

Missing the apocalypse not the end of the world

Did you know the world ended last week? A comet was supposed to hit the Earth, a fact kept secret by a government conspiracy. The impact would have caused a tsunami, killing millions. Good thing it didn't happen. I had theater tickets.

I know about this thanks to my son, who's a big fan of Phil Plait's "Bad Astronomy" Web site. If you go there, you'll learn about Eric Julien. Julien runs www.savelivesinmay.com. He claims to have been a French military air traffic controller who has tracked UFOs and communicated with extraterrestrials. He seems to be a normal guy. He just believes some things that, in my opinion, are a little weird.

What interests me about Julien is that he made a very public and specific prediction, backed up with a great deal of scientific analysis: "Big tsunami on Atlantic coasts, May 25th 2006." That took guts. Most people who believe they see the future never make claims like that. So when anyone makes a testable gloom-and-doom claim, I get interested. Checking things is how humanity gets smarter. It's how we make progress.

It's tempting to write off Julien as a harmless kook. He has a book out, so maybe he's trying to boost sales and doesn't really believe what he says. That would mean he's not harmless; He's ripping people off.

But let's give him the benefit of the doubt. Julien claimed to have visions of Absolute Truth: The world would end on Thursday, May 25. He turned out to be wrong.

Humanity has a less-than-inspiring record for predicting the end of the world. We're 0-for-a-million (give or take). Few things are more embarrassing for believers in the progress of humanity than our continued gullibility on this issue.

Ever heard of Thiota of Manz? She told anyone who would listen the world would end in 847. Bernard of Thuringia? 960. I can't even count how many scholars were sure that 999 was going to be it. I guess they



OPINION

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had a Y1K problem.

In the Middle Ages, astrologers gave us 1186 (when all the known planets were in Libra) and 1524 (when they moved to Pisces). People really went bonkers in 1524.

The abysmal failure of astrology didn't slow the apocalip-syncers. William Miller predicted the end of the world in 1843, then again a year later.

Herbert W. Armstrong predicted the end in 1936, and then later in 1975. Charles Russell seems to have predicted the end of the world at least three times, based on measurements of the pyramid of Giza. The Branch Davidians had an apocalyptic revelation of 1959, long before the tragedy in Waco.

All these people attracted considerable followers. In some cases, they still have them. In no cases were any of them right.

It might be tempting to paint this as a science vs. religion issue, but it's not that simple. The great mathematician Jacques Bernoulli made a prediction of May 19, 1719. Isaac Newton deduced 2060. And there are plenty of believers in the "End Times" who would never pick dates. The book of Matthew, for example, says no one knows the day or the hour of Jesus' coming.

I'm actually surprised Julien picked May 25. I would've thought he'd push for Tuesday: 6-6-06. In fact, I'm a little nervous, because my band has a gig at the Sky Sox game at Security Service Field. Come on by and say hi. But only if you're free. If you can't come, it's not the end of the world.

I think there's a deeply human need to witness the End of Everything. That's what Eric Julien's site says to me. Who among us wouldn't want to be present at the most significant event in all of existence?

And yet, that's why we should be careful. When it comes to the apocalypse, we've been wrong every time and done a lot of stupid things. Our judgment is worst when it is last.

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