

Book Review

Joseph Gelfer (ed.), *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse*. Equinox, Sheffield & Oakville, 2011, pp. 203, ISBN: 978-1845536398 (Hbk).

This book, edited by Joseph Gelfer, traces the development of a contemporary meme, prophesying apocalypse and cosmic changes that would occur on 21 December 2012, from its origin in academic literature about the Mayan calendar to New Age religion, popular culture and dance subcultures. The first mention of this meme was by Michael D. Coe in his 1966 book *The Maya*. The pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilization, ca. 2000 BCE–1100 CE, is widely known for the sophistication and influence of its art, architecture, written language, and mathematical and astronomical systems. Like many Mesoamerican cultures, the Maya believed that time moved in cycles, each of which ended in destruction and began with the recreation of the world, including the sun, stars, moon, animals and plants, and humans. What was different was that the Maya predicted this using a complex calendar of thirteen cycles. Coe initially calculated the end of the thirteenth cycle on 24 December 2011 CE, a calculation that was later corrected by Floyd G. Lounsbury to 23 December 2012, and then again by independent researcher John Major Jenkins, who calculated an end date of 21 December 2012, which in the minds of many people satisfactorily predicted that the end of the world would occur on the solstice.

The world did not end, as we now know, but, prior to the end date, the idea that it would gained tremendous traction in popular imagination through prophecies by New Age shamans, 're-incarnated' priests, and millenarian leaders. Appropriately, Coe contributes a preface to the book, which, chapter by chapter, explores this social phenomenon through different disciplinary perspectives. Robert K. Sittler provides a chapter discussing many of the leading figures in the dissemination of the 2012 meme through leaders in New Age movements and people who present themselves as contemporary Mayan elders. John W. Hoopes explores the principal themes of the contemporary 2012 meme and their adaptation through esoteric traditions, New Age thought, and metaphysical religion.

Following these broad thematic introductions are chapters that focus on case studies and particular issues. Pete Lentini explores how 2012 memes circulate as stigmatised knowledge and spread within what he calls the cultic milieu through media such as YouTube. Kristine Larsen explores the use of pseudoscience in support of claims of the end of the world. Andrea Austin provides a textual analysis of Rolan Emmerich's film *2012*. Graham St John explores the 2012 meme within the subculture of psytrance dance. Joseph Gelfer explores how a Mesoamerican prediction came to be associated with Australian Aboriginal people and the appropriation of indigenous cultures. This chapter also introduces a moral and political perspective, contextualising the religious ideas within a frame of cultural appropriation and historical disadvantage. And finally, John Major Jenkins was given a right to reply to academic critics of his research. Overall, the chapters support each other in a volume that provides the reader with a depth of understanding of this contemporary millenarian movement and its origins. A detailed

index enables readers to explore the 'complex mosaic' (p. 3) of identities, themes, and theories between the chapters. Gelfer is to be congratulated on the selection of authors and the organisation of the material into a very satisfying collection.

The criticisms I have are with the contributions of individual authors. At times, one is exposed to something like contempt for the adherents of millenarianism and New Age religion. In addition, Jenkins's contribution sits uneasily in the volume, as it does not address the '2012 phenomenon' in the manner that the other papers attempted, but was a defence of his own ideas against academics who think his calculations incorrect. However, both the slip in tone and the apparent misdirection of focus are most evident in archaeologically and scientifically oriented papers that are concerned to prove truth or falsity in such ideas, as opposed to those approaches that explore the principal themes through communications, content analysis, and history. As such, they may be put down to different kinds of engagement with the material.

The interest of *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* lies beyond its particular subject. It will be of interest to anyone studying contemporary religion or millenarian movements. But arguably, its enduring strength may lie in its charting of how an idea was spread through the currents of popular culture and communications technologies.

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