

## APOCALYPSE WITHOUT GOD

Apocalypse, it seems, is everywhere. Preachers with vast followings proclaim the world's end. Apocalyptic fears grip even the nonreligious amid climate change, pandemics, and threats of nuclear war. As these ideas pervade popular discourse, grasping their logic remains elusive. Ben Jones argues that we can gain insight into apocalyptic thought through secular thinkers. He starts with a puzzle: Why would secular thinkers draw on Christian apocalyptic beliefs – often dismissed as bizarre – to interpret politics? The apocalyptic tradition proves appealing in part because it theorizes a relation between crisis and utopia. Apocalyptic thought points to crisis as the vehicle to bring the previously impossible within reach, offering resources for navigating challenges in ideal theory, which involves imagining the best, most just society. By examining apocalyptic thought's appeal and risks, this study arrives at new insights on the limits of utopian hope. This title is available as open access on Cambridge Core.

Ben Jones is the Assistant Director of Penn State's Rock Ethics Institute and has a Ph.D. in political science from Yale University. His research has appeared in *the Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and other venues, including popular outlets like *The Washington Post*.

# Apocalypse without God

APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT, IDEAL POLITICS,  
AND THE LIMITS OF UTOPIAN HOPE

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*For Peggy Jones, my mother, who first taught me how to hope*

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## Preface

Apocalypse, it seems, is everywhere. Preachers with vast followings proclaim that the world will soon end. Motivated by apocalyptic visions, terrorist groups carry out acts of unspeakable violence. Apocalyptic fears even grip the non-religious faced with the dangers of climate change, deadly pandemics, and nuclear war. But as apocalyptic ideas pervade popular discourse, grasping their logic remains elusive. They increasingly have become disconnected from the religious traditions in which they arose, obscuring the hopes and anxieties that first gave birth to them.

*Apocalypse without God* argues that we can gain insight into apocalyptic thought by studying it through the eyes of secular thinkers. It starts with a puzzle: Why would secular thinkers find in Christian apocalyptic beliefs – often dismissed as bizarre – appealing tools for interpreting politics? To answer that question, it examines how three theorists with secular conceptions of politics – Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels – engage with Christian apocalyptic thought and how such thought still influences politics today. The apocalyptic tradition proves appealing, in part, because it theorizes a special relation between crisis and utopia. A persistent challenge in political philosophy is imagining a path from the imperfect present to the seemingly unattainable ideal society. To solve this challenge, apocalyptic thought points to crisis as the vehicle that creates new opportunities and brings the previously impossible within reach.

Though apocalyptic thought brings to mind doomsday visions, its appeal for political philosophy lies just as much in its visions of utopia. Apocalyptic thought offers apparent resources for navigating challenges that arise in ideal theory, which tries to imagine the best and most just society. By examining apocalyptic thought's appeal and risks, this study ultimately arrives at new insights on the limits of ideal theory and utopian hope.



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Research for this book began during my time in graduate school at Yale University. There Karuna Mantena and Steven Smith provided helpful feedback and guidance from the start when I was just brainstorming ideas. I also benefited from conversations with John Collins and John Grim, whose wealth of knowledge on religion proved invaluable. I am especially grateful to Bryan Garsten who advised my dissertation, which through much transformation eventually became this book. The Beinecke Scholarship Program deserves special thanks for helping fund my graduate studies during early work on this project.

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Sheila Denion proofread the entire manuscript, and I greatly appreciate her assistance and attention to detail. Chapter 4 benefited from conversations and correspondence with Patrick Callahan, Harro Höpfl, Al Martinich, and Stefania Tutino. That chapter partly draws on arguments from my article “The Natural Kingdom of God in Hobbes’s Political Thought,” *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 3 (2019): 436–53, © 2018 Taylor & Francis, available online: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/01916599.2018.1548810](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/01916599.2018.1548810).

I presented research from this project at a number of venues: the New England Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2015), American Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2015 and 2016), Great Plains

Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2015), American Philosophical Association Eastern Meeting (2017), Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas (2017), Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2017), Midwest Political Science Association Conference (2018), and Moral Agency Workshop at Penn State (2020). Those audiences introduced me to new perspectives and pushed me to develop what hopefully is a more compelling account of apocalyptic thought's relationship to politics.

Sections of Part I, in particular much of Chapter 2, previously appeared in my article "The Challenges of Ideal Theory and Appeal of Secular Apocalyptic Thought," *European Journal of Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (2020): 465–88, © 2017 Ben Jones, DOI: 10.1177/1474885117722074. The review process for that article played a key role in sharpening the book's argument. I am grateful to the journal's editors and two anonymous reviewers for the care they showed in evaluating the manuscript and for their detailed suggestions.

At Cambridge University Press, I have been fortunate to have a terrific editor in Robert Dreesen. His guidance helped transform my manuscript into the book you see today and improve it in countless ways. Two anonymous reviewers offered extensive and valuable suggestions, which helped bring the different strands of my argument together in more cogent form. I am thankful to the reviewers, Robert, and the rest of the team at Cambridge University Press for their significant investments in the project.

I completed work on this book at the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State, which provided a rich intellectual environment and could not have been more supportive. Ted Toadvine, the institute's director, deserves special thanks for his encouragement and sage recommendations. A grant from the TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem) Initiative at Penn State made this book available in an open access edition. I am thankful for that generous support, and in particular to Ally Laird of the Penn State University Libraries for all the help she provided in answering questions about the grant and application process.

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