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Spatializing the Environmental Apocalypse

Suvi Alt

Introduction: The Anthropocene as Environmental Apocalypse

Due to the emergence of the Anthropocene, the social sciences in general and international relations (IR) in particular will arguably need new ways of facing questions that have to do with both existence and extinction in the realm of the global (Burke et al. 2016). Not least among these questions is how human beings relate to what might be called ‘the end of the world’. Questions concerning the end of things (i.e., eschatological questions; see Box 21.1) are central to the ways in which we exist in the world today. Depictions of life in the Anthropocene often envision a future of environmental catastrophe where natural resources have been depleted and the Earth has been ravaged by storms and drought, finally turning into uninhabitable wasteland; an Earth where coastal areas are becoming submerged under rising sea levels, causing death, destruction, mass migration, and conflict.

Such imagery bears significant parallels to the Christian biblical tradition of depicting the apocalypse, that is, the unfolding of the end times that precede the second coming of Christ. Therefore, the term ‘environmental apocalypse’ (or ‘ecological apocalypse’ or ‘climate apocalypse’) has been coined

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to highlight the similarities between the current environmental condition and biblical descriptions of the end of the world. Such depictions used to belong mainly to the narratives of the environmental movement that has spoken of the dangers of environmental degradation already for decades. Yet, these drastic portrayals of the future of the planet have by now increasingly become part of an establishment discourse. For example, the former US Vice President Al Gore has been at the forefront of expounding the coming of a climate apocalypse, unless we make rapid changes (see Weber 2018). Similarly, the coverage of Australia's "apocalyptic fires" that are said to be "a warning to the world" (*Washington Post* 2020) and an "apocalyptic nightmare" (Hennessy 2019) is a recent example of such depictions of the end times. The issue of climate change, as well as environmental politics more widely, involves frequent mediation to publics through the frame of apocalyptic discourse (McNeish 2017; Skrimshire 2014). While environmental politics in the Anthropocene takes various forms, ranging from institutional governance to market-based solutions to environmental justice, the environmental apocalypse narrative is one such key form.

How should students of international relations approach such framings of environmental politics? What are the political effects of understanding environmental degradation in this way? On the one hand, the widespread popular portrayal of environmental issues through the apocalyptic frame can be alarmist and counter-productive because its sense of doom paralyzes people (Lilley et al. 2012; Feinberg and Willer 2011). This means that people are less likely to make decisions and choices that would contribute to protecting the planet because they feel that the situation is already hopeless. On the other hand, it is argued that the sense of urgency that the environmental apocalypse narratives carry can mobilize people to take the necessary political action to address environmental degradation (Ginn 2015; Globus Veldman 2012; Buell 2010). This position relies on the view that if people are sufficiently informed about how bad the situation is, they will take rapid action to protect the planet. Yet, the central argument of this chapter is that debating the motivational effects of apocalyptic depictions of environmental destruction disregards a central feature of these discourses that has important political implications. This feature is the embeddedness of the environmental apocalypse narrative in a particular modern, Western interpretation of the Christian eschatological tradition.

This chapter shows that understanding the 'environmental apocalypse' through the frames of reference of this modern, Western tradition leads to a primarily temporal conception of 'the end of the world'. This means that the end of the world is strongly related to a specific understanding of time. The

end of the world appears as having a uniform planetary presence as a future threat that ‘we’ can try our best to avert. Consequently, conceiving of the Anthropocene in terms of an ‘environmental apocalypse’ risks reproducing a particular Western, Christian notion of it (Rothe 2019, 4). An alternative conception of apocalypse can be found in postcolonial theology, which is a field of theology concerned with the intersections of Christian religious thought and systems of domination, such as the empires that have historically effaced marginalized peoples’ interests, cultures, and identities. Through an engagement with postcolonial theology, this chapter argues that a more politicized understanding of the environmental apocalypse comes about when the end of the world is conceived as variably distributed across geographical, social, and material divides in the present. To highlight the importance of spatializing the environmental apocalypse, this chapter introduces examples from the field of biodiversity preservation, specifically the politics of seeds that centers on questions concerning the types of seeds food producers should use and how these seeds should be stored and managed to best guarantee food security (see Boxes 21.2 and 21.3). This example is chosen because different actors’ positions in the debate on the future of food production express different forms of eschatological thinking. These examples demonstrate the political implications of different apocalyptic discourses and they emphasize the need to pay more attention to different spatial, material, social, and spiritual realities in the debates on existence and extinction in the Anthropocene. The next section begins by identifying how an apocalyptic mode of thinking is present in contemporary discourses of environmental degradation.

Box 21.1 What Is Eschatology?

In Christianity, eschatology refers to the doctrine of the last things, the final events that bring history to an end (Wolfe 2017). More generally, eschatologies are systems of thought that are concerned with the end of things—the end of life, the end of time, and the end of the world. Although they are traditionally rooted on religious ground, eschatologies are nonetheless profoundly secular and political in their contemporary articulations. Especially since the nineteenth century, eschatological forms of thought have become a way of understanding the direction of historical progress as a whole (Wolfe 2017). This also entails that eschatologies often carry either implicit or explicit assumptions about the desired or necessary political and social organization of our world in light of the end that is envisioned (Dillon 2011). Therefore, studying eschatological forms of thought can reveal the political positions and preferences of those who speak of ‘the end’.

The Futural and Planetary Logic of Environmental Apocalypse

News about climate change, the extinction of bees, the loss of biodiversity, and various other environmental threats frequently make reference to the way in which time is running out and we are reaching or have already reached a tipping point after which all that remains is the unfolding of a catastrophe that will bring the world to an end. The ‘environmental apocalypse’ is the cumulative effect of various environmental problems that lead to destruction, conflict, and the eventual collapse of civilization. The language of ‘tipping points’ (see Chap. 3), ‘points of no return’, and ‘time running out’ identifies finality and an accelerating development toward the end. Although such discourses are sometimes perceived as overly gloomy, even critics of such alarmist tones usually share the understanding that ‘the end’ is something to be deferred to a hopefully very far-away future. Such critics are simply more optimistic regarding humanity’s ability to postpone the end through cooperation and technological development—Al Gore (2016) is perhaps the most prominent protagonist of this position. Overall, apocalyptic environmentalism relies on a dramatic imaginary of the organized world descending into chaos as a consequence of a future catastrophe.

The apocalyptic frame in these scenarios is related in particular to treatments of time: time is directed toward a certain event that marks a definitive end and the apocalyptic era presents an accelerating development—‘time compression’—toward that end (Fagan 2017, 231). While accounts such as this emphasize the imminence of disaster and the urgency of action, they are nevertheless premised on a temporal separation of the present and the end. We may be inhabiting a situation of continuous and rising risk, but the ultimate disaster exists at a future point in time. Reflecting this temporal focus, according to Stefan Skrimshire (2010, 2), the purpose of examining the environmental apocalypse is to find out “how different ways of thinking, imagining, knowing and believing in the future impact upon political action and inaction”. “Why doesn’t the imagination of a catastrophic future galvanize people to act to avert it?” Skrimshire (2010, 2) asks. These questions illustrate the tendency to conceive the environmental apocalypse in decidedly futural terms.

Formulated along these lines, the environmental apocalyptic incorporates and revises the main features of the Christian apocalyptic tradition (Buell 2010, 15). These features include a sudden rupture with the past, a presentation of a revelation, a narration of a world-end, and a dramatization of the last judgment. The environmental apocalypse depicts a world-end that is the result of slowly unfolding processes, which, nevertheless, accelerate as the end

comes nearer. In these narratives, the imminent end of life on Earth produces a sudden rupture in people's relationship to their planetary past. The revelation of the Anthropocene is that humanity has become a geophysical force capable of fundamentally changing life on Earth (Northcott 2015, 105). While environmental degradation has been depicted in apocalyptic tones throughout the history of the environmental movement, the most important recent change in the character of the environmental apocalyptic is that nature is no longer seen as categorically distinct from the human in the way it was still in the 1960s (Buell 2010, 28). The environmentalist claims of the second half of the twentieth century were often premised on an assumption of a distinction between humanity and nature, with the latter appearing as something that needs to be protected from the former. Contemporary environmental thought, however, perceives such a categorical separation of humans from nature as implausible and unhelpful. In this regard, the development of the environmental apocalypse narrative parallels the emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene that is premised precisely on such inseparability and enmeshment of humanity and nature.

As a consequence of the intimate interconnectedness of all life in the Anthropocene, it is not enough to instigate change only among the enlightened few. This is why the environmentalist 'faith' needs to be adopted by everyone. As such, the environmental apocalypse lacks a last judgment where the faithful would be separated from the faithless. Rather, humankind is judged as a whole (Buell 2010, 15–16). In the words of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2019), "we are all in this together". The emphasis on the shared burden of the impacts of environmental degradation reflects another significant transformation of environmental politics since the mid-twentieth century where there has been a shift from addressing local, geographically delimited environmental problems to focusing on climate change as a planetary problem. Since the 1950s, there has been a shift from the idea of geographically differentiated 'climates'—plural, situated in places—to a placeless global climate (Turnhout et al. 2016, 66). Consequently, climate change is now habitually approached through its decidedly global character.

Yet, such a globalized representation fails to apprehend the very unequal effects that climate change and environmental destruction have. Challenging the idea of one global climate as a useful way of understanding climate change, Mike Hulme (2010, 563) argues that "there are no global pathways to the future because the world does not walk together; we walk along different paths towards different destinations". Therefore, it would be more useful to ask how the climate will change from place to place (Stott and Thorne 2010, 158) and what the differentiated impacts of this will be. Yet, climate change

and environmental degradation are typically perceived as a planetary issue. As such, apocalyptic narratives tend toward a representation of climate change that pictures a uniform global catastrophe, while giving little recognition to spatial differentiation in terms of either environmental impact or in terms of material and social inequality. Overall, the environmental apocalypse is thus depicted in, firstly, futural and, secondly, planetary terms. The next section examines the historical genesis of the Western eschatological tradition that the environmental apocalypse is embedded in.

Box 21.2 The Doomsday Vault

In 2008, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault opened on a remote island in the Arctic Ocean. The purpose of the vault is to store duplicates of seed samples from the world's crop collections and to keep these safe in the Arctic permafrost (Crop Trust 2017). More generally, the purpose of the seed bank is to guarantee the world's agricultural biodiversity and thereby the world's food security. The Svalbard seed bank quickly acquired the nickname 'Doomsday Vault' because it was framed in the media as a reserve of seeds to be used in the case of an apocalyptic event that would create a global catastrophe. Headlines such as "The Doomsday Vault: The Seeds That Could Save a Post-Apocalyptic World" (Goldenberg 2015) conjure an image of a future disaster that needs to be prepared for. Cary Fowler, the former executive director of the Crop Trust that manages the Svalbard vault, stated at the time of its founding that "these resources stand between us and catastrophic starvation on a scale we cannot imagine" (Fowler in CBS 2008). The vault is "a place that might someday save humankind" (CBS 2008). Such a time horizon expresses an eschatology where the end looms in the future but can, nevertheless, be deferred by keeping safe the genetic resources that the seeds contain. In recognition of this, Fowler has later noted that the nickname is misleading because the disappearance of biodiversity should be understood as an ongoing process, rather than a catastrophe possibly taking place in the future.

Thus, the eschatology attached to the vault is more complex than media representations would imply. But while representatives of the Svalbard vault recognize that biodiversity is being lost all the time, they nevertheless embrace a globalist discourse that does not prioritize the political and spatial differentiation that accompanies the loss of biodiversity. Sergio Fava (2013, 141) argues that the Svalbard vault represents the unification of agricultural practices centered on a *global* narrative of climate change. According to Fava (2013, 124), the Svalbard vault has been at the center of international developments where food security debates have shifted from a focus on equitable access to food in the present to a focus on increasing crop yields in the future. The Svalbard vault mobilizes global climate models and scenarios that propose the relative obsolescence of indigenous agricultural knowledge, thereby "creating one future" (Fava 2013, 118–119). These scenarios go hand in hand with a technocratic form of biodiversity preservation that disregards the dynamic and relational character of traditional forms of plant cultivation. Contrary to such a globalist narrative, a more spatially focused understanding of the end of the world can be identified in the claims of those small farmers who seek to preserve their indigenous seeds in their own habitat. For them, the end of the world is a matter of the present time, but it is also a matter of the places they inhabit (see Box 21.3).

Apocalypse, Modernity, Time, and Space

The apocalypse has a central position in Christian theology, even if this position has been interpreted in various ways throughout the history of Christian thought. While narratives of apocalypse predate Christianity, the imaginaries of apocalypse that currently proliferate in relation to environmental crises draw largely on the Christian eschatological tradition. This tradition is mainly shaped by the Book of Revelation where the apocalypse appears as a future catastrophic event that leads to God's final judgment of humanity. Various strands of Christianity have interpreted the imminence of the end in different ways. Sometimes the apocalypse is projected in the very near future, with the Book of Revelation providing the signs of the end times, such as war, famine, earthquakes, and disease. While catastrophic and terrifying, the awaiting of an imminent apocalypse has often also been a signifier of hope for the oppressed. For early Christians, the expectation of the end provided sustenance under Roman rule and, in later periods, such expectation has often been taken up in situations of religious or socio-political oppression, especially when a repressive regime is seen to be coming to an end (Ward 2008, 109). On the other hand, the institutionalized Church has often sought to contain people's apocalyptic aspirations in order to have them respect the authority of the Church in earthly matters. By interpreting the apocalypse purely symbolically, the Church has emphasized the Kingdom of God as existing eternally in the hearts of believers (Wojcik 1997, 34). The implication of this interpretation is the detachment of salvation from the concrete historical situation. Within Christianity, the apocalypse has thus been articulated not only in ways that sustain the existing power structures but also in ways that seek to contest them.

In his examination of the uses of apocalypse "from antiquity to the empire of modernity", John R. Hall (2009, 2–5) emphasizes that the apocalyptic is not a single, coherent 'thing' but a range of beliefs, events, and social processes that are concerned with the disjuncture that brings the old order to an end and operates as a passage to a new beginning. Similarly, Barry Brummett (1991, 6) argues that the apocalyptic should not be understood solely as religious discourse but rather as a common cultural vocabulary through which people express their hopes and fears for the future. Hall understands this passage to a new beginning in decidedly temporal terms: the "central concern is with *times* that are apocalyptic" (Hall 2009, 6, emphasis added). Such times are characterized not only by trial and hardship but also by the expectation of a new world. Whether religious or secular, the apocalyptic is thus a primarily temporal and, more specifically, future-oriented notion.

It is important to note that although eschatology is typically perceived as a religious form of thinking, its structure has been carried over into modern political thought. In modern eschatological thinking, the Christian expectation of 'the end' becomes part of the historical process (Löwith 1949). This means that the end of things becomes the culmination of a historical development instead of an exit from the world. While not directing the way to the Kingdom of God, modern political philosophies have developed their own ultimate ends from the nation-state, to classless society, to liberal democracy. In teleological views of progress, history becomes universal and directed toward an ultimate goal that gives unified meaning to the history of humankind (Löwith 1949, 18–19). Such linear understanding of time can be contrasted, for example, with a cyclical one, which portrays the processes of birth and decay in nature. While natural processes are characterized by cycles of death and renewal, Christian thought and modern political philosophies understand time as a linear movement toward an ultimate goal.

In this Western tradition, eschatological thinking is essentially understood to concern the end of *time*, and it remains more or less oblivious to spatial questions and realities (Westhelle 2012). History is directed at an ultimate purpose and space is present primarily as the homogenous background where progress plays out. As a consequence, space becomes organized without reference to its particularities (Giddens 1991, 17). This means that the coordination of human social organization assumes a form that is detached from spatial specificity. Anthony Giddens (1991, 16) identifies this kind of a separation of time and space as a key characteristic of modernity. Related to this tendency is the modern interest in objectifying and controlling nature, which has constituted a crucial aspect of 'progress'. Understanding space as the neutral background for the history through which humans pursue their political projects parallels international relations' tendency to view the environment as a neutral background for the pursuit of state and human interests. This assumption is now challenged by the Anthropocene, which makes it impossible to think of the environment as a mere background (see Dalby 2014). However, replacing the neutral and passive 'environment' with an active and entangled 'planet' may risk reproducing the disregard for spatial specificity. The next section turns to postcolonial theology to problematize this tendency.

Postcolonial Eschatologies

Alternative theologies containing elements of what more recently has been termed ‘postcolonial’ have existed around the world throughout colonial history (Yountae 2018, 728). While the dialogue between theology and postcolonial theory only increased in the 1990s as the latter gained popularity in the humanities and social sciences (Nausner 2012, 120), the borders of ‘postcolonial theology’ are not clearly fixed and the themes and arguments that are relevant for the purposes of this chapter have circulated for a much longer time in the fields of radical political theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, Latina theology, and so on. These are fields of theology that in various ways seek to revise the Christian tradition by foregrounding the experiences of the oppressed and the marginalized (see Martínez Andrade 2015; Keller et al. 2004). As such, the impact of postcolonial theology is not confined to the Global South, but has had a significant impact also on Western Christian thought. Often an important starting point for such approaches is the observation that the early Christian movements were decidedly counter-imperial and resistant to exploitative and oppressive powers. While forms of Christianity have for centuries been complicit with repression, empire-building, and war, postcolonial theologies seek to recover the liberationist and resistant tendencies at the genesis of Christianity (Westhelle 2010; Taylor 2004, 49). Following these tendencies entails relocating theology from the immaterial, spiritual realm to ‘this world’ (Yountae 2018, 729). This relocation has significant implications for theology’s relationship to politics, and it relies on important parts on a rethinking of the meaning of eschatology.

While the previously discussed temporal understanding of the apocalypse is undoubtedly central to Christianity, postcolonial theologies argue that Christian eschatology does not necessarily entail a linear, future-oriented conception of time (Tatschner 2018, 54). Rather, Vítor Westhelle (2012, 11) argues that the privileging of temporality is more the outcome of a particularly Western view of history than a biblically grounded reading of eschatology. Westhelle shows that in the New Testament ‘the end’ could refer to a spatial location, a geographical boundary, or a place in a rank, as well as having the more well-known temporal connotations. As a spatial location, the end can refer to a specific place, as a geographical location it refers to ‘the ends of the earth’, and as a place in a rank it can have the meaning of being the last in a hierarchical order (Westhelle 2012, 34). In other words, for the early Christians, ‘the end’ was associated with specific spatial realities. Nevertheless,

such spatial meanings of the end have been glaringly absent from Western eschatological discourse (Westhelle 2012, 79). As a consequence, Christian history has developed a placeless theology that avoids the political realities constitutive of the spaces that people inhabit (Carvalhaes 2019, 462).

But why is the spatial dimension important? Cláudio Carvalhaes (2019, 458) argues that the detachment from the Earth and the absence of space in Christian theologies have caused “an abyss between faith and matter”. In political terms, this means that Christian eschatology pushes the resolution of historical conflict

outside the bounds of socio-economic-political history (Thistlethwaite and Potter Engel 1990, 110). When eschatology is understood in terms of a future realm at the end of time, it has the effect of ignoring present forms of conflict. The social antagonisms that exist in the present are concealed by the idea of a single future catastrophe (Rothe 2019, 4). “Future tenses can disguise present anguish” (Thistlethwaite and Potter Engel 1990, 110). Similarly, Pablo Richard (1995, 29) argues that studies of apocalypse have been limited due to their lack of interest in the social and historical context in which the apocalyptic *takes place*. These theological debates are relevant for the field of international relations because they are crucial for understanding the problems that come with the environmental apocalypse narratives that reproduce the structure of a very specific version of the Christian eschatological tradition. The following part of this chapter introduces an alternative way of understanding the meaning of the end of the world.

Latitudinal Environmental Eschatology

Thinking the environmental apocalypse in spatial terms means paying attention to the places where it happens. Historical events *take place*: they are located and their significance is linked to the specific place where they occur. Hence, Westhelle (2012, xii) proposes to “frame eschatological thinking in a way that addresses the experience of those who live in and through the *eschata* [the ends] on a daily basis with regard to the places in which it happens”. For our thinking of the environmental apocalypse, this means that we pay attention to the catastrophe of the present, not assuming that the environmental, economic, political, or social problems entailed by the Anthropocene are globally uniform, nor that they conform to a globally uniform solution. Instead, they require carefully contextualized, spatially situated analysis.

As an alternative to the predominant futural eschatology that makes claims to universality, Westhelle formulates ‘latitudinal eschatology’ as

a discourse that is to be edged into the description of experiences close to the ground, attentive to its edges, mindful of crossings and passages, while aware that conceptual abstractions, speculations, or bizarre vagary are fed by a notion of history that does not take place, has no spatial location. It allows us to pay vigorous attentiveness to the present. (Westhelle 2012, 132)

In the latitudinal perspective, eschatology is not about progress—neither ‘positive’ progress toward a Kingdom of God or a classless society nor ‘negative’ progress toward environmental destruction or the collapse of civilization. Rather, eschatology is about the positions and margins that operate as turning points to other worlds *within* the present. Hence, latitudinal eschatology is not an abstract discourse on the future, but a concrete discourse on the action that is bringing to end the suffering taking place in the present (Richard 1995, 28). As such, eschatology is reconceptualized not as the doctrine of the last things but as continuous existence on a limit or an edge (Tatschner 2018, 56). Such limits and edges are not only geographical but can also be conceived in terms of, for example, social location, class, and ethnicity. The end, then, entails crossing the various spaces of oppression that order life. To do so, a latitudinal eschatology begins by asking questions about what differently affects our lived realities (Westhelle 2012, 138).

The purpose of a latitudinal environmental eschatology is thus to think both space and time in ways that allow for questioning and critiquing the present. To begin to think of the environmental apocalypse in these terms, we need to acknowledge that the human actions that mark the Anthropocene originate in a particular time and space where we must attend to economic inequality, class struggle, racial conflicts, means of production, and their relation to the Earth that constitutes their place (Carvalhaes 2019, 462). Latitudinal environmental eschatology highlights the need to pay attention to issues of power and of geographical and material inequality in any engagement with climate change or environmental degradation. The Anthropocene should not be used as a concept that disguises the diversity of local contexts and the disparities in the distribution of wealth, consumption, and environmental impact across human societies (see Davis and Todd 2017). Spatializing the environmental apocalypse thus means examining climate change in a way that prioritizes the spaces where it takes place—‘the ends of the earth’.

Box 21.3 Seed-Saving at the End of the World

The representatives of the Svalbard vault are not alone in arguing that we need to take measures to preserve agricultural biodiversity. However, not everyone agrees with the globalist narrative of saving the world's seeds through a centralized management strategy. While not necessarily rejecting the storing of seeds in places like Svalbard, critical small farmers emphasize that ultimately it is up to ordinary farmers and gardeners to save seed diversity and guarantee our food supply. This position is promoted through the mobilizations of, for example, the transnational social movement La Via Campesina and the Indian peasant organization Navdanya that coordinates the Global Citizens' Alliance for Seed Freedom. It is further echoed by small farmers' organizations across the Global North and South. They claim that diversity needs to be protected in its habitat. Conserving seeds in the habitat where they are to be used is arguably best able to guarantee that the seeds adapt to the changing environment. Yet, the argument for local seed-saving is made as much for cultural and spiritual as for ecological reasons (Chaskey 2014, 165).

Some of the small farmers who are engaged in this struggle articulate the problem in terms of an *ongoing* end of a world (see, e.g., Ray 2012). The end of the world is something that is taking place every day. Such farmers often represent the seed as comprising everything that is and everything that could be: it contains the biological fundament of life but also the power of the sacred. The seed encapsulates a world (Ray 2012; Kinchy 2012, 49–74). The conception of world at stake here is very different from the globalist notions attached to the Doomsday vault. The farmers' discourse expresses a latitudinal eschatology where the end of the world is spatially distributed in such a way that some live through it every day. Although they are living in the midst of marginalization and the ending of the diversity that their seeds harbor, the farmers also represent their farms and gardens as places of hope that function as an edge to another world—a world that is already prefigured in their ongoing practices of saving, sharing, and reusing seeds.

Conclusion

The anticipation of global warming, ocean acidification, food scarcity, climate migration, and conflict is frequently conveyed through apocalyptic discourse that is heavily indebted to the Christian tradition of thinking the end of times. Yet, such apocalyptic environmentalism is often severed from the spaces where it takes place. Consequently, attention is focused on the time that remains before the catastrophe, while limited consideration is given to differentiation that exists in the present. The outcome of conceiving the apocalypse in this way is a representation of climate change and environmental degradation as, firstly, futural and, secondly, planetary.

While the foundations of international relations are state-centric and there is a need to move beyond this limited understanding of our worldly reality, the calls to recognize ‘the planet’ as the subject that currently demands our attention can have equally problematic implications. The emphasis on the ‘planetary’ presence and impact of humanity is not politically neutral. The focus on the global or planetary scale can efface the different ways in which people are impacted by the Anthropocene. More generally, it is important to maintain a critical attitude toward the claim to novelty tied to the idea of the Anthropocene. Often notions that suggest the beginning of something fundamentally new have more of the old to them than we would like to admit. Therefore, we should remain vigilant in order not to reproduce old inequalities and oppressions through new ideas and concepts.

This chapter has argued that understanding the Anthropocene through the frames of reference of ‘environmental apocalypse’ risks reproducing a temporal version of it that is neatly embedded in a modern, Western, Christian tradition. With recourse to postcolonial theology, this chapter has highlighted an alternative notion of the end of the world that proposes to understand eschatology spatially. Conceived in this way, the end of the world is happening *now* and it is variably distributed across geographical, social, and material divides in the present. Spatializing the environmental apocalypse entails putting these divides at the center of attention. By doing so, this chapter has offered one possible way of politicizing international relations’ engagement with the Anthropocene.

Key Points

- The media, politicians, social movements, and academics often represent environmental politics in the Anthropocene as an ‘environmental apocalypse’ without questioning the political implications that this representation has.
- Narratives of the environmental apocalypse reproduce the key characteristics of the Christian apocalyptic tradition: a rupture with the past, a presentation of a revelation, a narration of the end times, and a last judgment.
- Postcolonial theology seeks to revise the Christian understanding of eschatology in ways that put more emphasis on the spatialized experiences of the oppressed and the marginalized in the present.
- IR in the Anthropocene should recognize and deal with not only the ‘new planetary real’ but also the ways in which particular ways of framing it might reproduce rather than contest IR’s modern, Western bias.

Key Questions

1. Why is it important to examine the ways in which conceptions of the end of the world are articulated?
2. How do postcolonial perspectives propose to revise the theological tradition?
3. What is the difference between a linear and a latitudinal eschatology?
4. What examples of different types of eschatologies can you think of? What political implications do they have?
5. Should we rather think of life in the Anthropocene in non-apocalyptic ways? What would this entail?

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