

cepts the existential view may define one of the great divides in contemporary society. The existentialism of Camus and Jean Paul Sartre is often dismissed as “old hat,” says

Blackford, but it’s still “philosophical dynamite.” Those who uphold more traditional views of humanity’s place in the universe have yet to find a response that defuses it.

EXCERPT

Revolution in Rome

*Liberal Catholics in the U.S. and Europe fault John Paul II for being out of touch with his Church; but they’re the ones, alas, who are out of touch. Their Church’s future, whether they like it or not, is in the hands of their Third World coreligionists, who share the current Pope’s lack of affection for democracy, pluralism, and church-state separation. And the Pope knows this—as do the like-minded cronies with whom he’s packed the College of Cardinals, and who will choose his successor. “In the traditionalist view,” explains Philip Jenkins, in *The Next Christendom* (2002), “adapting to become relevant or sensitive to the needs of Western elites would be suicidal for the long-term prospects of the Church. It is the so-called traditionalists, rather than the liberals, who are playing the political game of the new century.” . . .*

Yet the changes ahead may not all be to the traditionalists’ liking. While Catholic clergy in Africa, for example, love the idea of an all-male hierarchy, celibacy holds little appeal for them. . . . Furthermore, Third World Christians (whether Protestant or Catholic) tend to be syncretists, mixing Christian beliefs and practices with elements derived from ancient native religions—ancestor worship, animal sacrifices, spiritual healing, polygamy. “The newer churches,” observes Jenkins, “can read the Bible in a way that makes [Third World] Christianity look like a wholly different religion from the faith of prosperous advanced societies of Europe or North America.” So wildly unorthodox is their theological thinking, indeed, that they may inadvertently end up succeeding in the task that liberal American and European Catholics have failed at: namely, breaking the back of the Church’s dogmatic rigidity. A century from now, then, Catholicism may be a more formidable force than ever—but it may also differ from today’s religion in ways no one can now imagine or predict.

—Bruce Bawer, author of *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*,
in *The Hudson Review* (Fall 2003)

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The End Is Here!

“We’re All Gonna Die!” by Gregg Easterbrook, in *Wired* (July 2003), P.O. Box 37706, Boone, Iowa 50037-0706.

Nowadays, just reading the daily newspaper can give you the willies. The bad news: We’re all going to die. The worse news: There’s no limit to the things that can kill us. Where we go wrong, writes Easterbrook, a senior editor with *The New Republic*, is in separating the real, imminent threats from perils that are just too remote to worry about.

Consider the smallpox scare, for instance. “Weaponized smallpox escaped from a Soviet laboratory in Aralsk, Kazakhstan, in 1971,” reports the author. “Three people died, no epidemic followed.” A similar incident killed 68 people outside Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinaberg) in 1979. Again, no epidemic. Although it’s possible



Never mind weaponized smallpox and other much-discussed dangers; it's asteroids and other threats from nature that we are helpless to combat.

that “some aspiring Dr. Evil will invent a bug that bypasses the immune system,” the fact remains that, even including the Black Death, “no superplague has ever come close to wiping out humanity before.”

The potential threat from chemical weapons seems similarly overplayed. While movies and the news media focus on “noxious clouds of death” floating across cities, in reality “a severe chemical attack likely would be confined to a few city blocks.”

Are there doomsday scenarios we *should* worry about? You bet, chief among them the eruption of supervolcanoes and collisions with large asteroids. The U.S. Geological Survey has identified a supervolcano ripe to explode beneath the smoking geysers in Yellowstone National Park, a

cataclysm that could make the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption pale by comparison. Such eruptions in the past have sometimes triggered global climatic changes and, perhaps, mass extinctions. That’s what may have done in the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. But other evidence points to the impact of a huge asteroid striking near Mexico. Such mega-asteroids strike the Earth with alarming frequency. In 1908, an asteroid “250 feet across hit Tunguska, Siberia, flattening trees for 1,000 square miles and detonating with a force estimated at 10 megatons, or 700 times the power of the Hiroshima blast.” Scientists estimate that there are 500,000 similar sized asteroids wandering through Earth’s orbit. None are known to be on a collision course with our planet, but many have yet to be charted. But why

worry? Can’t we just send up a crack team of oil drillers, à la *Armageddon*, to blast that hunk of rock to smithereens? Well, no. NASA, says Easterbrook, “has no technology that could be used against them and no plan to build such technology.” This may be a mistake. As former Microsoft technologist Nathan Myhrvold has written, “Most estimates of the mortality risk posed by asteroid impacts put it at about the same risk as flying on a commercial airliner. However, you have to remember that this is like the entire human race riding the plane.”

Easterbrook breezily dispenses with a few other technorisks. Some scientists, for example, worry that some of the newest generation of supercolliders might inadvertently open a black hole, sucking the universe out through some graduate stu-

dent's science experiment. Or that a naturally occurring black hole might wander into the neighborhood (bad news, since we wouldn't be able to do a thing about it). But Easterbrook reminds us that while the White House was fretting about the kind of supergerm threat depicted in a re-

cent thriller, *The Cobra Event*, real terrorists were in the final stages of plotting the attack on the World Trade Center with old-fashioned jetliners. Yes, Easterbrook concedes, the world *could* end tomorrow. But "it makes far more sense to focus on mundane troubles that are all too real."

The Ultimate Pain Killer

"The Secret Killer" by David Stipp in *Fortune* (Oct. 27, 2003),
1271 Sixth Ave., 16th fl., New York, N.Y. 10020.

Recent medical studies suggest that anti-aging pills—the miracle drugs we've all been waiting for—may be as close as our own medicine cabinets. According to Stipp, a senior writer at *Fortune*, aspirin, ibuprofen, and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) could be the "rough draft" of drugs that will extend life spans and stem the alarming increase in age-related diseases, from Alzheimer's to cancer.

Over the past decade medical researchers have focused on "smoldering, low-level in-

flammation in places like arterial walls and the brain" as the root of many ailments of old age. Claudio Franceschi, scientific director at the Italian National Research Center on Aging, says, "Inflammation is probably the background and driving force behind all major age-related diseases." But that opinion is hardly unanimous in the medical community.

Franceschi began formulating his "inflammaging" theory a decade ago, when his research revealed that as people age, vital immune cells become more prone to in-

EXCERPT

Eek!

A few years ago, the U.S. Congress gave a scientific commission the task of developing a symbolic language that would make clear the danger posed by the U.S. storage site for atomic waste. The problem to be solved was the following: How should the concepts and symbols be constituted in order to communicate to those living 10,000 years from now?

The commission was made up of physicists, anthropologists, linguists, brain researchers, psychologists, molecular biologists, gerontologists, artists, etc. The commission looked for examples from the oldest symbols of humanity, studied the ruins of Stonehenge (1500 B.C.) and the pyramids, researched the reception of Homer and the Bible, and heard explanations of the life cycle of documents. These, however, only reached a few thousand, not 10,000, years into the past. The anthropologists recommended the symbol of the skull and crossbones. A historian, however, remembered that the skull and crossbones meant resurrection to the alchemist, and a psychologist carried out experiments with three-year-olds: If the skull and crossbones is stuck on a bottle, they cry in fear, "poison"; if it is stuck on a wall, they enthusiastically call out, "pirates!"



—Ulrich Beck, professor of sociology at the University of Munich,
in *Security Dialogue* (Sept. 2003)