

Book Talk:

*Apocalypse without God: Apocalyptic Thought, Ideal Politics, and the Limits of Utopian Hope*

by Ben Jones (2022, Cambridge University Press)

Author's Reply by Ben Jones (btj7@psu.edu)

Rock Ethics Institute at the Pennsylvania State University

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I am grateful to Professor Claeys for his careful and thoughtful response to *Apocalypse without God*. Informed by his expansive knowledge of utopian thought, he offers a nuanced account of the book's contributions to ongoing debates related to this literature. In particular, I have a keen interest in the connections that Claeys makes between the book's themes and the climate crisis. An earlier version of the book manuscript had a chapter on apocalyptic thought in the environmental movement, but it ended up not being part of the final version due to space constraints and suggestions raised during the review process. So I welcome the opportunity to discuss here, albeit briefly, some of the book's implications for responding to the climate crisis.

*Apocalypse without God* advances three main arguments—one methodological, one interpretive, and one normative. It raises concerns with overly broad conceptions of apocalypse that equate it with any sort of catastrophe and are commonplace in academic scholarship. To put the study of secular apocalyptic thought on firmer ground, the book makes a methodological recommendation: there must be explicit references to religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or concepts in a secular thinker's work to claim that apocalyptic influences are present. Some secular thinkers do express explicit interest in and see value in apocalyptic thought, which on its

face is puzzling. After all, apocalyptic doctrines are often viewed as the most bizarre elements of religious belief, so why do they have persistent appeal in politics for secular thinkers? The book offers an interpretive argument to explain why: apocalyptic thought's appeal partly lies in offering apparent resources to navigate challenges in ideal or utopian theory. Such theorizing frequently aims for goals in tension with one another—outlining an ideal that is both utopian and feasible. Apocalyptic thought, at least certain varieties, seeks to resolve that tension by embracing a thoroughly utopian ideal with considerable appeal while identifying crisis as the path to bring the seemingly impossible within reach. Lastly, the book suggests that the apocalyptic tradition offers normative insights for ideal or utopian theorizing in political philosophy today. To guard against the danger of trying to realize utopia through force, one strand of the apocalyptic tradition fosters epistemic humility. It holds on to utopian hope but stresses human ignorance of utopia and how to bring it about. The close of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan in Goray*—a fictional account of the apocalyptic figure Sabbatai Zevi—embodies that idea: “Let none attempt to force the Lord: To end our Pain within the world: The Messiah will come in God's own time: And free men of despair and crime” (160). Such epistemic humility, I argue, holds potential wisdom in a world marked by deep uncertainty.

It is my normative argument that draws much of Claeys's attention, especially in his discussion of the book's relevance to the current climate crisis. In my account, faith is an inescapable element of utopian hope. The world's immense complexity and human limitations preclude reliably accurate predictions of the range of future scientific, technological, economic, and political developments and the possibilities they bring. Given such uncertainty, we can have faith that utopia—the most perfect and just society possible—will one day come but cannot offer plausible grounds that it will be achieved nor that a particular vision of society represents the

ideal to strive for over potential alternatives. Ideal theorizing, whether in religious or philosophical contexts, ultimately rests on hope for an ideal that goes beyond the available evidence to support it.

Though Claeys sees utopian hope's value in imagining alternative futures when confronting challenges like the climate crisis, he is more skeptical of faith's role. As we develop visions for a sustainable future, "faith can play no role in their construction," he argues in his response. "We want no messiahs, no popes of hope, to reassure us, though elements of the utopian tradition itself can do so. We want climate scientists, and climate social scientists, and activists, and journalists, to ramp up and keep up the pressure for as long as it takes." For Claeys, visions of utopia must be guided by "the most plausible and compelling climate science," not faith.

I share Claeys's view that efforts to address the climate crisis and pursue a more just and sustainable future than the one we face should be informed by the best science available. My emphasis on faith's role in utopian hope stems from the recognition that even the best science does not offer clear guidance in all cases. In Claeys's most recent book, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life after Consumerism*, he offers a number of worthy recommendations for transitioning from consumerism to sustainability. Undoubtedly, though, others equally committed to climate justice and evidence-based strategies will disagree with him at points on which interventions and policies to prioritize. Such disagreement is to be expected. Despite all the valuable knowledge that climate-related science has produced, many questions remain unsettled on how best to mobilize social change and which practices and technologies to invest most heavily in given uncertainty over their future development.

Uncertainty is not an excuse for quietism, and *Apocalypse without God* makes no such argument. Rather, it recommends epistemic humility in our visions of utopia and pursuit of them. The end of Chapter 7 emphasizes this point: “Humility teaches us to coexist with other conceptions of utopian hope that we may not fully understand and to remain open to learning from them. That openness to revision, and refusal to accept any particular vision of utopia as the final word, is what a world of deep uncertainty ultimately demands of ideal theory and utopian hope” (190).

Such guidance, in the context of the environmental as well as other social movements, cautions against inflexible visions of utopia that exclude potential allies. It is here that my normative conclusions appear most at odds with ones that Claeys reaches. For instance, in *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, Claeys is quick to reject a role for religious faith in pursuing the sustainable future that he envisions: “Religion ... encourages ‘faith’ in general, meaning belief without empirical, verifiable evidence. This fosters scepticism about science” (443). His claim seems unnecessarily divisive in the context of his overall project. Many religions have taken an active part in calling for and working for environmental justice in ways informed by both their faith and climate science. Pope Francis’s encyclical on protecting the environment, *Laudato Si’*, is one of many notable examples. We need not share others’ faith or vision of utopia for there to be opportunities to work with them toward common environmental goals. Visions of utopia that preclude such collaboration risk proving counterproductive when—as in the case of protecting the environment—large-scale collective action is needed.

In a world of unavoidable uncertainty, we all must make leaps of faith at certain points when pursuing justice. Histories of social movements bear out this point. How to act and whether a specific action will advance justice is always less clear in the moment than with the benefit of

hindsight (see, for instance, David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* on the debates over strategy in the civil rights movement). Recognizing the leaps of faith involved in pursuing justice helps guard against overconfidence, encourage critical assessment of one's vision of utopia, and make one receptive to insights offered by other perspectives on utopia and new evidence. Without such humility, utopian hope stands in danger of becoming the worst form faith can take—dogmatism.

### References

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