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

*Robert Wuthnow*

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**Robert Wuthnow : Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation,

## Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats:

0 of 5 people found the following review helpful. This book is really good  
By Gregory A. Shelton  
This book is well researched -- the author is an expert in the sociology of fear. The illustrations add to the text.

In *Be Very Afraid*, Robert Wuthnow examines the human response to existential threats--once a matter for theology, but now looming before us in multiple forms. Nuclear weapons, pandemics, global warming: each threatens to destroy the planet, or at least to annihilate our species. Freud, he notes, famously taught that the standard psychological response to an overwhelming danger is denial. In fact, Wuthnow writes, the opposite is true: we seek ways of positively meeting the threat, of doing something--anything--even if it's wasteful and time-consuming. It would be one thing if our responses were merely pointless, he observes, but they can actually be harmful. Both the public and policymakers tend to model reactions to grave threats on how we met previous ones. Offering insight into our responses to everything from *An Inconvenient Truth* to the bird and swine flu epidemics, Wuthnow provides a profound new understanding of the human reaction to existential vulnerability.

From *Publishers Weekly*  
Wuthnow (*American Mythos*) surveys the cultural response to the prospect of devastation, even annihilation in this provocative if uneven study. Relying on government reports, scientific studies, poll results, novels and films, and extensive interviews, the author examines the response of Americans to a series of apocalyptic threats since WWII: nuclear holocaust, pandemic influenza, terrorism, and global warming. He categorically dismisses suggestions that denial and immobilization have been the default responses of Americans facing disaster and argues instead that we have responded quite aggressively. The great outpouring of cultural activity in the face of these crises suggests our propensity to creatively search for solutions, not to be paralyzed by fear. But given their daunting scope and complexity, individual action has largely yielded to collective action, and these crises have essentially become institutionalized in large-scale organizations like the Department of Homeland Security. A solidly resourced, cogently analyzed, and persuasively argued brief. (Apr.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "A solidly resourced, cogently analyzed, and persuasively argued brief."--*Publishers Weekly*  
"Wuthnow considers the range of huge hazards that Americans have faced and asks, how have we responded? His answers are nuanced, penetrating, and wide-ranging. A fascinating intellectual journey led by a truly creative mind."--Lee Clarke, author of *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster and Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination*  
"In this carefully researched and subtly rendered sociological history, Wuthnow demonstrates that fear about great social dangers has been central to modern American life. Americans have responded to these fears with neither panic nor denial but with culture. By making fears meaningful, they have made sense out of them, and made action against them possible. There is wisdom here."--Jeffrey C. Alexander, author of *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*  
About the Author  
Robert Wuthnow is the Gerhard R. Andlinger '52 Professor of Sociology at Princeton University.