important. One of the reasons for the great sense of doom was the year this catastrophe occurred: 1666—the last three numbers being "666." This symbolism still resonates today and most likely accounts for some of the vaccine hesitancy in certain religious circles.

This symbolism appears in another scriptural text from Revelation describing the Beast, a person some believe is the Anti-Christ and others believe is another individual working in the same one-world government. The Beast is depicted as having the horns of a lamb but the voice of a dragon. He does great wonders, like making fire come down from the sky in the presence of men. He develops immense power in the government—so much power that no one can take part in any commerce, including buying food, without the Beast's approval. That approval is shown by the Beast's mark on the people's hands or foreheads. The mark is the number six-hundred, three score and six: 666. This number demands fear and rapt attention from Christians raised in the apocalyptic tradition because it symbolizes a totalitarian government, in this case a world-wide government, that directs every person's actions. This government requires complete obedience and severely punishes noncompliance. No one can survive without the approval of the government run by the Beast; no one can support a family without "the Mark."

Indeed, this in some cases is the essence of vaccine hesitancy: People from this tradition often distrust any action that is mandated by government, but especially any that in any way changes or leaves marks on their bodies. In their view, the Mark of the Beast could be a brand or a tattoo, but it could also be an indelible mark only seen under a certain light: a computer chip, a scarification, an ink stamp—any mark can do. Could the mark be an insertion into the genes that

identifies who has gotten the vaccine? This question captures the extent of the fear that such mandated actions can engender.

It is worth noting that this fear of the Mark of the Beast and of totalitarian government is not limited to those who are traditionally religious; the tradition is somewhat familiar even to those who do not attend church services, even to those who may be anti-religious. Though many may not even be able to describe this tradition, it is nevertheless embedded deeply within the culture. It is a powerful fear that may not require the explicit description of its history as described here, but it is undoubtedly part of American tradition, just as it was part of the traditions of Defoe's London. It is not surprising that certain factions of society resent mandatory vaccines or mandatory masking. They resent and fear a government that states they cannot send their children to school unless every child is wearing a mask, especially when the government's advice on masking has been inconsistent. The masks even leave a mark on the face, albeit temporary, if worn for a long time, and this has been mentioned in some anti-masking writings. Opponents resent the mandatory administration of a vaccine that uses a genetic technology they see as a permanent change to their bodies. It may not matter that the technology does not actually modify the DNA; the temporary changes to the mRNA made by the new technology vaccines may be seen as threats because they do result in immunity, itself a type of mark.

For many outsiders unfamiliar with the apocalyptic tradition, this fear and resentment may merely serve as a humorous anecdote about ignorant rubes who should know better. The personal story I shared in the beginning of this article is indeed humorous in a twisted way, and I used it for that reason. However, from a public health perspective, researchers and practitioners try to understand barriers to seeking appropriate treatment or prevention, such as obtaining a vaccination. As public health professionals, we do not ridicule minority groups or other cultures for ignorant, erroneous, or naïve attitudes toward disease; rather, we try to be culturally sensitive so we can understand problematic beliefs and address them in an informed and culturally appropriate manner. There is no reason why the populations described here should be treated any differently. What can be done to address such vaccine hesitancy?

First, community leaders, public health workers, and healthcare providers should be informed about this subject and should recognize that even anti-religious people may harbor this innate fear.

Second, public health agencies should avoid *unnecessary* mandates that alienate the population. A cost-benefit analysis of public health mandates is essential, acknowledging that one of those costs may be the loss of the public trust. For example, what are the benefits of mandating vaccination for students in elementary school? What are the costs? Are the benefits great enough to balance the resentment and resistance incurred by such an inconvenient and heavy-handed mandate? Perhaps the benefits do outweigh the cost of the fear and distrust incurred in this community. Perhaps not. Is this being considered? A consultation with local clergy might be in order, but it is important to realize that there is great diversity among the clergy. Many of them do not have the background to understand this issue.

Third, be sensitive to the issue of the Mark of the Beast. Armbands or vaccine passports may be seen as marks, as might a temporary ink stamp on the back of the hand. Recently, a television news host stated that it was time to start shaming the unvaccinated and to shun these "stupid people," supposedly those who cannot display proof of vaccination. Such statements play

into the perception that popular society and big government are working together to establish a totalitarian regime.

Fourth, and very importantly, public health communicators should be able to defend new technologies, showing that mRNA vaccines do not change the genetic makeup of a vaccine recipient. They should also note that it would be impossible to implant a chip to monitor someone's presence. I still struggle to accept that anyone truly believes the chip conspiracy; nevertheless, it demonstrates the need for active rumor control.

Fifth, public health professionals must be honest about the presence of real side effects. It does no good to deny what people can see with their own eyes. They should be ready to discuss the relative risk of serious side effects due to vaccination compared to the risk of serious repercussions from the illness itself.

These actions have more application than one might think. Although COVID-19 might not be seen as one of the foretold plagues, some see it as a vivid preview of things to come. Christian scriptures state that biblical plagues of pestilence and "wild beasts of the field" will kill about one quarter of the world's population during the future's times of trouble. Anything that hastens these plagues by breaking down protective borders or increasing the size of government will be seen as simple steps toward a one-world government and the Apocalypse. The border crises of the U.S. and Europe, combined with power-grabbing emergency actions of central governments, all look like prophecy come true. The current response of the central government in Canada to the truckers' strike is a very good example of how a disregard for public sensitivities to heavy-handed government mandates can exact a high price for public trust. This explains a general distrust of globalism in part of the religious community. An awareness of this distrust is a good start to help allay unnecessary fears.

As for my family's experience with survivalism and End Times, the story is a little more predictable. The race riots and the economic collapse never happened, though I remember having a difficult time finding jobs during the recession of the 1970s. I went to college, then into the Navy for a 20-year career in medical entomology. I completed a Doctor of Public Health degree while in the military and, after my retirement from the Navy, settled into a rewarding academic career. Meanwhile, my siblings dispersed around the world into a variety of professions and lives. Our parents divorced, and my stepfather remarried into what appeared to be a happy, 20-year marriage that ended with his death in 2008. My mother remained on the farm in the home we had built so many years before. In her old age, she became even more confident in the accuracy of the apocalyptic prophecies, though she had learned not to set a date on when those prophecies would occur. Eventually, she moved into an independent living center in town, funded mostly by Social Security and the sale of the house and surrounding land. I was happy to see all the work invested in the small acreage being used for such a good purpose. Yet, if the current occupants of the old house ever open a wall void and find a few boxes of .22 shells or a shelf of 50-year-old canned food, I hope those findings do not stimulate visions of the horned Beast, forehead tattoos, and the Apocalypse. More importantly, I hope the new occupants of the house get the vaccine.

The author at the age of 16 working on the family farm.

Author

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David lives in Springfield, Missouri, with his wife and two dogs: a rat terrier and a whippet, both of whom are quite spoiled.