

Why We're So Afraid

The title of [a recent Rolling Stone article](#) claims that “we’re living in the age of fear.”

It explains:

“If this election cycle is a mirror, then it is reflecting a society choked with fear. It’s not just threats of terrorism, economic collapse, cyberwarfare and government corruption—each of which some 70 percent of our citizenry is afraid of, according to the Chapman University Survey on American Fears... Meanwhile, the electorate is commensurately terrified of its potential leaders.”

The article assigns blame for this fear—or more accurately, [anxiety](#) (it’s good and [healthy](#) to be afraid at times)—to “fearmongering” on the part of mass media and big business. But that’s a bit simplistic, as these entities are only able to capitalize on our anxiety if we have made ourselves susceptible to it.

I’m wondering if the ultimate cause of widespread fear and anxiety is actually the loss of an eschatological perspective in Western society.

I know—what the what?

For most of Christian history, Christians in the West lived by the maxim of “In the world but not of the world.” Deriving from chapter 17 of the Gospel of John, it captures Christians’ belief that, though they currently live in the midst of the world and all its cares, their true fulfillment lies in eternal life with God at the end of time—in Greek, this is called the *eschaton*. What is more, because Christians traditionally believed that God dwelt within them (a teaching known as “deification” or “theosis”), they also believed that

they participated in that eternal life *even in this present life*—hence, “in the world but not of the world.”

As you can imagine, this knowledge (well, for Christians, *the reality*) provided consolation and a certain amount of freedom from the anxieties that often seem normal to life.

[The most recent survey from the Pew Forum](#) tells us that 72% of Americans still believe in Heaven, and 58% believe in Hell (yes, the difference is probably telling).

However, one could argue that most people today do not really live in such a way that they believe in life after death, or that their belief in it should inform their present life. After all, if there is no afterlife, it’s only reasonable that you should seek above all else to live as long as possible, to enjoy life as much as you can, and to do whatever you want.

And you should be anxious about (and perhaps even hate) anything that impedes or threatens your singular pursuit of these things—whether it be your financial situation, illness, a co-worker, a parent, a teacher, a law enforcement officer, a political candidate or party, or a nation.

With the loss of an eschatological perspective, anxiety becomes “rational”.