

## ...If We Live That Long in Earthly Form

### Waiting for the Apocalypse

By John M. Benson and Melissa J. Herrmann

The year 2000 brings with it a host of worries, uncertainties, and expectations, some (like the Y2K computer "crisis") strictly secular, others more spiritual. The millennium, variously construed, has a special meaning to millions of Christians. Strictly speaking, the Millennium of Christian belief does not occur on a specific calendar date. Millenarianism refers to the belief, on the authority of the Book of Revelations 20:4-6, that after the Second Coming, Christ will establish a messianic kingdom on earth and will reign over it for a thousand years before the Last Judgment.

“ *But the year 2000 has a symbolic, and sometimes literal, meaning to many who await the new age. Here, we use public opinion data to look at those Americans who believe in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming or the end of the world. How many people hold these beliefs, and who are they?* ”

But the year 2000 has a symbolic, and sometimes literal, meaning to many Christians and non-Christians alike who await the new age. Here, we use public opinion data to look at those Americans who believe in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming or the end of the world. How many people hold these beliefs, and who are they?

Although the polling data about belief in the Second Coming are relatively sparse, they are consistent and revealing. In an April 1993 poll conducted by Yankelovich Partners for *Time/CNN*, one in five Americans adults (20%) said they believed that the Second Coming would occur sometime around the year 2000. In three separate polls conducted between 1992 and January 1999, by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman and Yankelovich Partners for *Time/CNN*, 27% to 36% of Americans said they believed the Second Coming was likely to occur sometime during the twenty-first century.

Three other recent surveys asked Americans about the end of the world. In January 1997, 21% of respondents to a Yankelovich Partners poll for *Time/CNN* said they believed the world was likely to come to an end during the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, more Americans believe in the world's imminent end if the question specifies a religious causation. A November 1998 poll conducted by Peter D. Hart for Shell Oil Company, found that 25% of Americans believed there was a greater than 50-50 likelihood that during the next 30 years the Judgment Day would come, bringing the world to an end. A September/October 1998 Gallup poll for *CNN/USA Today* showed that nearly four in ten Americans thought it was very (23%) or somewhat (16%) likely that the world would come to an end because of the Judgment Day or another religious event in the next century. Forty-one percent said such an event was very unlikely.

While only a minority of Americans (20%) expect the Second Coming sometime around the year 2000, fully half (53%) believe Jesus Christ will return within the next millennium, according to a July 1992 Yankelovich Clancy Shulman poll for *Time/*

*CNN*. In addition, five in six Americans (85%) in a November 1997 Princeton Survey Research Associates poll for the Pew Research Center said they believed we would be called before God on Judgment Day to answer for our sins. A December 1994 *US News & World Report* survey found that 60% of Americans believe the Bible should be taken literally when it speaks of the final Judgment Day.

Groups of Americans differ significantly in their level of belief in an imminent Second Coming or end of the world. Statistical analysis of variously-worded questions from four different surveys shows a consistent pattern. Responses differ significantly on (at least) seven demographic variables: education, income, race, region, gender, religious preference (among Christians), and age (see Tables 1 and 2).

“ *The greatest surprise is the finding that young adults ages 18-29 are significantly more likely than their elders to say they believe in the Second Coming and the end of the world.* ”

Historically, the evangelical strain of Protestantism tends to attach great importance to the immediacy of the personal religious experience. Because evangelical forms of belief are more common among African Americans and residents of the South, and both education and income are associated with race and region, most of these demographic differences might be expected. However, the magnitude of differences on these four demographic variables (race, region, education, and income) is quite striking: the differ-

**Table 1**  
**The Second Coming: A Third Say They Expect It in the Next Century**

	% who believe in:		% who believe in:	
	2nd Coming around 2000 (1)	2nd Coming in 21st century (2)	2nd Coming around 2000	2nd Coming in 21st century
<b>National</b>	20%	36%		
<b>By Gender:</b>				
Men	18%	31%		
Women	21	40		
<b>By Race:</b>				
White	18	34		
Black	36	53		
<b>By Region:</b>				
East	16	32		
South	25	43		
<b>By Religion:</b>				
Protestant	NA	41		
Catholic	NA	23		
			<b>By Age:</b>	
			18-29	28
			65+	14
			<b>By Income:</b>	
			<\$20K	28
			\$50K+	7
			<b>By Education:</b>	
			HS grad or less	26
			College grad+	9

**Questions for Tables 1-3:** (1)“Do you think that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur sometime around the year 2000?” (*Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners* 4/28-29/93); (2)“If you had to predict, which of the following are likely to occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which are not likely to occur?.. The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur.” (*Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners* 1/8-9/97); (3)“If you had to predict, which of the following are likely to occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which are not likely to occur?.. The world will come to an end.” (*Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners* 1/8-9/97); (4)“How likely is it that the world will come to an end because of Judgment Day or another religious event in the next century? Very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely?” (*Gallup/CNN/USA Today* 9/30-10/1/98); (5)“How important is religion in your everyday life: The most important thing in your life; extremely important, but not the most important thing; very important; somewhat important; or not important at all?”; (6)“Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible: a) The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; b) The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; or c) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.”; (7) [Asked of Protestants and “other Christians”] “Would you consider yourself a born-again or evangelical Christian?”; (8)“About how often do you pray? Would you say several times a day, once a day, several times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never.” (*Washington Post/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University* 7/29-8/18/98); (9) “Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements... ‘We all will be called before God at the Judgment Day to answer for our sins.’ Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree?” (*Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center* 11/5-17/97).

**Table 2**  
**End of the World? College Grads, Whites, Easterners, Men,**  
**and Catholics Are Less Likely to Say They Expect It**

	% who believe in the end of the world:	
	In the 21st century (3)	By Judgment Day in the next century (4)
<b>National</b>	21%	39%
<b>By Gender:</b>		
Men	18	33
Women	24	45
<b>By Race:</b>		
White	18	36
Black	40	57
<b>By Region:</b>		
East	15	28
South	25	51
<b>By Religion:</b>		
Protestant	24	NA
Catholic	13	NA
<b>By Income:</b>		
<\$20K	29	50
\$50K+	19	28
<b>By Education:</b>		
HS Grad or less	26	47
College grad+	12	28

**Table 3**  
**The Elderly More Than the Young Show Traditional Religiosity—**  
**But the Young More Than the Elderly Say They Expect The Apocalypse**

	Age 18-29	Age 65+
Second Coming around 2000 (1)	28%	14%
Second Coming in 21 <sup>st</sup> century (2)	42	32
End of the world in 21 <sup>st</sup> century (3)	27	13
End of the world by religious event in next century (4)	46	34*
Religion is most important/extremely important in my life(5)	35	42
Bible is actual word of God, to be taken literally (6)	34	39
Born-again or evangelical Christian (7)	32	40
Pray once a day or more (8)	45	70
We will be called before God on Judgment Day to answer for our sins (9)	77	84

Note: \* = age 60+

---

## Everyday Life

ences are significant on at least the 98% level in all cases, and at 99% in all but one. Women tend to consider religion more important in their lives than men do, so the gender difference might also be expected.

The greatest surprise is the finding that young adults aged 18-29 are significantly more likely than their elders to say they believe in the Second Coming and the end of the world. On standard measures, young adults appear less religious than their elders, or about equally religious. Table 3 shows the age relationship for importance of religion in one's own life, belief in the literalism of the Bible, frequency of prayer, and belief in Judgment Day. It also shows that young adults are no more likely than their elders to be born-again or evangelical Christians.

Why, then, is belief in the Second Coming and the end of the world more common among younger adults? Our

hypothesis, admittedly difficult to test, is that the difference has as much to do with a young adult's perceptions and needs as it does with religiosity. The desire for excitement and drama, com-

“ **Popular culture, often aimed at young adults, is filled with movies (“Armageddon,” “Independence Day”), TV shows (“Millennium”), and songs (“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”) about the end of the world, by various means outside human control.** ”

bined in some cases with an interest in death (exemplified by some youths' attraction to occult-related activities, as well as the high suicide rate among this age group), may lead some young adults

to believe in the final drama. Moreover, popular culture, often aimed at young adults, is filled with movies (“Armageddon,” “Independence Day”), TV shows (“Millennium”), and songs (“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”) about the end of the world, by various means outside human control. For many or perhaps even most young adults, belief in the Second Coming may be something other than a religious expression.

News organizations are likely to conduct many more polls this year on the public's expectations, both secular and religious, for the year 2000, the twenty-first century, and the next millennium. Will the proportion of Americans anticipating the Second Coming or the end of the world in the twenty-first century change as the time grows closer and news coverage of the millennium intensifies? Or, are they a stable part of American religious belief?



*John M. Benson is deputy director,  
Harvard Opinion Research Program,  
Harvard School of Public Health;  
Melissa J. Herrmann is account manager,  
ICR/International Communications Research*