

# Harold Camping and the Second Stillborn Apocalypse

Edmund D. Cohen

**R**adio evangelist Harold Camping, who predicted that the Second Coming would occur in September 1994, is now positive it will take place on May 21, 2011. Sixteen years ago—in the Winter 1994/95 issue of *Free Inquiry*—I reported on that earlier apocalyptic date-setting episode (that article is now available on [www.secularhumanism.org](http://www.secularhumanism.org)). What follows is an update that takes the story from the failure of that doomsday prediction to the “home stretch” phase of its sequel, now in progress.

In 1994, I facetiously observed that Camping had seemed to achieve something that has long eluded secularists and skeptics: he derived a testable proposition from the Bible, and its failure militated toward proving Bible truth claims false. Although he displayed much more confidence in that prediction at the time than he now lets on, he never claimed that it rose to the level of a formal proof. He left himself enough leeway to continue defending the premise after the prediction went bad. I was surprised—as he, himself, must have been—at how mild the backlash was and how readily his supporters allowed him to continue on, as if the 1994 date-setting fiasco had never happened.

This time, Camping emphatically proclaims that the prediction does rise to the level of a proof, Q.E.D. He insists it is impossible for Judgment Day not to occur on May 21, 2011, and that the question is not even worth discussing. Whereas his first date-setting episode was able to expire with a whimper, this one cannot but become a watershed for Camping and his broadcasting empire.

Over the intervening sixteen years, his Family Radio has “increased” to comprise fifty “parent” listener-supported radio stations in the United States, each with its complement of range-extending translators. The network now has a “footprint” comparable to National Public Radio. Camping’s flagship *Open Forum* call-in show has moved up to the 8:30 to 10:00 P.M. E.D.T. time slot, Monday through Friday. Family Radio has emerged as the preeminent Christian international shortwave broadcaster. The prophecy is on the air in sixty-one regional and local foreign languages. Internet streaming and tract literature further extend the message’s long reach.

Little appears to have changed with Camping himself. At age eighty-nine—thirteen years senior to Larry King—he skillfully fills at

least two hours of airtime each weekday and manages his broadcast empire as he has done for fifty-two years. His process in arriving at the May 21, 2011, prophecy is a direct extension of his earlier work. That makes his contention that this prediction rests on formal proof, whereas the earlier one did not, mystifying. In all other respects, however, his hermeneutic has changed profoundly.

Intricate and ingenious though they are, it is not useful to delve too deeply into the voluminous chronological calculations behind the Judgment Day predictions. The first time around, Camping had arrived at May 21, 1988, as the day when the church age ended and the final tribulation began. Because 1994 was the first jubilee year after that, Camping focused on it as the likely year for Judgment Day. Dates with Old Testament ceremonial significance during that year—especially in September—became possible alternatives.

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Because twenty-three years—8,400 days—is the longer of the two possible durations for the tribulation, Camping scrutinized May 21, 2011 (which falls on a Saturday—the seventh day, the last day of the week) as a promising alternative after the 1994 dates had come and gone. He had mentioned 2011 in passing as a possible alternative year as far back as in his book *1994?*, published in 1992. The most interesting of the number-of-years connections that fall into place around 2011 is the exactly 7,000 years since 4990 B.C.E., the year he had previously ascertained for Noah’s flood: God gave Noah seven days’ notice of the flood, and “one day is with the LORD as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Camping also sets great store by a complex calculation involving the symbolism of the numbers 3, 5, 10, 17, and 23 and the scientifically respectable value of 365.2422 days in a year, to produce 722,500 days: the exact number of days from April 1, 33 C.E.—Crucifixion day—to May 21, 2011.

After the Rapture takes place on that day, Earth will supposedly continue as an apocalyptic killing field, still peopled by the surviving unsaved, for 153 days. On the "last day"—October 21, 2011 (a Friday)—the present universe is to be incinerated and supplanted by new heavens and a new Earth.

Teaching that the church age ended on May 21, 1988, inevitably puts Camping at odds with the rest of the fundamentalist Christian church establishment. From his radio pulpit, Camping thunders that all organized churches have been under Satan's rule from that day forward. He exhorts true believers to quit them. True believers acquire an urgent, sacred duty to join with Camping, warning the world of the oncoming apocalypse. Failure to see the "truth" in the prophecy calls into question whether or not an individual is saved. Camping strenuously resists the obvious implication that only followers of his will qualify to be raptured. (He estimates the number of the saved to be approximately one out of seventy of the people who have ever lived.) He often talks about the teachers and believers who have arrived at the May 21 prediction independently of him. Inconveniently for him, there happen to be no such persons.

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During the forty-eight years, give or take, when Camping was not engaged in a date-setting episode and just taught the Bible, he did so with commendable objectivity. He debunked interpretations that perceived the Bible to be about social justice on Earth, meeting the physical needs of the poor, prosperity, happiness, bodily healing, taking over government, and the like. At Camping's hands, the bleakness and severity of the Bible's core message of sin and stratified salvation came across intact and undiluted. It replicated what receiving biblical counseling from John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, John Bunyan, or Cotton Mather must have been like.

Like all Christian fundamentalists in the 1960s and 1970s, Camping reflected Francis Schaeffer's aspiration to see a generation of fundamentalist Christian intellectuals arise who would develop a biblical *Weltanschauung*—a biblical "worldview"—that could subsume all valid human knowledge. Camping presented a plausible appearance of carrying that aspiration forward. Hardly anyone else did more than pay lip service to it or recite it as a future good intention.

It seems as though Camping wore himself out with that laborious, doomed effort. Isolated from anyone who could be regard-

ed as his peer, he has transmuted into a wholesale revisionist, downplaying and even discarding large hunks of his own previous Calvinist doctrine. His study of the Bible, for all its continuing detailed finesse, has devolved into figuring out how to massage the language so as to allow the conclusions he wishes to reach. Whereas he used to attempt to synthesize all that the Bible has to say—declarative content as well as allegorical, figurative as well as literal—into a unified whole, Camping has now opted for a more limited, piecemeal, minimalist approach. He now reads the descriptive content found in the Bible's prophetic visions, parables, and even the poetry as pertaining exclusively to the salvation plan. Having so long stood out as a commentator who refrained from projecting his own character onto his teaching, Camping has now replaced much of the Bible's angry, menacing, sadomasochistic lore with his own benign, kindly, American-bred impulses.

These changes in tack revolutionize his views about life after death. Because Camping professes agnosticism regarding knowing any more about that subject than the Bible's sparse declarative statements reveal, he discards eternal punishment altogether.

"Eternal fire," he argues, refers to fire that incinerates totally and finally, not fire that goes on burning forever. Otherwise, tourists would be able to visit eternal fires still smoldering at the sites of Sodom and Gomorrah. He makes the "death" that is declared to be the "wages of sin" out to be merely that—never again having conscious existence. Sometimes a death is just a death.

Camping now resolves the tension between scriptures stating that who will become saved was determined "before the foundation of the world" and ones that apparently leave it to be determined during the believer's lifetime plainly in favor of the former—

so much so that he now sees the Crucifixion and Resurrection as pantomimic demonstrations carried out for the sake of the biblical narrative, not redemptive events taking place in real time.

All that makes for a Judgment Day scenario weirdly unlike previous ones: in a worldwide earthquake, all the graves spring open, ejecting the remains of all the people who have ever died. The unsaved dead never resume conscious existence. Nothing resembling a judicial proceeding need take place on Judgment Day because everything has literally been decided forever. The worst that Judgment Day holds for the deceased unsaved is desecration of their remains, because they have become forever mercifully unaware. (Romans 14:10–12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 are scriptures Camping must massage particularly heavily in order to harmonize them with this scenario.)

The saved, both living and dead, are caught up in the Rapture. They receive their new, glorified bodies at that point. (Their condition during the 153 days before the new heavens and Earth are ready goes unexplained.) The living unsaved are left behind, in a world crippled by the earthquake catastrophe and the sudden disappearance of all the living saved. Camping speculates that few on Earth are likely to survive the first few days of that tumult.

To their credit, Christian fundamentalists by and large have not bought into the May 21 belief. It has barely penetrated beyond Camping's personal following. The larger fundamentalist Christian community ignores it, preferring to regard it as irrelevant. So—what is this extravagant fable really about? Why is Camping doing this? Why now? Is there a payday in it for anyone? Could Camping be a fundamentalist-Christian Max Bialystock, with hidden motives for guiding his Family Radio empire to suffer a surefire flop?

Camping admits that even Family Radio's staff is divided on the May 21 question. (That staff recently decided against publishing a 2011 Family Radio pocket calendar after discussing the ramifications of publishing one ending on May 21 or October 21.) The prophecy is so facially preposterous that anyone damaged by relying upon it will have little prospect of convincing a court that the reliance was reasonable. Around the world, unassuming people in poorer countries and speaking only local languages are hearing the prophecy of the world's 2011 doom broadcast from the exalted U.S.A. That is hardly calculated to increase America's prestige—much less that of the Christian gospel—in their eyes. No media evangelism pitch could possibly give its public less reason to contribute than this one does. It has no donor exploitation angle. Following the money leads nowhere. This is a story about madness, not venality. The answers, if any, are psychological.

My clearest recurring impression of Camping is his deep, unspoken longing that his way of life—wandering obsessively in circles in the Bible's semantic wilderness—will be concluded, finished, ruled out for succeeding generations. In 1994, I speculated that he unconsciously desired to trigger a scandal to discourage others from squandering their lives enmeshed in the futility of Bible-belief in the way he had. No one would have expected Family Radio's listenership to prove so long-suffering that it would simply disregard the episode and continue on blithely as if nothing had happened. Perhaps that constituency has something to teach the rest of us about tolerance for eccentricity. Long live freedom of speech!


By declaring certainty and approving a publicity campaign (with billboards, print-media advertising, missionary junkets, and touring RV caravans), Camping has raised the stakes. It is as if he were deliberately tweaking the noses of the rest of the fundamentalist Christian establishment and the public, seeking to goad us all to react.

Such a motive would also explain Camping's uncharacteristic foray into gay-bashing. Over all these years, he has never been given to "hot button" rhetoric. His current tract, *Gay Pride: Planned by God as a Sign of the End* is, however, a full-throated piece of hate literature. It was published under Camping's name, even though comparably short Family Radio tracts are usually unattributed. It is nothing but an attention-getting stunt in terri-

ble taste. I see it as Camping's version of *Springtime for Hitler*. How much more outrageous must Camping become in order to provoke an outcry?

The key to the whole ungainly story could lie in Camping's stance toward natural science. In recent years, the terminology of formal, numerical proof has cropped up more and more in his parlance. It is easy to detect the frustrated quantitative scientist behind all that fastidious analysis of biblical chronology. How much more satisfying could he have found a life devoted to investigating something real? What a productive natural scientist this man—with his meticulous attention to detail, facility with numbers, and capacity for hard work—might have become had he been influenced toward higher academic aspirations in his youth. He has never really seemed to relish science-versus-religion polemics. He "protests too much" when he lambastes and caricatures scientists. Sometimes on *Open Forum*, he perfunctorily recites stock "intelligent design" talking points. What sour grapes. Could that be what is really amiss in his life without his even being aware? These date-setting episodes are all about what happens when a brilliant person's urge to be creative and original is repressed. It crops out self-destructively.

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Camping is poised to succeed in bringing a high-profile media crucifixion upon himself. Most likely, he will find himself hastily trying to walk the prophecy back at the moment of truth. He has done that before. He might even be able to ease things back to *status quo ante* a second time. He can always appoint his own hundredth birthday as the next scheduled apocalypse. For him to face up to his obligation—incurred on precisely his own terms—to concede that he has unwittingly adduced evidence of the falsity of Bible truth claims is doubtless too much to hope for. We might as well enjoy the show. 

Edmund D. Cohen is the author of *The Mind of the Bible-Believer* (Prometheus Books, 1988). He has been a frequent contributor to FREE INQUIRY for twenty-five years.