

Questions without Answers: The End of the World and World Encyclopedia

by Maik Schlüter

Apocalypse, deluge, Armageddon—the end of the world, the end of all things, is an established topos in religious or cultural myths. People have time and again been taken in by prophecies and false sermons claiming that the destruction of the world is close at hand and that salvation and survival in the next world is only possible through an unconditional profession of faith. Besides the religious determinations, which after all do provide a code of conduct in an emergency, there are also more radical fantasies and scenarios that describe the destruction of Earth and the annihilation of humankind and from which there is no escape. These concepts for the end of the world are fatalistic, pessimistic, in part fantastic: extraterrestrial collisions could bring about the end much the same as the melting of the Earth's core or a planetary explosion. Scientific speculation also attempts to calculate the Earth's age and the life expectancy of the planet and its inhabitants and speaks in unimaginably abstract dimensions of infinite spaces and time windows in the order of billions of years: the sun will burn up, the galaxy will die, the basic celestial coordinates will shift, gravitational forces and orbits will release new energies and substantially alter climatic conditions, causing life as we know it to inevitably end. Or the evolution of Earth itself will change and redefine the biology and chemistry of life. This is all vague, more expectation or promise, prophecy or pretense. Human beings have not yet gotten any further than the moon. Describing the genesis and future of Earth and the universe is based on test arrangements and a kind of speculative big bang of our power of imagination. No one knows how big, how hot, how heavy, or how old the sun is, for example. Regardless of what out-of-touch space exploration positivists or martial, fanatic evangelists may profess and predict.

The stimulation of fear and pleasure with respect to the end of the world is nothing more than the time-bound, psychological, and sociological inversion of fantasies of fear and destruction. Yet the “end of the world” scenario is also instrumentalized for prevailing claims to power. For those who determine the past and predict the future also control the present. Those who conceptualize the course of time and history and call the dialectics of historical truth their own clearly mark the claim to leadership in the darkest recesses of the explanation of the world. Official truths all too frequently find their origin in the assertions of individuals

and become forced consensus. At the same time, it is unresolved whether historical necessity opens the gates for the fruition of a specific idea or simply opens another trap door of civilization in order to arbitrarily give the terror of change a new face. The synchronization of the fatal, abstruse, lethal, and delusional ideas of individuals in the collective consciousness and activities of societies belongs to the set analytical repertoire of mass psychology. For there are blind spots even in the light of the Enlightenment, inscrutable perversions and monstrous forms of destruction that are agreed upon and carried into effect by entire societies. However, as soon as cultural, intellectual, or emotional collapse threatens, the euphoria of collectivity dissipates. Then individual strategies of survival again dominate action. Blame and responsibility are suddenly attributable to others or the course of the world. And if the individual is given the choice of making a decision for his own survival or the survival of the world, then in most cases his choice will turn out in favor of his own ego. Because: I am the world! The head a projector, life a film, fellow human beings merely supporting actors in the great narrative of the self. A script that has everything: rise and fall, unpredictable turns, blows of fate and tokens of love, highlights and an elaborate end that is sometimes reconciliatory, dramatic, or tragic. But above all, it is unique. Because the ego is always larger than the world. In view of six billion human beings, strictly speaking this claim has to be a surprise. Six billion individual destinies that all take a different course and whose needs are fundamentally different? Do six billion pairs of eyes also see six billion worlds? And what about the estimated one hundred billion human beings who have lived to date, and what about all of those yet to come? Humankind is an organism that exhibits numerous aspects of reality, yet in the end knows a single reality that can be shared and experienced by everyone, even if religious or cultural interpretations and measures of value are fundamentally different. Not lastly, politics and economy, military and authority strictly separate worlds of experience and realities of life. Those who are massacred on battlefields or in torture chambers, those who vegetate on garbage dumps or bleed to death on the roadside sees the world with eyes that are different from those who live in the material security of the Western hemisphere. But the prospect of death unites everyone. And the world sinks with death. Ego mania and collective consciousness, ego fanaticism and global identity, group-specific assimilation and extravagant individual pretense are very different attitudes to life. Is every death an individual destiny, an individual case? Precedence and the exemplary nature of the fact of death contradict this

assumption more than they confirm it. But in the shadow of death, productivity develops as well, forces the finiteness of one's own life, the demand to create something and promote, channel, and specify the metabolism between world and self and have it lead to a result. That which is owed to daily production as a result and is only perceived in one's own focus has consequences for history. Even when only microparticles are integrated into the course of things. However, to start with, history is paradoxically the present and can only be construed from the present. Its start is just as nebulous as its destination. Whether it pursues a dialectics that will know a rational consummation that transcends time, or experiences sociopolitical coerciveness in the sense of the attainment of justice and freedom are complex and abstract philosophical questions. Will history repeat itself or advance? Can history become fuller or even end? Questions without answers that are unsettling and stimulating. But myth is rooted in and develops a vocabulary of ideology on the ruins of insight. The great esoteric reconciliation of the world can be found, as can the fascistic fantasy of valiant battle in the evening light of the setting world.

There can be no world encyclopedia. The Babylonian variety and the dynamics of life and death only allow this project to radiate in the light of egomania. How far the shadows of such an undertaking reach is difficult to estimate. The only thing that is certain is that there is a world, its history, one's own death, one's own time, and productive decay. Life is here and finite, unique and disposable. The end of the world and world encyclopedia: both of them are impossible projections but stand on the same ground. The scenarios of all-embracing destruction meet the attempts at an all-embracing explanation: beneath the thin line of the explanation of the world lies the destruction of the world. The myth of the end of the world is as selfish as the attempt at explaining the world: an individual construct and not an individual truth. This is why all of the totalitarian explanation models should be contradicted: by means of individual logic and fragmented narrative. The whole is perhaps rooted in the detail. That is why hyperprojections on the explanation of the world are only tolerable as long as they succeed in passing off tendencies not as totalities and presenting questions without answers.

© Maik Schlüter, 2009

Published in: Paule Hammer, *Weltencyklopädie*, Lubok Verlag, Leipzig, 2011