When the Four Horsemen ride again

Climate change will have religious consequences, especially in the Global South.

by Philip Jenkins in the October 2022 issue

The flooded rural roads of Thailand after heavy rain. (Photo by Weeraa / iStock / Getty)

Throughout history, societies have often understood great climatic events and disasters in religious terms, as signs of God's anger. Such episodes have driven wide-ranging religious developments: enthusiastic revivalism, new apocalyptic or millenarian movements, and all too often the scapegoating and persecution of minorities.

In our time of unprecedented climate change, will we see some kind of environmentally oriented change in our churches and religious institutions? I expect that we will in some parts of the world—but probably not in the prosperous and economically developed parts. That's because of a fundamental shift in modern consciousness.

Across the Global South, populous and mainly poor societies will suffer the most acute effects of global warming, and these changes likely will have broadly religious consequences. These are likely to include the intensification of religious violence across much of Africa and the rise of uncompromising militant sects. The consequences may recall the harsh experiences of early modern Europe: think of the Four Horsemen, of famine, plague, death, and war. We might even see a broad upsurge in anti-witchcraft movements, as societies seek culprits for the travails that they are suffering.

However severe climate assaults become in the Global North, nobody expects religious responses to follow the same lines. Surely, we think, believers will see the signs of the times and respond accordingly, perhaps with new theological insights, a new emphasis on creation care, and a more central regard for Earth as mother. Some changes of this kind can indeed be expected: witness Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, not to mention various climate initiatives and policy statements by a range of Christian denominations and representatives of other faiths.

My fear, though, is that such declarations will remain in the realm of elites and religious bureaucracies. Because in prosperous nations, for the great majority of people in the pews, climate-related disasters are something they read about rather than experience firsthand. Climate is easy to see as something that happens to other people.

One key aspect of modernity is the conviction that we as a society have escaped from the effects of climate. When the volcano Tambora erupted in 1815, in what is now Indonesia, it generated widespread famine, which came along with everything we might expect in terms of social unrest, violence, and pandemics around the world. There was an upsurge of apocalyptic religious movements as well.

Less than 70 years later, in 1883, Krakatoa erupted—and nothing comparable followed. Despite the fearsome reputation of this volcano (also in modern-day

Indonesia), its eruption produced nothing like the global chaos of Tambora. It did not spark mass starvation or pandemics. Economies and states did not collapse. Mobs were not so alarmed by changing colors in the sky that they attacked social or religious minorities; there was no upsurge of apocalyptic sects, no wave of revivals or miracle crusades.

Nor have such phenomena reappeared more recently. Unless you are a climate scientist, you probably do not recall the titanic 1991 eruption of Pinatubo in the Philippines—or the ensuing global volcanic winter, which in earlier centuries would have inflicted havoc worldwide.

So what changed? Obviously, new scientific discoveries help explain the change of attitude toward natural disasters and the fading sense that they might have a supernatural dimension. But the decline of older concerns was rooted in material transformations during the 19th century, as society moved decisively away from the direct reliance on agriculture that had defined earlier eras. The proportion of people living in cities and industrial communities grew steeply during the 19th century, first in Europe and then in the United States. Feeding those urban populations demanded a total restructuring of food production, storage, and shipping.

In such an environment, most urban dwellers in developed nations had little inkling of whether the previous year’s harvests had been good or bad. Medical science likewise reduced the effects of epidemics. People believed they had, in a sense, escaped from climate.

The American West and Southwest are currently enduring their worst drought in 1,200 years. When major droughts struck during the medieval period, states collapsed and societies crumbled, with all the religious and apocalyptic responses we might expect. Today, a similar drought certainly produces some mighty inconveniences, even water rationing. But there is little sense of existential threat. Among those most alarmed are real estate developers.

In the industrialization of the 19th century, the Western world underwent an epochal climate transition, one the rest of the world would experience only very gradually. Famines and pandemics continued to rage in non-Western societies through the 20th century, commonly following climatic assaults. Scholars now offer climate-based explanations for political events from the Rwandan genocide to the Syrian civil war. If the prosperous West can believe, however falsely, that humanity has

escaped from climate—and from the attendant Four Horsemen—the rest of the world has no such luxury.

That sense of escape—that collective delusion—helps explain why Western societies and their religious institutions are so slow to understand climate issues as issues that matter to them.