The world will definitely not come to an end on Dec. 21, 2012, regardless of the Mayan Calendar. There's no planetary Rapture in the near future, despite the wishful thinking of an apocalyptic few. For at least another billion years, Earth will spin, the sun will shine and all God's creatures will struggle against the entropy of tranquility. Thus it is written in the record of the rocks, the linear geological calendar that's been ticking for 4.55 billion years.

Having run the lance of truth through the dragon of ignorance, the citizen-scientist in me feels as if he's done his good deed for the day. The rest of me, however, still worries about the one in 10 Americans who believe the world will come to an end in their lifetime. And those who are vulnerable to anxiety as the winter solstice approaches.

To research this column, I began by googling: "end of world." At the top of the page was the lead story, "End of the World Confirmed," posted by the "Weekly World News: The World's Only Reliable News." This, of course, is bogus news from a bogus Internet site. But its top ranking raises the question: What gives this piece of info-garbage its strong cultural purchase? The answer must be the apocalyptic tradition embedded within the three great Abrahamic religions: Judaism with its messianic "end of days;" Christianity with its second coming of Christ as told by the Book of Revelations; and Islam with its "Yawm ad-Din," or Day of Judgment. These looming finalities are completely logical corollaries of such linear cosmologies. Any line of history, regardless of whether it's scriptural or secular, cannot go on forever. It must have a beginning. And it must have an end.

In contrast, the Mayan Calendar was (and is) emphatically based on a cyclical view of time. Each long-count cycle, called a "baktun," is 394 years long. Since the calendar began in 2144 B.C., there have been 13 baktuns. The present one will end on this year's winter solstice, Dec. 21. At that point, the calendar will re-set like an automobile odometer turning past 100,000 miles. On the other side is not the end of the car or a different reality, but the beginning a new long-term cycle. Nothing more.

More than 60 years ago, a historian of religion named Mircea Eliade published a path-breaking book titled "Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History" in its 1954 translation from French. In his view, primal religions were based on the cyclical calendars of planetary spins and orbital revolutions, and the passing of one human generation or dynasty into another. Based on direct experience, they -- along with early Hindu and Greek cosmologies -- banished the straight arrow of extended history that is an article of faith for the Abrahamic religions.

Forcing the eschatology of linear history onto the cyclical Mayan Calendar violates their culture. This is equivalent to saying to a Jew, Christian or Muslim that no savior will ever return to save our souls. Mayan elders are justifiably angered to see their religion so distorted because their ancient glyphs contain no doomsday prophesies, and they confirm that events took place before the beginning of their calendar and will do so after the final turn of the baktun odometer.

Immediately below the top-ranked bogus news story was a NASA information website (www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html) dedicated to debunking such tabloid junk. It reports no imagined planets heading our way on a collision course, no signs of any potential explosion of Earth and no indication whatsoever of an impending geo-magnetic reversal. In short, these federal employees assure you that nothing unusual is in the works.

Though I'm thankful the NASA site is there, and appreciate its quality, its mere existence reminds me that the battle to separate church and state in this country will never be over.