

The Age of the Apocalypse

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Today, we seem to be living in the age of the apocalypse. Shrugging away Climate Change, with its grim imagery of the bleached bones of countless species baking under a forbidding sun, is difficult enough. Likewise, the insidious spread of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS certainly warrants more than a shudder. And if both were not sufficient to keep us awake at night, the continued existence of enough nuclear warheads to destroy the earth hundreds of times over surely exposes humanity as hell-bent on self-destruction.

It is the War on Terror, however, that appears to have captured the public imagination. Out of all the catastrophes currently assaulting us, the War on Terror has undoubtedly claimed the most monetary attention; the United States of America alone spends billions annually on their deployable military. And aside from money, it is rare that one ever picks up the newspapers or switches on the television without seeing yet another damning report on terrorism. This begs a pertinent question, however; why does the War on Terror, when it only encompasses a few select countries, overshadow more global predicaments such as HIV/AIDS?

Since the tragedy of September the 11th, the world has irrevocably changed. This is not to be contested; it is a hard and brutal fact that the moment we learnt of the World Trade Centre collapsing, we were thrust into a shaken emptiness where security had once dwelt. From the rubble of the Twin Towers, a grief for the

thousands dead, a shock that such a disaster could happen, and a fear that it might happen again were all simultaneously born. All three form the justification of launching the War on Terror, yet arguably, it is really only the last that is to blame. After all, it was the Secretary of Defence at the time, Donald Rumsfeld himself, who said that “the war will be won when the Americans feel secure again”. It is this inherent fear of vulnerability, then, that is driving America and its allies to battle so bloodily in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, it does not explain just why the War on Terror has taken over our global consciousness. Neither the HIV/AIDS epidemic nor Climate Change are weaklings in the arena of generating fear; millions have already fallen to the former, while the latter promises uncontrollable natural disasters sure to reap their fair share of deaths as well.

Indeed, compared to these two solid threats, the War on Terror is a nebulous entity. It would be understandable in the light of the 9/11 attacks that triggered it for it to be named “the War on Terrorism”, or even “the War on Muslims” with the amount of bad press America has encouraged. However, the fact that it is indeed a war on the emotion of “terror”, born from human agency, could lie at the heart of just why it has so prominently commanded our attention. The history of humankind is not without comparable occurrences; one merely needs to glance at the witch-hunts of Europe for evidence that fear can and often does overwhelm reason. Indeed, the similarities are staggering, especially when one considers that witch-hunters operated on the basis that the human witches threatened the security of the people with their curses and spells. It is not difficult to find other examples of humans committing atrocities against humans in the name of security either; from the Christians thrown to the lions in ancient Rome to the massacres of Aborigines in the early days of a British-colonised Australia, it seems almost as if the instinct to lash out when confronted with our own vulnerability is innate. Thus, it appears that the War on Terror is yet another incarnation of an ages-old dread of other humans, and the compulsive need to strike back in fear of our own fear.

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The implications of this are certainly foreboding. Even now, there are strident voices against the War on Terror, recognising evidence that the violence committed under its banner has only fuelled the terrorism that triggered it. The same evidence also shows that the best course of action after the horror of 9/11 would have been to pinpoint the cause of the terrorists' malaise, and to examine the responsibility that comes with it. Alas, instead we have followed history, and with that choice we have invited a future that eclipses the tens of thousands dead after the witch-hunts of Europe if we do not change. The dilemma is, to shift to the better course of seeking answers and self-reflection, for a peaceful resolution depends upon a willingness to resist our child-like instinct to lash out from fear. After all, anyone can hide from the monster in the wardrobe, or sleep with a baseball bat ready to flail around blindly in the darkness. It requires a great deal more courage and maturity to open the door and see both the angel and the demon within you staring back.

If we take into account the annals of our history, then, our future looks grim. Humanity has, after all, remained willing to react to this immature instinct with witch-hunting and scapegoats for eons. Although it is undeniable that today, our logical and scientific reason is much improved from the superstition-rife Middle Ages, the declaration of the War on Terror itself suggests that in some respects we remain unchanged. This does not necessarily mean that we are doomed to repeat the iniquities of the past, however. Throughout the years, another primal instinct within us has also remained; that of a willingness to hope, to believe in the magical and the miraculous which can primarily be found in our ancient tales and myths today. One of these myths is that of the Phoenix; the legendary bird that bursts into flames upon its death, yet rises again from the ashes. In the light of humanity's continued existence despite so many obstacles, there is no reason why we cannot hope for a similar rebirth.



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