

10-1-2011

Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats

Steven Bouma-Prediger
Hope College, boumapred@hope.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/faculty_publications



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Bouma-Prediger, Steven, "Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats" (2011). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 310.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/faculty_publications/310

Published in: *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Volume 65, Issue 4, October 1, 2011, pages 421-422. Copyright © 2011 Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, [Richmond], VA.

Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats

by Robert Wuthnow

Oxford University Press, New York, 2010

294 pages, \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-19-973087-2

From the pen of prolific Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow comes another learned volume. The bulk of the book (chs. 2-8) is a perceptive description of life in a nuclear-haunted world, in a world of weapons of mass destruction, in a world of pandemics, and in a warming world. For those of us who remember many of the events recounted—duck and cover drills in the 1960's, the record-setting hot summer of 1988, the spring 2003 outbreak of SARS—the book reads like an all too familiar anthology of bad dreams.

Wuthnow's question is this: With our now constant sense of vulnerability and threat, what effect has this awareness had on us, and how might we act more intelligently? He claims that "The contemporary perils that threaten to kill hundreds of millions of people have been a strong motivating force for action" (p. 206). He further argues that our responses to peril are more than merely technocratic or political in nature; they are, rather, "driven by the need to make sense of our very humanity" (p. 2). We are meaning-making creatures who tell stories not only to provide order to events but also to help solve problems and face the fragility of our own lives. This search for meaning via narrative is central to our various responses to peril. So far so good.

But back to one of his original questions: given the reality of peril, how might we act more intelligently? In his concluding chapter Wuthnow addresses this question. He notes that an awareness of fragility and vulnerability can be a powerful incentive for action, and, in fact, much action has been taken in response to previous threats, e.g., the founding of the Atomic Energy Commission, the Centers for Disease Control. But, as he admits, there is considerable mistrust of these organizations. In addition to noting that "the bias for action in face of potential danger carries costs...as well as benefits" (p. 222), what advice might Wuthnow have? I wish for more guidance, prudential as well as moral, for living amidst the perils. He hints at the comfort of religion, but doesn't go very far with it. What words of wisdom might Wuthnow have for how best to live in a perilous world? But perhaps that is asking that he write a different book. As an insightful exposition of the perilous times in which we live, Be Very Afraid is a very fine book.

Steve Bouma-Prediger
Hope College
Holland, Michigan