Six sixty-six and all that
(or, what the hell is marketing eschatology?)

Stephen Brown
University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland

In the beginning was the word...

And the word was eschatology

Words, according to the late, great novelist, Evelyn Waugh, “should be an intense pleasure, just as leather should be to a shoemaker”. Like the apocryphal author whose lifetime ambition was to write a book that ended with the word “mayonnaise”, or H.L. Mencken’s famous contention that the words “cellar door” comprise the most euphonious combination of sounds in the English language (Frumkes, 1995), we have all encountered words which seem to resonate somehow, which inexplicably appeal to our aesthetic sensibilities, which speak to us, so to speak, and which we are determined to work into our work come hell or high water. For example, as a teenage devotee of the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft, I found myself captivated by two of his manifestly favourite words – “ululation” and “noisome” – both of which I have since managed to smuggle into my publications (the latter, for some strange reason, figures particularly prominently in my book reviews); publications, incidentally, which many people consider to be veritable horror stories in themselves.

Similarly, when studying archaeology as an undergraduate student, I was drawn to the early civilizations of the Near East – Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, the Hittites, Catal Hüyük, Mohenjodaro, pre-dynastic Egypt and so on (see Cotterell, 1988). Their appeal, however, lay not in remarkable developments like the domestication of plants and animals, the first stirrings of urban life, the advent of social stratification, the invention of writing or even the establishment of long-distance trade routes, but in the enormous aesthetic store they set by a beautiful blue stone called lapis lazuli, the exquisite sound of which used to roll around in my admittedly empty head. After years of trying and failing, I have finally managed to incorporate lapis lazuli into my academic output, though it necessitated writing a potted history of western civilization in order so to do (Brown, 1995a, p. 29).

Another word that has long lurked in the depths of my unconscious is eschatology, the study of endings. I first came across it in the late 1980s while

"Six sixty-six and all that" in the title: this is adapted, with apologies, from Sellar and Yeatman's (1930) famous comic synopsis of British history and who, it should be recorded, announced the "end" of history some 60 years before Fukuyama.
wrestling with the wheel of retailing theory. In my attempts to comprehend the
nature of time, I read (Harvard biologist) Stephen Jay Gould's (1987, p. 21)
wonderful little book on incrementalism and catastrophism in geology, Time's
Arrow, Time's Cycle. Apart from opening my eyes to the fact that cyclical
concepts like the wheel theory are predicated on extremely ancient, some would
say antiquated, interpretations of temporality, it exposed me to a totally
unfamiliar yet incredibly arresting word. Indeed, in complete contrast to my
usual protracted struggle to shoehorn attractive words into my research,
eschatology quickly became part of my academic repertoire, though in the time-
worn tradition of papers by Stephen never-knowingly-understood Brown, no
one paid the slightest bit of attention.

Let there be light
Everything changed, however, in March 1990 when Jim Bell and I were in
Germany with a group of postgraduate students, who were conducting
international marketing research on behalf of several Northern Ireland
companies. One morning, on our befuddled descent to breakfast – after a heavy
night imbibing Jägermeister (for medicinal purposes only, you understand) –
Jim looked at the breakfast buffet display, which contained numerous eco-
conscious products, and said, "You know, Stephen, I'm beginning to think that
we have reached the end of marketing". "Marketing eschatology, Jim", I replied
and, after the import of what I'd said finally registered, added a rider to the
effect, "now, that's got a ring to it!" In fact, as I recall, breakfast was completely
forgotten in the animated discussion that followed, not least on account of Jim's
family circumstances. Coming, like myself, from a deeply religious background
– Jim's parents were missionaries – he was well versed in the scriptures and
fully au fait with the relevant sections of the Book of Revelation (its anticipation
of two witnesses from the North was the cause of particular rejoicing).

Later that day, we took the train to Frankfurt-am-Main and, as was our wont
on residential, decided to partake of some cultural nourishment. It transpired
that a Chagall retrospective had just opened at the local art gallery, which we
eventually tracked down after numerous wrong turns and pit-stops to soothe
our still unsettled systems. The exhibition comprised a collection of the artist's
works that had been inspired by scenes and stories from the Bible (the series
commenced in 1930 when Chagall was commissioned to illustrate an edition of
the good book, but he returned to the theme throughout his long working life),
though the small gallery was so full of people that it was difficult to enjoy the
experience. After a quick circuit, we were about to leave when one particular
painting literally stopped us in our tracks. Until that day, I had never really
subscribed to the idea that works of art possessed overwhelming power – albeit
I had often felt a tingling of the spine in the presence of great art – but when I
looked at Jim and he looked at me, we both knew that something special was
happening. We checked the catalogue for the name of the painting and,
translating roughly from the German, discovered that it was entitled Isaiah
Prophesying the Apocalypse. We had received a message from God.
Our Pauline conversion, our fleeting moment of rapture, our Epiphany in a hot and crowded art gallery, concluded with an agreement that somehow, somewhere, someday, we would try to do something together on marketing eschatology. Like so many academic resolutions, needless to say, this one slipped down and seemingly disappeared from our personal research agendas, as Jim left for the land of milk and honey that was his PhD thesis and I entered the valley of the shadow of death known as postmodernism. It was only after the (fortuitously) simultaneous completion of these projects in mid-1994 and, thanks largely to the enthusiastic prompting of our distinguished colleague Professor David Carson, who has long exhorted the UU marketing group to think heretical thoughts, that the idea of the eschatology retreat came to pass. Although many recipients of the “call for papers” responded with the inevitable and inadvertently appropriate comment “What the hell is marketing eschatology?”, a small group of non-conformists reacted positively and, of these, a chosen few were invited to share their thoughts and break bread at St Clement’s Retreat (as described in the introduction to this special issue of EJM).

Six days shalt thou labour...
Words, of course, perform more than an aesthetic function, important though that is for most lovers of language. They are also, as the nineteenth century pastor Henry Ward Beecher pointed out, “pegs to hang ideas on”. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the doctrine of the final issue of things (from the Greek eschatos – last), eschatology is a compelling intellectual peg for academics interested in marketing ideas. Indeed, when we talk about marketing eschatology, there are at least six ways – six and its derivatives (most notably 666, the number of the Antichrist) having particular scriptural significance – in which eschatology can be related to marketing. For the purposes of explication, these can be termed: literal, historical, conceptual, metaphorical, political and existential.

Literal
The first and arguably the most obvious interpenetration of marketing and eschatology is evident in the everyday buying behaviour of evangelical Christians, of believers in biblical prophecies – the Second Coming, Last Judgement, signs and wonders, Armageddon, the Rapture[1] and various other eschatological phenomena. Paralleling Hirschman’s (1981, 1983a) pioneering analyses of consumption behaviour among religious sub-cultures, there have been a number of scholarly studies of born-again Christians, of which LaBarbera’s (1987) is probably best known (see also The Economist, 1995; Edmondson, 1988; McDaniel and Burnett, 1991). Noting that no fewer than 56 per cent of the American population, compared to 27 per cent of Europeans, consider themselves deeply religious (including 30 per cent who subscribe to born-again beliefs), LaBarbera demonstrated that, while evangelical Christians are similar to the national average in terms of income, demographics and media exposure, if not geographical distribution (heavy concentrations are apparent
in the southern states), their buying behaviour diverges somewhat from the overall norm. Unsurprisingly perhaps, they demonstrate a greater propensity to purchase religious magazines, attend to religious broadcast media, indulge in good works or participate in community organizations, wear modest rather than fashionable clothing, listen to country or gospel music in preference to rock 'n' roll or heavy metal, and espouse moderation in matters of alcohol, cigarette, drug and entertainment consumption. Indeed, although ostensibly opposed to materialism per se, the Heritage Village USA phenomenon indicates that born-again Christians are quite prepared to over-indulge in suitably sanctified goods and services (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989). Interestingly, however, they are not anti-advertising as such - on the contrary, considerable pleasure is derived from the non-selling aspects of commercials - though gambling, pornography, abortion, homosexuality, sexual promiscuity and any form of sacrilegious activity is strenuously opposed. So much so, that products, services or, indeed, marketing organizations that are seen to be promoting blasphemous behaviours are routinely boycotted and vigorously condemned. Thus films like Scorsese's Last Temptation of Christ, convenience stores selling Playboy and Penthouse, the sponsors of Saturday Night Live and, most notoriously, Procter and Gamble (with its “satanic” man-in-the-moon logo) have incurred the indignant wrath of evangelical Christian consumers (LaBarbera, 1987).

Although, as Campion (1994) points out, the expectation of an imminent end is a central conceit of Christianity, it can be argued that the above shopping behaviours are not eschatological as such, in that they do not pertain directly to end-times themes. There is, however, ample evidence of consumption behaviours that are specifically related to eschatology. These range from the purchase of best-selling works of prophetic literature (Hal Lindsey's (1970) Late Great Planet Earth has sold a staggering 19 million copies) and wrist-watches with an indispensable “countdown to Armageddon” function, to bumper stickers proclaiming “In the event of Rapture please take the wheel”. Boyer (1992), moreover, reports numerous instances of individuals who refuse to accept change for a $10.00 bill if their purchases come to $6.66, or take delivery of automobiles with a licence plate containing the numerals 666, and Relfe (1982) has calculated that the entire UPC barcode system, which is predicated, so she claims, on multiples of 666, is an insidious manifestation of the Antichrist’s maleficent ambitions. Conversely, of course, such eschatological beliefs can and have been exploited by unscrupulous marketers for their shock value and accompanying publicity. The clearest examples of this “secular apocalyptic” (Bull, 1995, p. 4) are found in rebellious, antinomian strands of science fiction and rock music – Stephen King’s The Stand, J.G. Ballard’s Millennium, Van Halen’s The Seventh Seal, The Sex Pistols’ Anarchy in the UK (first line, “I am an AntiChrist”) [2], etc. – though Boyer (1992) quotes instances as diverse as 666 Jellybeans, the 666 brand of Italian shoes and an advertisement for Pizza Hut which runs “Beware of 666; it’s the Anti-Pizza” (see also Cotton, 1995; Greisman, 1974; Wagar, 1982). Furthermore, as most inhabitants of Northern Ireland can readily testify, the biggest single boost a
new product or service can receive is to be denounced and, ideally, declared a portent of imminent Apocalypse, by religious zealots and fundamentalists.

**Historical**

The deliberate adaptation, manipulation and usurpation of eschatological doctrine may seem like marketing at its most cynical and depraved – and to some extent it is – but it is also true to say that chiliasts, millennarians and eschatologists of whatever stripe have shown themselves to be remarkably adept marketers. For many people, the marketing of eschatology consists of sad old men stalking the streets, bedecked with sandwich boards proclaiming “the end of the world is nigh”, or open-air crusades consisting of a hell-fire and damnation preacher, a motley band of yea-sayers and, invariably, a temperamental PA system. Yet, one only has to examine the operations of (say) Jack Van Impe, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Morris Cerullo or Salem Kirban, to appreciate that their marketing activities are of the highest order, especially given the intangibility – to put it mildly – of the product they purvey (Chandler, 1993). Conspicuously absent from the pseudo-case studies that punctuate our me-too marketing textbooks, and denounced as they often are by mainstream denominations for selling biblical ideas as if they were soap powder or personal insurance, there is no denying their astonishing ability to apply the tools and techniques of modern marketing.

Marketing skills, however, are not the preserve of the present generation of eschatologists, with their dedicated television stations, newsletters, direct mail operations and diverse array of tie-in products from CDs to T-shirts. On the contrary, the extensive history of millennarian movements reveals that they were invariably promulgated, propagated and perpetuated by individuals – e.g. Montanus, Thomas Müntzer, Jan Matthys, Thomas Venner, Tanchelm, Ian de Stella, Peter the Hermit, Shabbetai Tsvi – endowed with what many would today consider to be intuitive marketing abilities (Cohn, 1970; Rubinski and Wiseman, 1982; Thomas, 1971). A typical, if somewhat poignant, example of marketing eschatology occurred just over 150 years ago when William Miller, a devout New Englander and self-taught student of biblical prophecy, calculated that the end of the world would occur on 21 March 1843. Aided and abetted by Joshua V. Himes, a self-made businessman, “public relations genius” (Chandler, 1993, p. 81) and coiner of the Millerite advertising by-line “End of the World in ’43”, the movement spread rapidly throughout the USA, Europe and beyond. As the fateful day approached, thousands of Millerites quit their jobs, boarded up businesses, abandoned crops and livestock, gave away possessions, confessed to crimes and infidelities, donned ascension robes and gathered together to witness the final blast of the heavenly trumpet. Nothing happened, needless to say, though one gathering in a Massachusetts mansion was driven into pandemonium when a local prankster played several shrill notes on a borrowed trumpet at the appointed hour (Mann, 1992).

Although it is easy to make light of the Millerites, not least because two subsequent attempts at date-setting also failed to fulfil the founder’s
eschatological ambitions, it is necessary to appreciate that people like Miller and millenarian movements generally appear to serve an important socio-spiritual need. Bizarre though it seems to unbelievers, many individuals actually *relish* the idea of the end of the world, the Second Coming, when they will sit among the saints at God's right hand. Hence, Miller and his innumerable apocalyptic successors can legitimately be described as marketing-oriented rather than the mendacious con-men – aka sales orientation – that many cynics consider them to be. Indeed, it has recently been argued that most millenarian cults are characterized by four distinctive features: a charismatic leader who claims to have experienced revelations concerning the imminence of the end; a belief that better, less troubled times are just around the corner; an extraordinary outpouring of emotion, ecstasy and, as often as not, irrationality; and, the underpinning anti-authoritarianism of the often marginalized or downtrodden millenarian masses (Hamilton, 1995). Marketing eschatology, in short, is characterized by the four Ps of prophets, paradise, passion and protests.

**Conceptual**

Although it is undeniable that many millenarians are adept marketers – perhaps more than anyone they purvey the “hope” that Belk (1995) so eloquently espouses – the relationship between marketing and eschatology cannot be described as anything other than uneasy at best and antipathetic at worst. After all, the end-time predictions of the eschatologically inclined are invariably predicated on a literal reading of the Bible and fairly free extrapolations of its numerous prophecies. The good book, however, and arguably the entire western intellectual tradition, is implacably opposed to everything that marketing is widely assumed to represent – materialism, hedonism, covetousness, consumption, greed, usury, cupidity, luxury, desire, forestalling, to name but a few (see Berry, 1994; Jackson, 1995; Pollay, 1986; Rassuli and Hollander, 1986). As numerous passages in the Bible make abundantly clear, not least the Book of Revelation, with its vivid description of the fall of Babylon (“thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived”), commercial success, or rather excess, is incompatible with the way of the Lord. True, this traditional hostility waned in the face of the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution – in fact, the former, according to Weber’s Protestant ethic, was at least partially responsible for the latter (Campbell, 1987) – but whereas production and manufacturing were thereby sanctified, consumption and marketing were, and to some extent still are, regarded with more than a modicum of suspicion and hostility (Belk, 1992, 1994; Lord, 1987; Mulvihill, 1983). Notwithstanding the latter-day secularization of the sacred and sacralization of the secular, which has led O’Guinn and Belk (1989, p. 236) to conclude that “prosperity in fact is next to godliness”, marketing’s reputed ability to stoke the insatiable flames of consumer desire, is still widely regarded as an abomination. Ironically, however, most of these contemporary condemnations emanate from Marxists, critical theorists and
their fellow travellers on the left of the political spectrum, rather than the traditional, religiously motivated, right (Brown, 1995a).

The rise of evangelical Christian sects, armed to the teeth with the weapons of mass marketing, may be one of the manifold paradoxes of our postmodern times, but no less paradoxical is marketing's conceptual reliance on eschatological principles and precepts. If the copious accounts of the history of marketing thought are to be believed, marketing has always been something of a bastard discipline (as opposed to immaculate conception). The second-hand rose of scholarship, it sprang from the rib of economics at the start of the present century and, at the risk of further mixing my metaphors, continues to depend on the conceptual scraps from the tables of its academic elders and betters – sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography, history and many more (Brown, 1995b). Indeed, Shelby Hunt (1994) even goes so far as to suggest that, as a result of its reliance on the theoretical constructs of established disciplines, marketing cannot make a genuine contribution to knowledge. While it is undeniable that marketing suffers from a conceptual balance of payments deficit, the theological-cum-eschatological underpinnings of marketing thought have attracted very little academic attention hitherto. However, the briefest acquaintance with eschatological precepts, especially its emphasis on numerology reveals that the roots of many extant marketing concepts – the 4Ps, the PLC, the production-sales-marketing eras schema, the wheel of retailing theory, the art or science debate – stretch right back to the very dawn of time. This is not to suggest that marketing theories are directly influenced by eschatological constructs, but simply that eschatological influences undergird the entire western intellectual tradition, of which marketing is merely a comparatively recent manifestation. Indeed, it is arguable that one of the principal reasons why such constructs “hang on”, despite innumerable empirical “refutations”, is because of their elemental or archetypal character.

Metaphorical

The fourth interpretation of marketing eschatology, and the one that inspired the aforementioned Retreat, is essentially metaphorical. A metaphor, according to Ortony (1995), Steen (1994) and most other analysts of figurative thinking (Van den Bulte, 1994; Zaltman et al., 1982), describes one thing in terms of something else; in this case, marketing in terms of end-times theology. Such an analogy can hardly be described as original, since the theological trope is readily applicable to marketing per se (e.g. Brownlie et al., 1994a; Hirschman, 1983b; Ramond, 1974). Marketing, after all, has its celestial city of marketing orientation; its four commandments of analysis, planning, implementation and control; and, its pantheon of priests, prophets, apostles, saints and, though some observers might demur, scholars (Brown, 1995a). More to the point, for its disciples marketing comprises the one true way of looking at, organizing and understanding the world. This is a world where disbelievers are damned as “production,” or “sales,” oriented and backsliders denounced as “myopic” or preoccupied with the “trappings” of marketing rather than the “substance” (or,
should that be transubstantiation?). Indeed, like members of any other
religious persuasion, marketers are quite content to take credit for marketing
successes yet absolve themselves of any responsibility for its failures (see
Campion, 1994). Thus, business people who have specifically eschewed
marketing, such as Anita Roddick of the Body Shop, are rapturously anointed
as "intuitive" or "innate" marketers (until such times, naturally, as things start
to go wrong), whereas any hint of failure in the marketplace, even by
organizations that have followed marketing dogma to the letter, automatically
translates into deviation from the straight and narrow, the slippery slope to
perdition, a one-way ticket to Gehenna - or Palukaville at least.

While many people might be prepared to accept the marketing/theology
comparison, if pressed, the apocalyptic analogy is something else again. At a
time when marketing is "on the lips of many managers" (Hooley and Saunders,
1993, p. 3); when there is copious empirical evidence confirming that it is the key
to long-term business success (Baker and Hart, 1989); when it is in the
ascendant as an academic discipline (Saunders, 1993); when it has proved
applicable to fields as diverse as health care, public administration and not-for-
profit (Doyle, 1994); when the diverse writings of the new generation of
management gurus - Peters, Porter, Blanchard, etc. - concur on its
overwhelming importance (Huczynski, 1993); and, when it is being treated with,
admittedly grudging, respect by hitherto hostile academic specialisms (Brown,
1995b), how it is possible to conclude that marketing is in its eschatological
depth throes? Marketing, surely, is just starting to mature, it is fitter, stronger
and healthier now than it has ever been.

Although such optimistic, not to say gung-ho, sentiments are eminently
understandable, a quick perusal of recent commentaries on the state of
contemporary marketing reveals that numerous leading academics and
practitioners appear to be experiencing crises of faith, doubting the wisdom of
their intellectual calling, thinking heretical thoughts and, in some extreme
cases, openly contending that the end of the modern marketing concept is nigh
(Hoyt, 1991; Lynch, 1994; Wensley, 1994). Piercy (1992, p. 15), for example,
maintains that the traditional marketing paradigm "assumes and relies on the
existence of a world which is alien and unrecognisable to many of the
executives who have to manage marketing for real". Professor Michael Thomas
(1995, p. xxv), a pillar of the UK marketing establishment, opens his recent 646-
page compendium of marketing theory and practice, not with a declaration of
faith or an oath of allegiance to the cause, but with the rhetorical, quasi-
eschatological question, "is marketing facing a mid-life crisis?" And, after
summarizing the parlous state of marketing research, Brownlie et al. (1994, p. 8)
conclude that "marketing as a domain of knowledge and practice is itself
becoming as myopic, complacent and inward looking as all the once great but
now defunct myopic companies. Is the end of marketing as we once knew it in
sight?"
Regardless of whether one shares the doubters' belief that we live in a dystopian marketing world of disruption, disorder and despair, a disenchanted marketing world in which rationality is deemed irrational and the ambiguous unambiguous, a postmodern marketing world characterized by crisis, chaos and the impending crack of doom, the question still has to be asked: why do many marketers feel this way, and why now? Clearly, part of the answer lies in the apparent turbulence of the contemporary socio-economic environment (Drucker, 1993; Handy, 1994; Naisbitt, 1994; Toffler, 1993). In a paradoxical marketing milieu where organizations are exhorted to be both global and local, centralized and decentralized, large and small, planned yet flexible, and are expected to serve mass and niche markets, with standardized and customized products, at premium and penetration prices, through restricted and extensive distribution networks and supported by national yet targeted promotional campaigns, it is perhaps not surprising that the traditional, linear, step-by-step marketing model of analysis, planning, implementation and control no longer seems applicable or appropriate.

Another, somewhat insidious yet no less pervasive, factor is the broader intellectual climate, the Zeitgeist, the almost palpable air of despondency, lassitude, stasis and melancholia that characterizes the current fin de siècle. Fins de siècle, as Kermode (1995), Kumar (1995), Showalter (1991) and Mestrovic (1991) among others have shown, are entirely arbitrary calendrical artefacts - Judeo-Christian calendrical artefacts - and there is no logical reason why they should be imbued with eschatological expectations. Yet they are and long have been, though the year AD 1000 was a surprising exception to the rule (Mann, 1992; Rubinski and Wiseman, 1982). In fact, a glance across the extant intellectual landscape, with its seemingly limitless array of "ends" - history, economics, philosophy, ideology, truth, man, reason, nature, art, psychoanalysis, modernity, grand narratives, to name but the most prominent - demonstrates that marketing is just one among many academic specialisms seemingly bent on chiliastic self-destruction.

In addition to environmental upheaval and the characteristic ennui and enervation associated with the late twentieth century - academic marketing, remember, is also in the throes of its own fin de siècle - the eschatological current in contemporary marketing scholarship cannot be divorced from intra-disciplinary political manoeuvring. Although some people like to think of marketing as an aspirant science, abiding by the Mertonian norms of disinterestedness, collegiality and the rigorous pursuit of objective knowledge, the extensive sociological investigations of scientific endeavour clearly demonstrate that the practice of science itself is incurably political and self-serving (e.g. Pickering, 1992; Woolgar, 1988). In these circumstances, only the most naïve Utopian would conclude that academic marketing is any different from or somehow more scientific than science. Indeed, as noted earlier, studies of millenarian movements have emphasized their highly politicized nature, in that they invariably involve a group of discontented, marginalized and, as often
as not, rabid revolutionaries who set out to seize the reins of power and thereby establish their eschatologically informed vision of a New Jerusalem (Cohn, 1970; Hamilton, 1995). Similarly, analyses of avant-garde movements in the arts demonstrate that the engineering of some sort of "crisis" or radical break (often involving the coining, or use, of new terminologies) is vitally necessary for the "outsider" or challenging group, as is a vitriolic response from the "establishment" (Bürger, 1984; Elias and Scotson, 1994; Featherstone, 1991). Not only does the latter help provide the emergent group with a sense of cohesion and purpose, but the ensuing process of accommodation eventually places the (usually) younger generation of radicals at the centre of power as the establishment ages and disengages. Given this time-honoured tendency, it is necessary to pose the uncomfortable yet all-important politically grounded questions: who exactly are the marketing eschatologists? Why are they marketing eschatology? What does the end of marketing mean for them?

Existential
Announcing that the end of marketing is nigh, or drawing ostentatious attention to marketing's mid-life crisis (which can perhaps best be described as eschatology's kid brother), has very clear political implications for the discipline as it is presently constituted. It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that latter-day attempts to rethink the nature of marketing thinking are motivated purely by self-aggrandizement and careerism. Although this may be true of certain unscrupulous individuals - mentioning no names! - the renowned literary critic Harold Bloom (1973) contends that the underlying rhythm within intellectual life is one of Oedipal "belatedness", where putative thinkers intuitively position themselves in opposition to their predecessors. In effect, it is only by setting up a semi-structuralist dichotomy that the newcomers' contributions can derive any semblance of meaning. "Poetry", as Said (1995, p. 272) has recently stressed, "is an antithetical art, since what poets do is to write against their antecedents".

More specifically, Kermode (1967, 1995) draws attention to the fact that eschatological expectations, what he terms "the sense of an ending", have been part and parcel of the human condition since the very dawn of civilization (or, as far as Cohn (1993) is concerned, since the advent of the Zoroastrianism, c. 1500 BCE). Every generation, so it seems, lives in times of "crisis", of transgression, of iniquity, of the imminence – not to say immanence – of the end. Whether it be the Baudrillard, Jamesons and Blooms of the 1990s, the Foucaults, Bells and Grahams of the 1960s, the Eliots, Pounds and Spenglers of the 1930s or the Nordaus, Huysmans and Marmallés of the previous fin de siècle, it appears that creative thinkers and intellectuals in the western tradition are addicted to the end[3]. They are apocaholics. Isn't it remarkable, Kermode (1995, p. 261) wryly concludes that ends, crises, transitions and the like seem to occur "at the very moment when Foucault, or whoever, happened to be around to witness and explain it".
Although it is tempting to be dismissive about expectations of the end, the notion of perpetual apocalypse and constant crises cannot fail to strike a chord with observers of marketing scholarship. The entire history of post-war marketing research, after all, has been punctuated with quasi-eschatological ruminations. Approximately 35 years ago, for example, Bartels (1962) was discussing the then “crisis” in marketing. Twenty-five years or so ago Fisk (1971) was saying something similar. And, 15-odd years ago Bennett and Cooper (1981) were also crying crisis, as, to name but three latter-day prophets, have Austen (1983), Mueller-Heumann (1986) and Wensley (1994). True, declarations of the end of marketing have been thin on the ground before now, but this is probably attributable to the proximity of the millennium – tarred as it is with what Focillon terms “centurial mysticism” – which offers an almost irresistible apocalyptic angle for crisis-concocting academic opportunists.

Eschatology and its analogues may always be with us, but how can we make sense of this sense of an ending? Kermode (1967, 1995) contends that it is a fundamental correlate of the human condition. Human beings require consonance, they need things to make sense and are predisposed to impose structure on the existential flux, chaos and fragmentation of our daily lives. The idea that we live within a sequence of events between which there is no relation, pattern, progression or mutuality is simply unthinkable. Hence, humankind is inclined to foist a beginning, middle and end on time, whether it be in terms of the changing of the seasons, the storyline of a novel (from once-upon-a-time to happily-ever-after) or the mundane ticking of a clock (tick-tock being a complete narrative, as opposed to the unending succession that is tick-tick-tick). Just as our individual lives have a clearly discernible plot structure, so too “we project our existential anxieties on to history” (Campion, 1994, p. 346), “we hunger for ends and for crises” (Kermode, 1967, p. 55), we cannot avoid “a certain metaphysical valorisation of human existence” (Eliade, 1989, p. vii).

I am alpha and omega
In his recent discussion of endings and beginnings, Kumar (1995, p. 204) dismisses millenarian movements with the words: “Doomsayers can be found at any time and place. It is an amusing intellectual game to place earlier prophecies of the end of the world against any current crop of expectations. They can generally be made to sound uncannily apt.” Indeed, he goes on to quote an eloquent disquisition on natural calamities, human misdeeds and diverse portents of the end – which could have been written yesterday – from the teachings of St Augustine in the fifth century CE. Wheen (1995, p. 31), likewise, concludes his historical synopsis “Apocalypse Then” with the generous suggestion that “viewed from a distance, gibberish of this kind can seem faintly amusing – endearing, even”.

Whether one sides with such sceptics, or sees merit in Eliade’s (1989) argument that humanity’s seemingly insatiable desire for endings is actually a sign of optimism (in so far as the prospect of redemption and renewal enables
people to cope with the trials, tribulations and torments of their quotidian existence), there is no question that eschatological sentiments are very widespread at present, both in everyday life and the academic arena. The former is exemplified by burgeoning numbers of sects, cults and often highly volatile, new religious movements (NRM) in the industrial societies of the western world (Cotton, 1995; Hamilton, 1995; Weiss, 1995). The latter is epitomized by the rise of postmodernism, with its emphasis on endings of one kind or another. Aply described by Mestrovic (1994, p. 1) as “a fun version of the apocalypse”, the postmodern condition has afflicted the A to Z of academic disciplines, marketing among them (Firat et al., 1993, 1995). In fact, for many extra-marketing commentators, the practice (if not the principles) of contemporary marketing represents the apotheosis of the postmodern movement (Brown, 1995a).

It is no accident, then, that many of the attendees at the Marketing Eschatology Retreat were individuals closely associated with, or sympathetic towards, the postmodern, post-positivist, post-everything, post-early-for-Christmas wing of marketing thought. No doubt for some mainstream marketers, the gathering comprised a fine example of what Bull (1995, p. 6) considers to be “the damned celebrating their own damnation”. For others, this outbreak of marketing millennialism is a sure sign of the ultimate failure of the post-positivist “revolution”, which was precipitated ten years ago by Belk, Holbrook, Hirschman and their manifold followers. After all, as demonstrated by the Ghost Dance phenomenon of late-nineteenth century Native Americans, the Cargo Cults of mid-twentieth century Melanesians, or the periodic revival of the Inkarri myth in South America, apocalypticism is often a sign of despair, of desperation, of an escape into otherworldliness and anti-authoritarianism by the disaffected, the downtrodden, the defeated.

Yet others, of course, might conclude that marketing eschatology, in all its diverse manifestations, is a worthwhile scholarly venture. Perhaps there really is a new day dawning this time; perhaps a better informed world of marketing theory and practice is tantalizingly close; perhaps a golden age of genuine marketing understanding is glimmering on the horizon. Perhaps...

Notes

1. The Rapture, according to pre-millennialist dogma, is the moment when all true believers, the redeemed, rise into the air (literally) to meet Jesus Christ on his reappearance. The social and economic consequences that ensue – driverless motor vehicles, pilotless aircraft, parentless children, bursting graves, etc. – can only be imagined.

2. There is more to this example than the Sex Pistols’ notorious anti-authoritarianism. John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten), the lead singer of the Sex Pistols, was a “creation” of Malcolm McLaren, who was also closely associated with the English publication of texts by the Situationist International, led by Guy “society of the spectacle” Debord. The Situationists, in turn, were very heavily influenced by Cohn’s (1970, original 1957) classic study of medieval millennial movements The Pursuit of the Millennium, which includes the story of John of Leyden, a sixteenth-century Anabaptist who proclaimed himself “King of the New Jerusalem”. As Bull (1995, p. 5) suggestively notes, the relationship between John Lydon and John of Leyden “may be more than phonie”.


3. To cite but three examples from Kermode’s (1995) extensive list: excited by news of the September 1895 tribulations in Venezuela, Yeats invited a friend to “come and see me on Monday and have tea and perhaps divine for Armageddon”; Wittgenstein’s preface to his Philosophical Investigations of 1953 notes that he is writing in “a time of darkness”; and, D.H. Lawrence went out of his way to include apocalyptic prophecies into a school history book that he wrote under a pseudonym in 1921.

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