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## **“Ecological apocalypse”: An elective affinity between political and religious discourses?**

**Joseph Gotte**, [joseph.gotte@u-pec.fr](mailto:joseph.gotte@u-pec.fr)

Centre d'étude des discours, images, textes, écrits, communication (Céditec)

Université Paris-Est-Créteil

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# “Ecological apocalypse”: An elective affinity between political and religious discourses?

*Political Communication Research Section – #489*

Joseph Gotte, [joseph.gotte@u-pec.fr](mailto:joseph.gotte@u-pec.fr)

Centre d'étude des discours, images, textes, écrits, communication (Céditec)

Université Paris-Est-Créteil

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Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pioneers of Western ecological thought have mobilized an apocalyptic vocabulary to point out the risks threatening the habitability of the Earth, especially the danger of nuclear technology (Anders, 1960; Dumont, 1974; Jonas, 1979). Since recent scientific findings about climate change, biodiversity erosion, and resource depletion, “*apocalypticism has become part and parcel of contemporary rhetoric surrounding the environmental crisis*” (Kowalewski, 2023, p. XIII). This parallel is often drawn today to discredit messages perceived as irrational, doomist, or even reactionary. As Bruno Latour noted in *Facing Gaia*, “*As soon as you speak with some degree of seriousness about ecological mutations without even raising your voice, you are immediately accused of ‘apocalyptic discourse’ or, in a somewhat attenuated version, ‘catastrophist discourse’*” (Latour, 2017, p. 235). Like other works, this paper proposes to look at the comparison seriously “*from a perspective that does not seek to disqualify ecological discourse on the basis of its affinity with apocalypticism, but rather to capture its inherent rationality*” (Afeissa, 2014, p. XIV, we translate). Following sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s studies of the neo-ruralists of the late 1970s, this relationship between apocalypticism and political ecology will be explored through the category of “elective affinity”.

## **“Elective affinity”: history and contours of a concept**

The term “elective affinity” was first popularized by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who named one of his novels after it in 1809. It denotes “*a metaphor for the*

*passionate movement by which a man and a woman are attracted to each other - even if this means separation from their former partners - and which is based on the intimate kinship between their souls*” (Löwy, 2004, p. 94, we translate). About a century later, Max Weber transformed the romantic-erotic metaphor into a sociological concept suitable for scientific analysis, as he unfolds it in his standard work: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). He uses the term to describe the relationship between (often religious) beliefs - e.g., Calvinist theology - and social formation, lifestyles, and economic behavior - such as bourgeois entrepreneurship. The term is widely used in the social sciences today and the lack of a Weberian definition has led to differing understandings of the term (Thomas, 1985). Drawing on Michael Löwy’s understanding, we consider elective affinity as *“the process by which two cultural forms - religious, intellectual, political, or economic - enter into a relationship of mutual attraction and influence, mutual choice, active concentration, and mutual reinforcement because of certain significant analogies, intimate affinities, or affinities of meaning”* (Löwy, 2004, p. 100, we translate). Although Löwy does not precisely define cultural forms, we understand them as “global narratives”, perceptions of reality that generate “attitudes”, “motivations” and actions (Geertz, 1983). The purpose here is to examine the relevance of “elective affinity” category to explore the connections between religious and ecological apocalyptic forms.

### ***Apocalypticism in several forms***

The term “apocalypticism” refers to the literary genre which has been named after the Apocalypse of John, commonly referred to in English as the Book of Revelation. This corpus, characterized by messianic hope and expectation, is particularly well suited to troubled times and eschatological crises. It experienced *“an outpouring between the second century BC and the second century AD”* (Hartog, 2022, p. 20) around the Mediterranean. The apocalyptic genre is based on a *“revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world”* (Collins, 1979, p. 9). This definition establishes the meaning we ascribe to *religious apocalypticism*, although we will focus mainly on biblical representations (from both the Jewish and Christian traditions), as they were most frequently mentioned by respondents.

Over the centuries, apocalypticism spread and was often subverted from its original meaning to refer to the threat of human extinction and, to a lesser extent (global) catastrophic events. Given the dual threat post-World War II of nuclear proliferation and degradation of life on Earth, catastrophic apocalypticism represents “*a phenomenon consubstantial to ecological thinking and political ecology*” (Semal, 2019, p. 11, we translate). Although “*the rise of sustainable development [...] has contributed [...] to some euphemization of the catastrophist overtones of political ecology, toward more continuist, consensual theories*” (Semal, 2019, p. 26, we translate), increasing scientific warnings, along with the apparent difficulty for politicians to resolve the ecological crisis, support a resurgence of catastrophism on a large geographical scale. To distinguish this particular perspective from religious apocalypticism, we will refer to it as *ecological apocalypticism*.

### ***A few methodological indications***

This presentation is based on a doctoral thesis that has been in the making since 2020 at the Université Paris-Est Créteil, at the intersection of political communication studies and discourse analysis “à la française” (Maingueneau, 1991). By summoning themes discussed in both academic fields (circulation of ideas and discourses, performativity), it examines the discourses of intellectuals and activists mobilizing around the issue of ecological *collapse* in France, Belgium, and Switzerland. From one respondent to another, this collapse can be understood either in the singular or in the plural, as catabolic or catastrophic, as imminent or already underway, as a threat to industrial-capitalist societies or to the human species. The theme of collapse seems to be a catalyst for ecological apocalypticism, especially in the French-speaking countries of Europe in the 2010s.

This work is based on the qualitative study of a heterogeneous corpus consisting of 72 books of various genres (essays, collective works, comics), 11 videos published online (interviews, debates), and 5 films and television programs, released between 2015 and 2021 (see Appendix 1). It is complemented by the results of 15 interviews (see Appendix 2) and 25 observations (see Appendix 3) conducted between 2021 and 2023. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, this presentation uses various authors and concepts from a variety of social sciences and humanities (sociology, political science, history, philosophy, theology, etc.).

## I. Relationship to time: unsettled presentism

The historian François Hartog emphasizes that at the beginning of our era, what he calls the “Christian regime of historicity” has become hegemonic in the West. This regime is based on the idea of an “*apocalyptic present enclosed by the Incarnation and the Final Judgment*” drawing a horizon determined in its outcome but uncertain in the timing of its completion. The present becomes the “*time of the history of salvation*” (Hartog, 2022, p. 110). However, between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century, according to Hartog, the West transitions to “*the modern regime of historicity*” (*Ibid.*, p. 156). This regime, characterized by an insistence on the future, no longer conceives time and history as temporary but as an eternal process towards progress. Given the current ecological risks, it is this latest conception of time that is discussed by our interviewees:

“the profound transformation of our world as we know it, the very possibility of its elimination, demands that we rethink our foundations and the beliefs imposed on us: the myth of *progress* linked to economic growth, faith that technology will save us” (Corinne Morel Darleux, 2019, *Plutôt couler en beauté que flotter sans grâce*<sup>1</sup>)

“The severity and irreversibility of the potential impacts in the coming decades collide with our worldview, our faith in technological *progress*, and the reassuring belief that ‘a solution will be found’” (Jean-Marc Gancille, 2019, *Ne plus se mentir*)

In their more or less strong “anti-modern reaction” (Léger in Augé, 1986, p. 274), the intellectuals and activists studied emphasize the need for a return to the “here and now” - to the present from which it is possible and necessary to act, to mitigate, to adapt. As shown in an earlier work (Desingue and Gotte, 2023), the terms “urgency” and “emergency” have become a material basis for establishing a time limit that contradicts the idea of permanence inherent in modernity. Thus, we have read and heard:

“The *urgency* and seriousness of the situation are such that parallel action must be taken on two fronts at the global level: reducing the population and limiting per capita consumption to much lower levels.” (Gwennyn Tanguy, 2020, *Collapsus*)

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<sup>1</sup> All indented paragraphs contain quotations from the corpus or interviews. In all cases, we provide the translation. Also, the emphasis is always ours.

“what stands out [...] in the communication of scientific knowledge is the ability to convey [...] the *urgency* to act.” (Interview with Valérie Masson-Delmotte)

For François Hartog, in an ecological crisis perspective, the future, “*because it is viewed as a threat, [...] is prevented, or at least postponed, in the name of urgency and for the sake of protecting the present*” (Hartog, 2022, p. 203). This revival of presentism opens the door for a resurgence of apocalyptic schemes: “*Once the category of the future lost its guiding function, a space opened wherein apocalyptic scenarios could be activated or reactivated.*” (*Ibid.*, p. 207)

However, this temporality, which emphasizes the present and urgency, remains fuzzy and difficult to define. It is simultaneously evidence of the resurgence of a pre-modern apocalyptic presentism as well as of a modernity that is still very much active. The process of technical and social acceleration, as well as the acceleration of the pace of life, inherent in “late modernity” (Rosa, 2013) seems likely to feed the discourse on urgency. Moreover, this particular presentism operates a constant back and forth between the categories of the present and the future, without the first category clearly taking the lead. For example, the personalities studied seem to be concerned about the next generations, whether for their wellbeing or for their possible judgment of the inaction (or misaction) of the present generations. Very often this concern is embodied through the eyes of their own children. The journalist Hugo Clément recounts of the ambivalence he felt at the birth of his daughter Jim:

“If we continue as we are, without pulling the emergency brake, Jim will leave a world without mountain glaciers, without virgin forests, without coral, without rhinos. She will leave dead oceans, ravaged by decades of unreasonable exploitation; a hostile climate, source of discomfort and violent conflict” (2020, *Journal de guerre écologique*)

Similarly, actress Mélanie Laurent introduces the trailer for the documentary *Demain* (2015), which she co-directed with Cyril Dion, by referring to the birth of her son Léo:

“What world will our children live in 40 years from now? Léo was born 6 months ago, like hundreds of thousands of children around the world. And the ecological situation

has never been as bad as it is today. So, what will we tell our children? That there is no solution, is that what we will tell them?"

*Image 1. Scene from the Demain documentary trailer illustrating Leo's birth*



According to the theologian Stéphane Lavignotte, this responsibility towards future generations can be linked to a form of theological thinking that goes back to some historical beliefs of the West. Based on a reading of the book of Genesis (chapter 2, verse 15), the Judeo-Christian environmental ethic is rooted in a God-given mandate to humans to steward nature (Callicott, 1990) and may later lead to a divine judgment. For Lavignotte, the ecologist view is in some ways consistent with this sense of environmental stewardship, but *“is no longer held before God, but before future generations and before the peoples of the South, who question the responsibility of the people in the North for massive CO2 production and raise the issue of justice and climate debt”* (Lavignotte, 2022, p. 98, we translate). A process of secularization of religious axioms seems to be underway.

## **II. Revelatory genre: which world and which salvation? For whom?**

Religious apocalypticism is rooted in what we may call a “revelatory genre”. The term “genre” is extremely prolific and polysemous. It can be defined as *“a socio-historical form of expression, oral or written, characterized especially by social usage and by collectively recognized and internalized language-related norms”* (Krieg-Planque, 2017, p. 106, we translate). It *“serve[s] both author and reader, allowing them to relate any given work to other similar works. It allows them to compare and contrast, to contradict other works, to innovate with respect to others’ writings, or to follow the genre paths that others have laid down”* (Steinmann, 1990, p. 3). As mentioned in the introduction, the studied “revelatory genre” is



based on the disclosure of a supernatural world and an eschatological salvation. For John of Patmos in his apocalypse, impending catastrophes are only a step before the revelation of the Parousia, the hoped-for return of Christ, which marks the end point of salvation history. In the case of the ecological apocalypse, how do the interviewees imagine a possible world after the catastrophes? To what extent do they perceive a form of redemption?

For some of the intellectuals and activists studied, the threat is so great that humanity is headed for its end. In a certain technophilia, anthropologist Paul Jorion foresees the extinction of humanity and the only survival of artificial intelligence:

“I have convinced myself that only plan C [is realistic], that is, a survival of intelligence, but not in the form of natural neural networks, but artificial [...] From this moment on, I must contribute with my remaining energy [...] to the emergence of an artificial intelligence, not necessarily of better quality than ours, but certainly more robust, and which could exist in a world that would no longer be habitable for humans.” (Interview, 2023)

For the psychoanalyst Pierre-Henri Castel who predicts “the end of everything in a few centuries”, the remaining time holds the risk of providing reasonable dimension to a moral chaos:

“What if we were not reckless or unreasonable, in front of the imminent end of times, but strangely lucid, exposed to an unprecedented temptation: to live all possible pleasures before the calamity that is coming [...]? What does it mean to be bad, even evil and even perverse, if the end that awaits us is a dry one, without final judgment, punishment or salvation for anyone [...]?” (*Le mal qui vient*, 2022)

This “apocalypse without kingdom” which the author describes in the words of Günther Anders is not the only way forward. Some respondents develop a discourse on the transformation of economic structures and habits - through degrowth, sobriety - and the reorganization of social relations - for example, based on bioregionalism, alliances between species, or mutual aid as a mode of survival. In episode 5 of the fictional television series *L'Effondrement* (“The Collapse”), a group of vagrants arrives in an eco-hamlet, 25 days after the collapse. The residents, who pool their resources, must decide whether or not to accept the group. This

decision is about to be made by a council, different each week. A supposedly horizontal governance is preferred, and the absence of a leader is emphasized. During the council assembly, after some contributions, hands are waved, and silent applause is given (as we have observed in the meetings of an Extinction Rebellion local group). Although *L'Effondrement* is a fictional series, it aired in 2019 at a cultural moment when the “collapsology” movement in the French-speaking West was at its height. The literature that spawned this movement runs like a thread through series’ scenarios, underpinning the observation that “*series are certainly the fictional genre most affected by the relationship with reality*” (Esquenazi, 2017, p. 318, we translate).

*Image 2. Scenes from L'Effondrement TV series*



In our corpus, revelation becomes a prospective work of anticipating and imagining the future in order to make it desirable or as tolerable as possible. In a back and forth between utopian and dystopian scenarios, ecological apocalypticism integrates a quest for salvation, whose slogan “Save the planet” is probably the best-known example. But here, too, salvation is understood under secularized features. Hermeneutist Clairette Karakash points this out: “*Salvation today is no longer seen in terms of ancient apocalyptic eschatology [...]. People do not believe in the miraculous intervention of a god who would have planned a heavenly Jerusalem to welcome the survivors of a world catastrophe. [Mankind] is doomed, probably for a long time to come, to seek salvation on Earth*” (Karakash, 2002, p. 80, we translate).

In response to a universalist view of the ecological cause - that humanity as a whole is responsible for the present catastrophe and can only be saved as a whole - some dissonant voices are raised. Many point to the responsibility of the capitalist West:

“The words and the way in which the destruction of the Earth’s ecosystems is described are not politically neutral. By making Human - *anthropos* - its subject, the Anthropocene suggests in return that it is this same apolitical ‘Human’ who should respond, thereby obscuring the violent processes of one faction’s domination over ever-larger groups of humans and non-humans.” (Malcolm Ferdinand, 2019, *Une écologie décoloniale*)

The author insists on the distinction between those who are responsible for the ongoing destruction and the others. In another approach, figures such as Yves Cochet, a former French minister known for his pronounced catastrophism, proclaim the consequences of ecological collapse in terms of demographic decline:

“To be clear, by collapse I mean a phenomenon that would lead, in demographic terms, to the disappearance of about half the world’s population in less than ten years. By 2035, there would then be about three billion instead of eight billion.” (2020, *Devant l’effondrement*)

From then on, there seems to be a distinction between those who survive and are “saved” and those who are not. Yves Cochet, during a Momentum Institute<sup>2</sup> seminar on bioregionalism, raised the question of hospitality, distinguishing between “inside” - “us” - and an “outside” - “them”. This remark recalls the episode of *L’Effondrement* and clings to a “*dichotomizing consciousness of the world*” (Léger in Augé, 1986, p. 275, we translate) inherent in an orthodox vision of salvation.

When will ecological salvation and a post-catastrophe world occur? It is not quite clear, as interviewees try to articulate these paradoxes: the catastrophe must be avoided, but we must be prepared for it; the catastrophe will come, but it is also (to some extent) underway (Villalba, 2021). As the subtitle of a comic strip from our corpus says: “Sow today the seeds of the world

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<sup>2</sup> The Momentum Institute is a French think tank founded in 2011 by Agnès Sinaï. It presents itself as a “laboratory of ideas on the ways out of industrial society, and solidarity-based degrowth in response to the social shock of collapse” (we translate). See more on < <https://institutmomentum.org/qui-sommes-nous> >.

to come!” One can read between the lines “*the specifically Christian dialectic of the 'already there' and the 'not yet'*” (Hervieu and Léger, 1980, p. 43, we translate), according to which the kingdom of God is both present and future. Understanding this tension tends to orient salvation more toward political transformation or inner preparation.

### **III. Prophetic *ethos*, clairvoyance, subversion**

By his clairvoyance the apocalypticist is a messenger who is able to reveal a hidden reality. It is quite clear, for example, in this statement by the journalist Laure Noualhat:

“the apocalypse is in fact a revelation. [...] Obviously, there are many connotations, disguises that have changed its meaning. But in reality, it is not only a massive and violent catastrophe. It is the revelation that a path is changing. And this path is the one that humanity has been following for about 10,000 years, since the beginning of sedentarization, of culture, all the way to the moon. What is this path? It is a path of growth, development, domination of nature and women.” (Interview, 2023)

Ecological apocalypticists (or “whistleblowers”, to put it in more common terms) often find themselves at odds with the prevailing order of things. They describe themselves as “overseers” or “awakeners”, have an “ambivalent sense of being pioneers”, and find themselves in the “discomfort of the margins”, as we heard during an observation at the Momentum Institute.

A look at the social position of the respondents shows that marginality is a relative phenomenon here. Several of them are retired from political activity (Yves Cochet, Corinne Morel Darleux, Isabelle Attard) or are active as independent and sometimes precarious researchers (Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens). However, other interviewees hold important political posts: in the French National Assembly (François Ruffin, Delphine Batho), in the European Parliament (Pierre Larroustourou), in the city council of a large French city (Antoine Back). Others were and are an integral part of the teaching and research landscape of the Grandes Écoles (Bruno Latour, Agnès Sinaï), state universities (Aurélien Barrau, Geneviève Azam, Yves Citton), or Catholic higher education institutions (Gaël Giraud, Nathanaël Wallenhorst, Renaud Hétier).

Our study is still in progress. Nowadays, mediatization and awareness of ecological threats are advancing in French-speaking Europe (Itel, 2023). Marginality tends to shift to the side of

skeptics, who are quickly reminded of the recklessness of climate denial, as in Adam McKay's film *Don't Look Up* (2021). At the "Rencontres des nouvelles pensées écologiques" in October 2022, philosopher Patrice Maniglier notes that "the hegemony of ecological thinking is beginning". Our research would undoubtedly have been very different 10, 20, 30 years ago, when some of our respondents began to alarm an often indifferent, even contemptuous public. Danièle Hervieu-Léger's conclusion that "*apocalyptic discourse [is] an expression of the practical impotence of a social class to change a world in which it lives badly, because of the overall conjuncture as well as the contradictions of its own position in social relations*" (Léger, 1982, p. 61, we translate) needs to be updated.

Yet, it appears from the interviews that several interviewees still hold on to a certain "residue" of a subversive social and symbolic position:

"I am not old enough not to have the pleasure of reaping the fruits of what we have sown with this Momentum Institute. It has a certain resonance. But I do not quite get it. For me, what we are doing is still completely marginal [...] We are in a kind of frugality, a poverty, in the good sense of the word. This is perhaps a bit asymmetrical compared to the importance of the ideas we represent. (Interview with Agnès Sinaï, 2023)

To follow the religious metaphor, we refer to this minoritarian *habitus* as "prophetic *ethos*". "*Ethos*" is understood here as "*the self-image that the speaker constructs in his discourse to contribute to the efficacy of his statement*" (Amossy, 2012, p. 82, we translate). We take the term in a broad sense, considering the "*tangible traces that are sometimes seen in linguistic signs, sometimes in the situation of utterance*" (*Ibid.*, p. 95). Our previous considerations are useful to analyze the speaker's *ethos* at a prediscursive level: their legitimacy (status, function, position), but also the image that their interlocutors have of them beforehand (collective representation, stereotypes, social imaginary). We are particularly interested in the argumentative strategies used in the discourse to deconstruct and reconstruct this initial perception.

A prophet is someone who is "*convinced in his own mind that he is chosen by God to make known to man the will of God*" (Obbink, 1939). Unlike royal prophets who were perceived as conforming to the ruling power (Weber, 1967) the authentic prophet in pre-exilic Judaism is "*by vocation a subversion, a troublemaker, while his interlocutors - kings and peoples alike -*

would like to hear what flatters and comforts them” (Schlegel, 2017, we translate). A perfect contemporary illustration is Donald Trump’ criticism of the young activist Greta Thunberg, whom he called a “prophet of doom” at the 2020 Davos Forum<sup>3</sup>. This figure of the prophet is regularly mobilized by our interlocutors, either to distance themselves from it or to appropriate it:

“I am neither a *prophet of doom* nor a politician, and certainly not an ideologue. I am a scientist, a naturalist, specialized in paleontology and the sciences of evolution and biodiversity” (Bruno David, 2021, *À l’aube de la 6<sup>e</sup> extinction*)

“Without wishing to be *prophetic*, it seems likely to me that we are heading for an energy, financial and socioeconomic crisis of epic proportions, with all the attendant risks of shortages, especially of food, of social disintegration and of public disorder” (Arthur Keller, 2020, *L’effondrement de l’empire*)

“I was like a *prophet animated by a desire for Truth*. With a capital letter. My goal was simple: to destroy Le Journal des Amiénois, the weekly city newspaper distributed to all mailboxes. It was a tissue of lies” (François Ruffin, 2020, *L’Écologie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*)

Again, this prophetic *ethos* (sometimes disputed) must be considered primarily secular: the intellectuals and activists studied legitimize their prescient discourse not through a divine knowledge or mandate, but on the basis of a solid scientific literature (mobilized in more or less agile ways), and a mission of transmission, a commitment to truth. Sometimes other forms of knowledge are invoked: intuition, observation, the ancestral knowledge of the first peoples. Regardless of its source, a warning message is delivered by both the prophet and the apocalypticist, but they may differ in the aim of their message.

#### **IV. Pragmatic aim of a trajectory shift**

Apocalypticists and prophets are both part of a revelatory genre but without merging into each other: “*unlike the apocalypticist, the prophet does not claim an end position*” (Hartog, 2014,

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<sup>3</sup> “At Davos, Trump urges the world to ignore the ‘prophets of doom’” < <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/trump-davos-apocalypse-greta-climate/> > [online].

we translate), but “*always leaves a narrow opening so that through a change of behavior [...] the prophecy (of doom) does not come to pass. A good prophecy, then, is a prophecy that has not been fulfilled*” (Hartog et al., 2017, we translate). Many thinkers of the nuclear apocalypse are in fact closer to the characteristics of prophets. Günther Anders himself wrote: “*If we differ from the classical Judeo-Christian apocalypticists, it is not only because we fear the end they were hoping for but mainly because our apocalyptic passion knows no other purpose than to thwart the apocalypse. We are apocalypticists only in order to be wrong.*” (2006, p. 88). More recently, Jean-Pierre Dupuy proposes the need for an “enlightened catastrophism”: “*The catastrophe, even though it does not take place, retains the status of a possibility [...] When one announces, in order to avert it, that a catastrophe is coming, this announcement does not possess the status of a prediction, in the strict sense of the term: it does not claim to say what the future will be, but only what it would have been had one failed to take preventive measures.*” (Dupuy, 2012)

This proposal attracted the attention of Pablo Servigne, the leading author of the so-called “collapsology” movement:

“For me, collapsology starts from Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s attitude [...] that the more we see the catastrophe, the more we can avoid it. [...] The goal of being interested in the catastrophe is to avoid it or, if it is already there, to turn it off. [...] It’s not about starting the fire or wanting the apocalypse.” (Interview, 2023)

Only rarely do people studied express a strict sense of demobilization in the face of potential collapse(s). Action is involved in one way or another, either to prevent the ecological apocalypse, reduce its impact, or prepare for it. The above-mentioned prophetic *ethos* leads us to a pragmatic approach of our corpus. Language cannot be understood as an object independent of practice (Latraverse, 1987): it is necessary to consider “*that speech itself is a form and a means of action*” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni in Charaudeau et al., 2002, we translate).

The pragmatic aim here fluctuates between two sides. The first is “negative” in the sense that, as we have just seen, the goal is to prevent the catastrophe by any means possible, through a discourse that would perform a departure from a destructive trajectory. The second is “positive” in the sense that the emphasis and focus is on imagining a possible desirable future. This

“utopia” could save us from catastrophe - but only consequentially. This second side is structured around the development of “new” narratives presented as a mode of action:

“Everything comes from our narratives. So, above all, we have a cultural battle to wage [...] It is important to provide a desirable ecological vision of the future, to form strong cultural references, to project a powerful imaginary, to structure a tangible project [...] *Little by little*, these narratives of a new kind could mingle our representations, positively contaminate minds, and, if widely disseminated, be structurally translated into companies, laws, landscapes.” (Cyril Dion, 2018, *Petit manuel de résistance contemporaine*)

This positive “little-by-little” reading of the pragmatic aim may resemble a “postmillennialist” interpretation of the religious apocalypse, according to which “*the kingdom of God will be established gradually through an evolutionary process [...] Man’s action [...] does not oppose this final coming but accelerates its rhythm [...] What premillennialism expects from a top-down descent in space, postmillennialism expects from a bottom-up progression in time*” (Desroche, 1963, p. 76, we translate). This immanent - almost secular - reading is advocated by many ecologists, including Bruno Latour: “*The Anthropocene forces us to reclaim the scheme of the end of time through new figures of space and time, thus renewing the traditional expressions of the apocalypse [...]. To put it crudely, it is transcendence that has become fraudulent, if not diabolical, and it is immanence, the immanence despised by centuries of ‘spirituality’, which becomes desirable, moral, and civic. The horizontal now takes precedence over the ‘vertical dimension’*” (Latour, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have been able to establish that the analyzed discourses on collapse resort to a catastrophism characterized by various allusions to the apocalypse. Allusions aside, the connection between religious and ecological apocalypticism lies in a deeper affinity: in the way time is conceived through the prevalence of the present and uncertainty of the future; in belonging to a broader set of discourses of a revelatory kind describing ways of salvation and alternative ways of being-in-the-world; and in the staging of a prophetic *ethos* of clairvoyance and subversion.



Like other elective affinities, ours are born in a subtle and fragile balance between unity and familiarity, on the one hand, and “*a prior distance, a cultural gap that must be addressed, an ideological discontinuity*” on the other (Löwy, 2004, p. 102, we translate). We have pointed out that the pragmatic aim of deviating from a destructive trajectory - through various approaches - is more akin to prophetism than apocalypticism. Furthermore, borrowings from ecological to religious apocalypticism are secularized on various levels. In the era of *anthropos*, the *eschaton*, the end of time, is in the hands of humanity (or at least in the hands of a few people) and no longer in those of an exogenous deity. From then on, Western contemporaries are and will be accountable to future generations and to the inhabitants of the Global South. This secular judgment implies the search for an immanent salvation for our planet Earth and the species that inhabit it. The ecologists’ whistleblowers warn of the impending dangers, and hope to operate an unfulfilling prophecy. They do this not on the basis of an oracle they have received from above, but on the basis of predominantly scientific knowledge. This combination of a “*residual religiosity with a scientific worldview*” allegedly constitutes “*the whole originality of ecological catastrophism*” (Afeissa, 2014, p. 6, we translate).

We emphasize the interest of thinking elective affinity and secularization together, as both imply “*the transition of one form into another, that is, the historical transformation of a form, a scheme, a concept*” (Monod, 2017, p. 61, we translate). Elective affinity seems here possible and accurate. However, this study only explores the relationship that ecological catastrophism has with a certain form of religious apocalypticism. Elective affinity, however, implies a mutuality, reciprocity. It seems relevant for future work to examine the ways in which (this time contemporary) religious apocalypticism borrows elements from ecological apocalypticism<sup>4</sup>, but also to open reflection on the elective affinities between ecological discourse and other religious forms such as animism or witchcraft, which are also frequently mentioned by respondents.

Finally, we can ask why political ecology mobilizes religious elements. For Danièle Hervieu-Léger, the affinity with religion can feed the “anti-modern reaction” and contribute to the construction of a marginal *ethos*: “*Religion can play the role of a reservoir of mobilizing symbols because it appears to those concerned as a discontinuity with the dominant culture*”

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<sup>4</sup> As an example, Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (2015) writes: “*There are regions now at high risk and, aside from all doomsday predictions, the present world system is certainly unsustainable from a number of points of view.*”

(Léger in Augé, 1986, p. 273, we translate). For philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in coping with an unprecedented and immeasurable complexity, “*a portion of modernity must fall back on archaic speeches to say things for which no usable modern words exist*” (Sloterdijk, 2020, p. 44). In this way, “*the apocalyptic narrative scheme provides a paradigm to describe the current situation and make sense of reality, namely the environmental crisis*” (Afeissa, 2014, p. 252, we translate). These observations apply to our study, with different variations and modulations from one respondent to another.

We believe that discourse analysis has its insights to offer with its reflections on the heterogeneity that constitutes any discourse: “*Discourse comes upon the discourse of the other on all the roads that lead to its object, and it cannot but enter into intense and lively interaction with it.*” (Bakhtine in Todorov, 1984, p. 62). For the remainder of our research, we will attempt to grasp the extent to which the apocalyptic discourse that underlies ecological discourse is the result of conscious argumentative aims or is imposed upon them as the result of a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1969) that configures modes of expression about human finitude, in the West of our time.

## Appendices

### Appendice 1: Corpus

Books		
Year	Author(s)	Title
2015	Servigne Pablo ; Stevens Raphaël	<i>Comment tout peut s'effondrer : Petit manuel de collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes</i>
2015	Agnès Sinaï ; Hugo Carton ; Pablo Servigne ; Raphaël Stevens	<i>Petit traité de résilience locale</i>
2015	Bruno Latour	<i>Face à Gaïa : Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique</i>
2016	Paul Jorion	<i>Le dernier qui s'en va éteint la lumière : Essai sur l'extinction de l'humanité</i>
2016	Renaud Duterme	<i>De quoi l'effondrement est-il le nom ? la fragmentation du monde</i>
2017	Servigne Pablo ; Chapelle Gauthier	<i>L'entraide : L'autre loi de la jungle</i>
2017	Hervé Kempf	<i>Tout est prêt pour que tout empire. 12 leçons pour éviter la catastrophe</i>
2017	Paul Jorion	<i>À quoi bon penser à l'heure du grand collapse ?</i>
2017	Jean Jouzel ; Pierre Larrourou	<i>Pour éviter le chaos climatique et financier</i>
2018	Servigne Pablo ; Stevens Raphaël ; Chapelle Gauthier	<i>Une autre fin du monde est possible. Vivre l'effondrement, et pas seulement y survivre</i>
2018	Cyril Dion	<i>Petit manuel de résistance contemporaine</i>
2018	Pierre-Henri Castel	<i>Le mal qui vient</i>
2018	Julien Wosnitza	<i>Pourquoi tout va s'effondrer</i>
2018	Dominique Bourg	<i>Une nouvelle Terre</i>
2018	Enzo Lesourt	<i>Survivre à l'anthropocène : par-delà guerre civile et effondrement</i>
2019	Delphine Batho	<i>Écologie intégrale : le manifeste</i>
2019	François Ruffin	<i>Il est où, le bonheur</i>
2019	Corinne Morel Darleux	<i>Plutôt couler en beauté que flotter sans grâce</i>
2019	Fred Vargas	<i>L'Humanité en péril. Virens de bord, toute !</i>
2019	Aurélien Barrau	<i>Le plus grand défi de l'histoire de l'humanité</i>
2019	Emile Bertier ; Yann Girard	<i>Le Petit guide pratique, ludique et illustré de l'effondrement</i>
2019	Yves Cochet	<i>Devant l'effondrement : Essai de collapsologie</i>
2019	Collectif Notre affaire à tous	<i>Comment nous allons sauver le monde</i>
2019	Geneviève Azam	<i>Lettre à la Terre ; et la Terre répond</i>
2019	Alain Grandjean	<i>Agir sans attendre Notre plan pour le climat</i>
2019	Alexandre Boisson ; André-Jacques Holbecq	<i>Face à l'effondrement, si j'étais maire ? Comment citoyens et élus peuvent préparer la résilience</i>
2019	Antoine Bueno	<i>Permis de procréer</i>

2019	Henry Augier	<i>Trop nombreux, trop pollueurs, trop consommateurs, où allons-nous ?</i>
2019	Iolande Cadrin-Rossignol ; Frédéric Lenoir ; Hubert Reeves	<i>La Terre vue du cœur</i>
2019	Dominique Bourg	<i>Le marché contre l'humanité</i>
2019	Isabelle Attard	<i>Comment je suis devenue anarchiste</i>
2019	Jean-Marc Gancille	<i>Ne plus se mentir. Petit exercice de lucidité par temps d'effondrement écologique</i>
2019	Sébastien Bohler	<i>Le bug humain. Pourquoi notre cerveau nous pousse à détruire la planète et comment l'en empêcher</i>
2019	Pierre Rabhi	<i>J'aimerais tant me tromper</i>
2019	Jean-François Julliard	<i>On ne joue plus ! Manuel d'action climatique et de désobéissance civile</i>
2019	Jérôme Baschet	<i>Une juste colère. Interrompre la destruction du monde</i>
2019	Malcom Ferdinand	<i>Une écologie décoloniale. Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen</i>
2020	François Ruffin	<i>Leur folie, nos vies : La bataille de l'après</i>
2020	Pierre Larrourou	<i>Aujourd'hui l'esprit se révolte : Crise sociale, crise climatique : 7 solutions pour éviter l'effondrement</i>
2020	Laurent Aillet ; Laurent Testot (dir.)	<i>Collapsus. Changer ou disparaître ? Le vrai bilan sur notre planète</i>
2020	Hervé Kempf (dir.)	<i>L'Écologie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle</i>
2020	Pablo Servigne ; Stevens Raphaël (dir.)	<i>Aux origines de la catastrophe</i>
2020	Sutter Pierre-Éric ; Steffan Loïc	<i>N'ayez pas peur du collapse</i>
2020	Hugo Clément	<i>Journal de guerre écologique</i>
2020	Hubert Reeves	<i>Parmi des millions</i>
2020	Philippe Vion-Dury ; Rémi Noyon (dir.)	<i>Face aux chocs écologiques. 12 entretiens pour comprendre l'anthropocène</i>
2020	Noël Mamère	<i>L'écologie pour sauver nos vies</i>
2020	Paul Jorion, Vincent Burnand- Galpin	<i>Comment sauver le genre humain</i>
2020	Nathanaël Wallenhorst	<i>La vérité sur l'anthropocène</i>
2020	Pierrot Pantel ; Manon Commaret (dir.)	<i>L'Effondrement de l'empire. Regards croisés</i>
2020	Laure Noualhat	<i>Comment rester écolo sans finir dépressif</i>
2020	Valérie Garcia ; Marc Pleysier	<i>Voyages en effondrement : Un pire à éviter ou une période à vivre ?</i>
2020	Cédric Chevalier ; Thibault de La Motte	<i>Déclarons l'état d'urgence écologique</i>
2020	Roland Gori	<i>Et si l'effondrement avait déjà eu lieu. L'étrange défaite de nos croyances</i>
2020	Daniel Tanuro	<i>Trop tard pour être pessimistes ! Écosocialisme ou effondrement</i>
2020	Baptiste Denis ; Jean Jouzel	<i>Climat : Parlons vrai</i>
2020	William Clapier	<i>Effondrements ou révolution ?</i>

2020	Eric La Blanche	<i>Colère ! Contre les responsables de l'effondrement écologique</i>
2021	Emile Bertier ; Yann Girard	<i>Petit guide local, équitable et lombricompostable de l'effondrement</i>
2021	Nicolas Hulot ; Muriel Douru	<i>Les petits pas ne suffisent pas !</i>
2021	Pierre Rabhi	<i>La Tristesse de Gaïa. De l'effondrement à l'émerveillement</i>
2021	Bruno David	<i>A l'aube de la 6<sup>e</sup> extinction</i>
2021	Christophe Blain ; Jean-Marc Jancovici	<i>Le monde sans fin, miracle énergétique et dérive climatique</i>
2021	Vincent Mignerot	<i>L'Énergie du déni</i>
2021	Edgar Morin ; Denis Lafay ; Pierre Rabhi	<i>Frères d'âme</i>
2021	Vadim Turpyn	<i>La collapsologie heureuse</i>
2021	Nathanaël Wallenhorst	<i>Mutation. L'aventure humaine ne fait que commencer</i>
2021	Yves Citton ; Jacopo Rasmi	<i>Génération collapsonautes. Naviguer par temps d'effondrements</i>
2021	Agnès Sinaï (dir.)	<i>Politiques de l'Anthropocène</i>
2021	Renaud Hétier	<i>L'humanité contre l'anthropocène, Résister aux effondrements</i>
2021	Gabriel Salerno	<i>Effondrement... c'était pour demain ?</i>
2021	Enki Bilal	<i>L'Homme est un accident</i>
<b>Online videos</b>		
Year	Publisher account	Title
2017	Thinkerview	Vincent Mignerot : Anticiper l'effondrement ? [EN DIRECT]
2018	<a href="#">Fakirpresse</a>	PABLO SERVIGNE & FRANÇOIS RUFFIN : UNE DERNIÈRE BIÈRE AVANT LA FIN DU MONDE
2018	Jerome Breton	Pierre Rabhi, Yves Cochet, Cécile Renouard, Pierre Jacquand - Festival Oasis 2018
2019	Thinkerview	Gaël Giraud : Tsunami financier, désastre humanitaire ? [EN DIRECT]
2019	Geoffrey Dorne	Nicolas Hulot & Pablo Servigne & Alexia Soyeux au Climax Festival en 2019
2019	Clément MONTFORT - Web-Séries Documentaires	DECROISSANCE : ANTIDOTE A L'EFFONDREMENT ? S02 E02 - (Agnès Sinaï) [NEXT]
2020	Le Forum Veritas	Fin du monde et si c'était sérieux ? Yves Cochet et Frédéric Baudin
2020	Thinkerview	Chaos économique, blanchiment bancaire ? Gaël Giraud [EN DIRECT]
2020	UPEC (Journées de l'environnement)	Journées Scientifiques de l'Environnement (JSE) 2020 – 1er jour du colloque scientifique - Session « L'effondrement est-il inévitable ? » : intervention de Dominique Bourg
2021	Thinkerview	Le rapport qui annonce l'apocalypse ? Valérie Masson-Delmotte et Pierre Larrourou [EN DIRECT]

2021	CAMTE	Crise climatique, la tech va-t-elle nous sauver ? - Masson-Delmotte, Bihouix, Kosowski et Auzanneau
Films, tv serie		
Year	Filmmaker	Title
2015	Cyril Dion ; Mélanie Laurent	<i>Demain</i>
2018	Laure Noualhat ; Cyril Dion	<i>Après demain</i>
2018	Nicolas Pariser	<i>Alice et le Maire</i>
2019	Collectif Les Parasites	<i>L'Effondrement</i>
2020	Emmanuel Cappellin	<i>Une fois que tu sais</i>

### Appendice 2: Interview data

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Status
Yves Cochet	Male	77	French	Former French Minister and MP, Member of the French Green Party
Loïc Steffan	Male	52	French	Professor of economics and management, co-founder of the Facebook group “La collapsio heureuse” (31,528 members)
Pablo Servigne	Male	45	French	Writer and speaker behind the “collapsology” movement
Valérie Masson-Delmotte	Female	51	French	Paleoclimatologist, co-chair of the first IPCC working group
Aurélien Barrau	Male	49	French	Astrophysicist, philosopher
Gaël Giraud	Male	53	French	Economist, Jesuit priest
Dominique Bourg	Male	69	Swiss, French	Scholar, philosopher
Henri Trubert	Male	Unknown	French (?)	Co-founder and managing director of the publishing house “Les Liens qui Libèrent”
Hervé Kempf	Male	66	French	Editor in chief of <i>Reporterre</i> media
Antoine Back	Male	46	French (?)	Deputy Mayor of Grenoble
Nathanaël Wallenhorst	Male	44	French, German	University professor of education, writer, speaker
Agnès Sinaï	Female	56	French	Journalist, founder of the “Institut Momentum” think tank
Laure Noualhat	Female	49	French	Journalist, film director
Paul Jorion	Male	76	Belgian	Anthropologist, writer, blogger
Vincent Mignerot	Male	45	French	Writer, essayist

### *Appendice 3: Observation data*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Object</b>
10/09/2021	Cachan, France	Business for Climate Convention
17/09/2021	Lyon, France	Extinction Rebellion and Youth For Climate action
26/09/2021	Rennes, France	Premiere of the documentary Une fois que tu sais
12/11/2021	Zoom (online)	Momentum Institute seminar
03/12/2021	Lyon, France	Extinction Rebellion Lyon General Assembly
08/01/2022	Zoom (online)	Momentum Institute seminar
21/01/2022	Paris, France	Temporary exhibition "Renaissances" presented by Cité des sciences et de l'industrie
15/02/2022	Paris, France	Debate on "Business and degrowth" organized by Génération Écologie and ESCP Business School
27/02/2022	Chassieu, France	Salon "Primevère" 2022
10/03/2022	Bron, France	Café Gesticulé "To have or not to have? When the ecological cause meets the feminist cause"
12/03/2022	Paris, France	"Look up" march for climate and social justice
21/03/2022-23/03/2022	Créteil, France	Scientific Days of the Environment 2022 of the University Paris-Est Créteil
02/05/2022	YouTube (online)	Debate "How can we make energy sobriety acceptable in a world that thinks it is limitless?"
25/06/2022-26/06/2022	Villeurbanne, France	"UniverShifté" 2022 organized by the The Shifters association with the support of the think tank The Shift Project
09/09/2022-11/09/2022	Bordeaux, France	Climax Festival 2022
15/10/2022	Vitry-sur-Seine, France	10 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Momentum Institute
21/10/2022-22/10/2022	Cluny, France	Meeting of new ecological thoughts
10/01/2023	Paris, France	Meeting of leftists and ecologists on pensions
10/02/2023	Paris, France	100 <sup>th</sup> Momentum Institute seminar
27/02/2023	Chassieu, France	Salon "Primevère" 2023
03/03/2023	Grenoble, France	"Café Collapse"
14/03/2023	Lyon, France	Debate "Ecological crisis: will degrowth save us?"
13/04/2023	Paris, France	Debate "Sharing water, a vital issue in a time of scarcity"
15/04/2023	Lyon, France	Debate "Anthropocene or Capitalocene?"

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