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The Hazards of Studying Secular Apocalyptic Thought

It is not uncommon for studies of apocalyptic thought to open with an apologetic tone. In his history of apocalyptic belief in America, *When Time Shall Be No More*, Paul Boyer starts by relating awkward encounters he had while researching the book. During his travels, Boyer's choice of reading material – popular prophecies on the rapture and Antichrist – would prompt strangers to share their predictions regarding the end times, as well as eagerly ask for his.[1] Such anecdotes reinforce the impression that the beliefs studied by scholars of apocalyptic thought are, well, a bit nutty. Some may wonder whether these beliefs are worth anyone's time. Sensing this skepticism, Boyer goes out of his way to offer a defense "for devoting so many pages to a belief system seemingly so marginal and fantastic."[2] Like Boyer, those who study apocalyptic ideas find that a hazard of their research is encountering friends and colleagues puzzled by why anyone would dedicate so much time to such a bizarre topic. Inevitably, there is skepticism to overcome in persuading others of the value of studying apocalyptic beliefs.

On that front, researchers appear to be having some success. Many disciplines – from theology to literary studies to political science – now take an interest in apocalyptic thought, and literature on the topic continues to proliferate. Apocalyptic thought's enduring influence in various secular and religious contexts, including politics, makes it difficult to dismiss as a fringe phenomenon unworthy of serious scholarship. With apocalypse seemingly everywhere, those who study it are finding audiences interested in their

[1] Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1, 11.

[2] Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 17. For a similar attempt to allay readers' skepticism, see Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xiv.

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research and its connection to contemporary challenges, such as terrorism and the threat of nuclear war.[3]

But though scholars are keen to counter skepticism about the value of studying apocalyptic thought, other hazards of their research receive less attention. In particular, there has been insufficient reflection on what methods and approaches are best for studying *secular* apocalyptic thought. The very nature of such thought poses a dilemma for researching it. On the one hand, secular apocalyptic thought departs in important ways from religious thought – after all, that is what makes it secular and distinct. On the other hand, calling secular thought "apocalyptic" implies that it retains some connection to the religious traditions that gave birth to apocalyptic ideas. These two aspects of secular apocalyptic thought exist in tension with one another and prompt the question: How strong of a connection must secular thought have with religious apocalyptic traditions for it to count as apocalyptic? When scholars fail to address this question, they end up with haphazard approaches that leave the concept of secular apocalyptic thought vague and ill defined.

More than a half century ago, two prominent theorists – Judith Shklar and Hans Blumenberg – recognized this danger.[4] They criticized the idea of secular apocalyptic thought for blurring important distinctions in the history of ideas. Rather than clarify, the concept too often functioned as a rhetorical weapon against certain ideologies. Unfortunately, the study of secular apocalyptic thought largely has proceeded as if these critiques were never raised. As a result, the concept of secular apocalyptic thought has become so expansive that it risks becoming a largely empty one with little value in tracing the development of different traditions of thought. Though there are potential strategies for overcoming Shklar's and Blumenberg's concerns, research on secular apocalyptic thought suffers so long as it ignores their critiques.

To better understand these critiques, this chapter first examines the context in which they arose. It specifically looks at some of the early pioneers who studied secular apocalyptic thought, such as Eric Voegelin, Karl Löwith, and Norman Cohn. They all took an interest in the topic during the mid-twentieth century, at a time when potent political ideologies like communism and

[3] See, e.g., Zack Beauchamp, "ISIS Is Really Obsessed with the Apocalypse," *Vox*, April 6, 2015, www.vox.com/2015/4/6/8341691/isis-apocalypse; and Alison McQueen, "How to Be a Prophet of Doom," *New York Times*, May 11, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/opinion/nuclear-doomsday-denial.html.

[4] Judith Shklar, "The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia," *Daedalus* 94, no. 2 (1965): 367–81; and Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

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Nazism prompted growing fears that apocalyptic aspirations were invading politics. For many, this research captured the disruptive political forces at the time, but it also prompted critiques from Shklar and Blumenberg. After discussing these early studies and criticisms of them, the chapter turns to more recent treatments of secular apocalyptic thought. Studies today often fall victim to the very problems Shklar and Blumenberg identify: reading into texts apocalyptic themes that are not there and using the concept as a rhetorical weapon. To address these concerns, the chapter concludes with a modest proposal. Despite its current shortcomings, research on secular apocalyptic thought has the opportunity to put itself on more solid ground. It can do so by limiting its focus to cases where religious apocalyptic thought's influence on secular thinkers is clear because they *explicitly* mention such thought and its appeal. In this way, research can avoid much of the speculation that currently leaves it vulnerable to criticism.

EARLY PIONEERS

Today there is clear interest in secular apocalyptic thought. That is evident in the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, which dedicates six of its forty-three articles to the topic "Secularization of Apocalypticism."[5] Current research on secular apocalyptic thought builds on a longer tradition going back at least to the first half of the twentieth century. There one finds burgeoning interest in secular apocalyptic thought, not coincidentally after the rise of communism and National Socialism. As these movements emerged, a number of scholars identified what they saw as apocalyptic hopes bursting into politics and taking secular form.

One of the first thinkers to bring attention to secular apocalyptic thought during this period is Voegelin. In *The Political Religions* – published in Vienna in 1938, the year Nazi Germany invaded Austria – Voegelin points to the secularization of religion, and particularly apocalyptic thought, as part of the appeal of fascist and totalitarian regimes. Apocalyptic thought helps satisfy people's desire for perfection and transcendence. When religion loses its hold, Voegelin argues, political ideologies step into the void as a source of meaning. The apocalyptic symbolism of the Middle Ages, which envisioned a perfect empire on the horizon, "lives on in the symbolism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: in . . . Marx and Engels's philosophy of history, in the

[5] John Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen Stein, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

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Third Reich of National Socialism, and in the fascist third Rome."[6] For Voegelin, apocalyptic thought takes secular form and, in the process, unleashes disruptive effects on politics.

A decade later, Löwith in his influential work *Meaning in History* draws a connection between apocalyptic thought and modern conceptions of history and politics. For many, Löwith's analysis hits closer to home because he sees apocalyptic thought's influence not only in fascist and communist ideologies but also in the widespread faith in human progress. Löwith makes the bold claim that a concept central to modernity, progress, has its roots in Jewish and Christian eschatology: "We of today, concerned with the unity of universal history and with its progress toward an ultimate goal or at least toward a 'better world,' are still in the line of prophetic and messianic monotheism; we are still Jews and Christians, however little we may think of ourselves in those terms."[7] According to Löwith, Jewish and Christian thought's conception of linear time moving toward an ideal end grounds modern understandings of history. The secularization of apocalyptic thought produces the widely held belief in human progress, while leaving many unaware of its religious heritage.

Cohn's 1957 classic *Pursuit of the Millennium* also contributed to heightened interest in secular apocalyptic thought in the mid-twentieth century. The study focuses on medieval apocalyptic sects and the chaos they caused. Cohn ends it, though, by noting similarities between these sects and revolutionary movements such as communism. Like apocalyptic sects of old, modern revolutionaries are motivated by "phantasies of a final, exterminatory struggle against 'the great ones'; and of a perfect world from which self-seeking would be for ever banished." Cohn continues: "The old religious idiom has been replaced by a secular one, and this tends to obscure what otherwise would be obvious. For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still."[8] So after detailing the death and destruction perpetrated by past apocalyptic sects and the sad ends they met, Cohn closes with a somber warning – similar threats remain with us today. His history serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers society faces when apocalyptic sects flourish.

Together, Voegelin, Löwith, and Cohn represent an earlier generation of researchers who brought attention to how apocalyptic thought becomes

[6] Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, trans. Virginia Ann Schildhauer, in *Modernity without Restraint*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 5, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2000), 52.

[7] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949), 19.

[8] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 286.

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secular and its continued influence in the modern world. But though some greeted their research with enthusiasm, it also had its critics, which we turn to next.

NEGLECTED CRITIQUES

Early researchers of secular apocalyptic thought made bold and sweeping claims about its impact. They argued that some of the most influential and disruptive forces of the twentieth century – communism and National Socialism – had apocalyptic beliefs at their core. The 1960s, though, produced two important critiques that pushed back on these claims and cast doubt on whether secular apocalyptic thought even made sense as a conceptual tool for political theorists.

The first critique comes from Shklar's 1965 essay "The Political Theory of Utopia." Here she makes the case for emphasizing distinctions rather than continuities between political ideologies and apocalyptic thought. She writes: "It has of late been suggested that the radicalism of the last century was a form of 'messianism,' of 'millennialism,' or of a transplanted eschatological consciousness." Shklar resists this claim on the grounds that political movements like communism do not make promises of eternal salvation, which for her is an essential element of millennialism.[9] She thus concludes:

> Neither the view of history as a dualistic combat of impersonal social forces nor the confident belief in a better future which would at last bring rest to mankind was a "millennial" fancy, nor was either really akin to the chiliastic religious visions that inspired . . . apocalyptic sects . . . . The desire to stress similarities, to find continuities everywhere, is not always helpful, especially in the history of ideas, where the drawing of distinctions is apt to lead one more nearly to the truth.[10]

Looking for connections between religious apocalyptic thought and secular political movements strikes Shklar as misguided – an approach liable to lead theorists astray by pushing them to make spurious links among very different traditions of thought. Her argument implies that political theorists might be better off abandoning the concept of secular apocalyptic thought altogether.

Blumenberg raises similar concerns in his book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, first published in 1966. Part I focuses on the ever-growing list of features of modernity that purportedly reflect the secularization of theological

[9] Shklar, "The Political Theory of Utopia," 376.
[10] Shklar, "The Political Theory of Utopia," 377.

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concepts. Blumenberg criticizes the loose way in which theorists apply the idea of secularization. As scholars continue to draw one tenuous connection after another, the result in his words is "secularization 'run wild.' "[11]

One of the many examples that Blumenberg objects to is the "fashionable pastime to interpret expectations of political redemption, like those typified by the *Communist Manifesto*, as secularizations either of the biblical paradise or of apocalyptic messianism."[12] In particular, Blumenberg takes issue with Löwith's characterization of the modern idea of progress as being a vestige of Jewish and Christian eschatology. According to Blumenberg, Löwith overlooks critical distinctions among different traditions of thought: "It is a formal, but for that very reason a manifest, difference that an eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it, while the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history."[13] For Blumenberg, Christian eschatology presents a dramatically different vision for the future – marked by abrupt supernatural intervention – than that offered by the idea of progress, which envisions the gradual perfecting of what is already present.[14]

In addition to sharing Shklar's concern that the concept of secular apocalyptic thought blurs important distinctions, Blumenberg makes the further critique that it often serves as a rhetorical weapon. Secularization, he writes, is among "the weapons with which the legitimacy of the modern age is attacked."[15] This line of attack argues that modern ideologies and political traditions are the "inauthentic manifestation" of religious beliefs. Though indebted to these beliefs, modernity purposefully avoids acknowledging them. That charge leaves modern political ideologies with a taint of illegitimacy that they have difficulty escaping.[16] The label "apocalyptic" undermines the legitimacy of modern ideologies by associating them with bizarre and seemingly irrational beliefs. Blumenberg worries that many claims about secularization, while popular ways to express discontent over the present, ultimately provide a misleading account of the relation between religious concepts and modern thought.[17]

[11] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 15.
[12] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 14–15.
[13] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 30.
[14] Not all scholars of eschatology would agree with this distinction by Blumenberg. See Ernest Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1949); and Theodore Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
[15] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 125.
[16] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 18.
[17] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 118–19.

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To summarize, Shklar and Blumenberg level two criticisms against the concept of secular apocalyptic thought: (1) it blurs important distinctions in the history of ideas and (2) it functions more as a rhetorical weapon against modern ideologies than as a device for clarifying their development. Their critiques identify potential dangers that can undermine the study of apocalyptic thought. To ensure the credibility of their research, scholars of secular apocalyptic thought have good reasons to address these concerns. But in practice, they rarely do. As the next section discusses, too often studies repeat the errors Shklar and Blumenberg warned against.

APOCALYPSE WITHOUT BOUNDS

In his wide-ranging study *Heaven on Earth*, Richard Landes uses the term "semiotic arousal" to describe how many with apocalyptic beliefs interpret the world. Their anticipation of the apocalypse colors everything they see. Developments near and far reinforce one another as further evidence of the coming apocalypse. Even events with little ostensible connection to the end times – at least from an outsider's perspective – take on significance for believers.[18] In short, those anxiously looking for the apocalypse can find traces of it wherever they turn.

What Landes fails to add is that those holding apocalyptic beliefs are not the only ones in a state of semiotic arousal. That description also seems apt for many scholars on the lookout for apocalyptic thought. Primed to see apocalyptic influences, they claim to find them in all sorts of unanticipated contexts. From their perspective, apocalyptic thought not only migrates into secular contexts but also pervades them. Such heightened interest among scholars has the benefit of bringing to light examples of secular apocalyptic thought previously overlooked. But it also runs the risk of drawing tenuous connections and making questionable claims about the far-reaching influence of apocalyptic thought.

Vague and overly broad conceptions of apocalyptic thought by their very nature give the impression that it is everywhere. Some scholars raise this concern, especially as more disciplines outside theology and religious studies take an interest in apocalyptic thought. "Millennialism has perhaps appeared ubiquitous," notes church historian James Moorhead, "because scholars have been reluctant to explain precisely what they mean by the term."[19] Rather than

[18] Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 14.

[19] James Moorhead, "Searching for the Millennium in America," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 8, no. 2 (1987): 22.

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provide clear criteria for what constitutes millennialism or apocalyptic thought, the trend has been to multiply their meanings. Literary critic Frank Kermode goes so far as to equate apocalypse with any sort of ending.[20] Armed with such an expansive understanding of the apocalypse, scholars can find traces of it in just about any narrative.

Indeed, it is common for scholars to adopt understandings of apocalypse that stretch its meaning. Consider Alison McQueen's recent study *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. In it she focuses on what she calls the "apocalyptic imaginary." The apocalypse is best understood as an imaginary, according to McQueen, because it emphasizes that the concept is more than just an ancient genre of literature. It persists today in images, narratives, and sets of meanings that influence how people interpret their world.[21]

On its face, that approach makes sense. Apocalyptic ideas take various forms today and are not just confined to ancient religious texts. It is important to note, though, that McQueen's characterization of apocalypse as an imaginary lowers the bar for identifying apocalyptic thought and its influence. She cautions against limiting "ourselves to overtly scriptural expression" of apocalyptic ideas when tracing their "trajectories . . . in the works of modern and purportedly secular thinkers."[22] Because its influence often operates in insidious ways, the apocalyptic imaginary "rarely rises into complete awareness by those who draw upon its resources."[23] It thus can "resonate for people with no knowledge" of apocalyptic texts like "Daniel and Revelation" in the Bible.[24]

As with all ideas and images, those derived from the apocalyptic tradition certainly can influence people in unconscious ways. But in such cases, if even the person being influenced is not aware of it, one wonders how often later interpreters will be in a better position to make that determination. More generally, in cases where individuals make no explicit reference to apocalyptic texts or figures, it can be difficult to know with any certainty whether they are in fact drawing on those sources. After all, imagery in non-apocalyptic sources – say, accounts of war – can resemble imagery in apocalyptic literature, which creates obstacles to knowing whether the former, the latter, or both influence a particular text.

[20] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Paul Corcoran, *Awaiting Apocalypse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[21] Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51–62.

[22] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 19.

[23] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 56.

[24] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 52.

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Ultimately, these obstacles do not deter McQueen and others from identifying apocalyptic thought in the midst of ambiguous evidence. Their approach certainly broadens the scope for potential research on secular apocalyptic thought, but also leaves itself vulnerable to criticisms that it relies on questionable and spurious claims.

An example from McQueen's study illustrates this point. To show apocalyptic thought's influence in politics today, McQueen points to President George W. Bush's speech announcing military strikes in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks. In the speech Bush says: "Initially, the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places. Our military action is also designed to clear the way for sustained, comprehensive and relentless operations to drive them out and bring them to justice."[25] McQueen sees in this statement coded references to Revelation 6:15–17, which speaks of God's wrath against the unrighteous at the end of time:

> Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"[26]

McQueen recognizes that the "apocalyptic undertones of Bush's speeches may not be . . . obvious," but stresses that "they are there for those able and willing to hear them."[27]

This interpretation by McQueen revives an earlier one by Bruce Lincoln from his book *Holy Terrors*. Lincoln shares McQueen's confidence that there are references to Revelation 6:15–17 in Bush's speech, which are "plainly audible" to those familiar with the Bible's apocalyptic texts.[28] In fact, despite no explicit references to scripture, Bush's short speech contains several biblical references according to Lincoln. He also points to one phrase Bush uses for terrorists – "killers of innocents" – as "surely gestur[ing] toward Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2."[29] Stories of the killing of innocent people are virtually endless throughout history. Lincoln, though, is

[25] George W. Bush, "Appendix B: George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, October 7, 2001," in Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 99.

[26] New Revised Standard Version.

[27] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 4.

[28] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 30.

[29] Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 31.

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certain that these three words by Bush indicate that he had Herod on his mind when announcing military action against the Taliban.

It is safe to say that these alleged biblical and apocalyptic references in Bush's speech would come as a surprise to most Americans who watched or read it. Even for many familiar with Christian apocalyptic beliefs, the phrase Lincoln and McQueen focus on – "terrorists may burrow deeper into caves" – fails to register as apocalyptic imagery. After all, the caves mentioned in Revelation 6:15–17 are by no means one of the images most commonly associated with apocalyptic thought. Revelation's images of plagues, two beasts, and Christ's millennial kingdom are far more distinctive and better suited for bringing to mind apocalyptic hopes and fears. Bush's speech lacks such imagery. The most straightforward interpretation of the cave reference is that, rather than convey some deep apocalyptic meaning, it merely emphasizes that the Taliban's practice of hiding in caves will be futile against American military might.

Perhaps Bush and his advisors purposefully chose subtle imagery so that they could plausibly deny charges of apocalyptic influences in the speech, while still speaking to fundamentalist supporters. Politicians do sometimes employ subtle messages that speak to portions of their base while aiming to avoid the attention of others. In some cases, we can be pretty sure that hidden motivations were at work because the architects of the ads and speeches later say so.[30] In other cases, it is easy to recognize, say, racist dog whistles because they appear in a long-standing pattern of speech that includes less subtle messages (e.g., the demonization of certain racial and ethnic groups).[31] Such explicit admissions and patterns provide compelling evidence to confirm suspicions about the presence of coded messages in political speech.

Lincoln and McQueen, however, offer no evidence along these lines. When the apocalypse is understood as an imaginary, the discovery of any phrase or image resembling those in apocalyptic texts can become the basis for making claims about apocalyptic influences in politics. Sometimes there may be truth to these claims. Perhaps Bush really did draw on Revelation in his speech announcing military action. But it is hard to have confidence in that claim – other interpretations of the speech seem just as plausible, if not more so. By focusing on ambiguous imagery rather than more explicit

[30] See, e.g., Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, www.thenation.com/article/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/.

[31] See, e.g., Karen Grigsby Bates, "'Rapists,' 'Huts': Trump's Racist Dog Whistles Aren't New," *NPR*, January 13, 2018, www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/01/13/577674607/rapists-huts-shitholes-trumps-racist-dog-whistles-arent-new.

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references, Lincoln and McQueen advance claims about apocalyptic thought's role in politics with only tenuous evidence to back them up.

This approach to studying apocalyptic thought often takes a polemical tone, as in John Gray's *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*. There Gray mounts a wide-ranging critique of utopian projects in politics, while wielding the concept of apocalyptic thought as a rhetorical weapon. In particular, his book illustrates how motivations to discredit certain ideological views can lead to expansive claims about apocalyptic thought's influence in politics.

Gray takes aim at a diverse array of historical and contemporary targets: Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Nazis, Islamic terrorists, neoconservatives, and just about any prominent supporter of the Iraq War. In his view, all these groups suffer from deluded and destructive utopian hopes. When faced with the reality that their impossible visions for politics cannot be realized, these groups resort to violence in a futile effort to realize utopia by force. Gray specifically sees apocalyptic beliefs as playing "a central role in state terror from the Jacobins through the Bolsheviks and the Nazis."[32] Now in the forms of neoconservatism and Islamic terrorism, "apocalyptic religion has re-emerged, naked and unadorned, as a force in world politics."[33]

It certainly is possible that apocalyptic ideas are present in many of the ideologies singled out by Gray. But it often takes little evidence for Gray to reach sweeping generalizations about apocalyptic thought's role in politics. As a case in point, he approvingly cites Lincoln's interpretation of Bush's speech announcing military strikes in Afghanistan as evidence of apocalyptic influences in the war on terror.[34] Highlighting such examples in his brisk tour of modern ideologies, Gray sees apocalyptic beliefs as a potent force wherever he turns. In one of his more hyperbolic remarks, he writes: "If a simple definition of western civilization could be formulated it would have to be framed in terms of the central role of millenarian thinking."[35] Clearly no fan of apocalyptic beliefs, Gray is more than ready to attribute their influence to everything he finds wrong with politics today.

Together, these studies highlight that current approaches to secular apocalyptic thought often involve expansive understandings of it. First, many lower the bar for what counts as secular apocalyptic thought. Any imagery loosely resembling that found in religious apocalyptic texts can count as apocalyptic

[32] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 176–77.
[33] Gray, *Black Mass*, 3.
[34] Gray, *Black Mass*, 115.
[35] Gray, *Black Mass*, 6.

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thought in secular form, even when the imagery appears in a context with no explicit religious references and there are other plausible explanations for it. Second, the desire to undermine the legitimacy of certain ideologies leads some to see secular apocalyptic thought everywhere in politics. Calling a secular ideology apocalyptic taints it by association. Shklar and Blumenberg identify both these moves as pitfalls common to the study of secular apocalyptic thought. The following section explores why these approaches prove so problematic.

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT APPROACHES

Though critics like Shklar and Blumenberg have concerns with expansive understandings of apocalyptic thought, some may push back and attribute their concerns to a matter of taste. One way to categorize historians (as well as scholars in other fields) speaks to this difference in taste: some are "splitters," others "lumpers." Splitters look for opportunities to draw distinctions among different thinkers and traditions of thought, whereas lumpers look for opportunities to make connections.[36] Historical evidence is often ambiguous, and when scholars encounter it, some lean toward lumping ideas together while others have the opposite inclination. For whatever reason, many lumpers find their way into the study of secular apocalyptic thought, and their style may not be to everyone's taste. Understandably, some may be skeptical of methodological critiques of lumpers and see them as merely reflecting a difference in taste.

I hope to overcome that skepticism and show how expansive understandings of secular apocalyptic thought mislead. When secular texts contain imagery similar to that found in religious apocalyptic texts, many treat it as evidence of apocalyptic thought in secular form. That conclusion, though, rests on a flawed argument:

(1) If a religious apocalyptic tradition influenced a secular text – whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously – the text will use images or language resembling those found in that tradition (e.g., images of catastrophe).
(2) A secular text uses images or language resembling those found in a religious apocalyptic tradition (e.g., images of catastrophe).
(3) Therefore, a religious apocalyptic tradition influenced the secular text in question.

[36] J. H. Hexter, "The Burden of Proof," *Times Literary Supplement* 3841 (1975): 1251–52.

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The problem, of course, is that this conclusion does not follow from its premises. The argument commits a common fallacy known as affirming the consequent. An example is someone who says that, if it rains, their neighbor's driveway will get wet, and when they see that their neighbor's driveway is wet, they conclude it must have rained. Perhaps it rained, but it could also be the case that there's not a cloud in the sky and the driveway is wet from a sprinkler.

Similarly, just because a text uses catastrophic images does not mean that apocalyptic influences are at work. After all, the apocalyptic tradition that emerged from religious belief has no monopoly on catastrophe. Fears of wide-scale catastrophe are common throughout human history, and it is easy to experience such fears absent direct or indirect contact with religious apocalyptic traditions. Histories of war, for instance, can inspire a writer to use catastrophic imagery. For this reason, simply looking for the apocalyptic imaginary, as McQueen calls it, sets an insufficiently low bar for identifying secular apocalyptic thought.

McQueen's discussion of apocalyptic influences in Thomas Hobbes's political thought illustrates how this approach can result in questionable claims. During the English Civil War when Hobbes wrote, clergy, scholars, soldiers, and government officials often drew on Christian apocalyptic texts as a lens to understand the political upheaval around them. Hobbes finds many faults with these interpretations, especially when they use apocalyptic belief to justify rebellion.[37] McQueen argues that, to counter apocalyptic prophecies, Hobbes adopts a strategy where he "fights apocalypse *with apocalypse*."[38] In her view, Hobbes specifically carries out this strategy through his imagery of the state of nature and the state that emerges in its place, described as a powerful Leviathan that keeps violence at bay.

Famously in *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes life outside of government as "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short,"[39] and uses this dismal portrait of the state of nature to motivate obedience to the civil sovereign. McQueen sees in this political argument the staging of "a secular apocalypse, in which the terror and chaos of the state of nature are the narrative prelude to an enduring commonwealth ruled by a mortal God." She then adds: "Hobbes does not reject the apocalyptic imaginary. He redirects it."[40] McQueen goes further than just pointing out similar imagery in Hobbes's writings and Christian apocalyptic texts. She makes the stronger claim that Hobbes draws on

[37] See Chapter 4.
[38] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 14.
[39] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), XIII: 192.
[40] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 106.

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apocalyptic thought when formulating his description of the state of nature: "Both the imagery and narrative structure of [Hobbes's] secular political argument appropriate elements of the seventeenth-century English apocalyptic imaginary."[41]

What evidence, though, is there that apocalyptic influences contribute to Hobbes's account of the state of nature? In his various descriptions of the state of nature – in *The Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, and *Leviathan* – he never directly references Christian apocalyptic texts, contemporary interpretations of these texts, or distinct concepts from these texts.[42] Moreover, Hobbes explicitly names several sources for his understanding of the state of nature, all of which fall *outside* the apocalyptic tradition. Conditions resembling the state of nature, according to Hobbes, characterize how "savage" peoples in America live and how "inhabitants of Germany and other now civil countries" used to live.[43] In addition, the Latin *Leviathan* mentions the Genesis story of Cain's killing Abel to illustrate the anarchic violence characterizing the state of nature.[44] So Hobbes does not leave his readers in the dark as to the sources that influence his thinking about the state of nature.[45] This textual evidence undermines rather than strengthens the claim that apocalyptic influences play a central role in Hobbes's account of the state of nature.

Of course, there could be influences Hobbes fails to mention. Even so, it is far from clear that apocalyptic thought stands out as the most likely source for the catastrophic imagery in Hobbes's state of nature. Though apocalyptic texts often include catastrophic imagery, other texts do, too. Accounts of war and their devastating effects provide rich resources for theorizing about catastrophe. Notably, Hobbes uses the term "war" to characterize conditions in the state of nature.[46] Given this evidence, Hobbes very well could have had in mind accounts of war, not the Christian apocalyptic tradition, when developing the catastrophic imagery in his state of nature.

[41] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 145.

[42] Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), I.14; *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), I; and *Leviathan*, XIII.

[43] Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, I.14.12. See also Hobbes *On the Citizen*, I.13; and *Leviathan*, XIII: 194.

[44] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII: 194–95.

[45] For more on the sources for Hobbes's accounts of the state of nature, see Ioannis Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes's State of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[46] Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, I.14.11; *On the Citizen*, I.12; and *Leviathan*, XIII: 192.

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McQueen notes that Hobbes translated Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*,[47] and that it "provided him with a rhetorical and visual vocabulary with which to both imagine and describe an apocalyptic moment of uncreation."[48] This history certainly offers vivid accounts of catastrophe. Yet it fails to qualify as an apocalyptic text like Daniel or Revelation. Hobbes's deep familiarity with texts like the *History of the Peloponnesian War* points to resources outside the apocalyptic tradition that could have shaped his vision of the state of nature.

Since it is impossible to know the full scope of influences left unmentioned by Hobbes, it could be the case that the apocalyptic tradition informed his account of the state of nature. Hobbes does explicitly reference apocalyptic concepts and texts in his writings.[49] But the specific claim that his description of the state of nature draws on apocalyptic thought is highly speculative, resting on a vague resemblance between imagery in Hobbes's writings and imagery in the Christian apocalyptic tradition. And that is the problem with expansive understandings of secular apocalyptic thought: they treat mere speculation with greater certainty than it deserves. The root of this problem goes back to the low bar used by many to identify secular apocalyptic thought. If a text contains any imagery reminiscent of the apocalyptic tradition – say, it describes some catastrophe – that suffices as evidence that apocalyptic influences are at work.

Such loose criteria are ill-suited to meaningfully check the inevitable biases that affect scholars when studying secular apocalyptic thought. A long-standing methodological concern in the history of ideas is that scholars, when looking for a concept, read it into historical texts. They interpret any ambiguous evidence as confirmation of what they are looking for.[50] Confirmation bias gets the best of them and too often they fail to seriously consider alternative explanations. In the case of research on secular apocalyptic thought, additional motivations exacerbate that risk, as some use the label apocalyptic to undermine political ideologies they dislike. Such motivations, combined with lax evidentiary standards, lead to understandings of secular apocalyptic thought so broad that a clever interpreter can find it just about anywhere they want.

[47] See Thucydides, *The History of the Grecian War*, trans. Thomas Hobbes, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. 8–9, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1843).

[48] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 135.

[49] See Chapter 4.

[50] See Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

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Tackling this problem is no easy task. Confirmation bias is well documented and no one is immune to it.[51] Given its pervasive and stubborn nature, scholars are unlikely to ever fully avoid it. So they have to be on constant guard against confirmation bias and adopt strategies to minimize it. More rigorous criteria can advance that goal – such as requiring explicit references to religious apocalyptic traditions when looking for secular transformations of them. By relying on less ambiguous evidence, such an approach has the potential to limit opportunities for confirmation bias to influence interpretive decisions, as the following section explains.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

Shklar and Blumenberg raise legitimate concerns about the study of secular apocalyptic thought. Overly broad conceptions of such thought do mislead by blurring important distinctions. But though Shklar and Blumenberg identify real problems with the study of secular apocalyptic thought, their critiques do not necessarily doom it.

In fact, it is difficult to fully abandon the idea of secular apocalyptic thought. Too many thinkers with secular theories of politics directly reference religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or concepts while finding aspects of them appealing. Part II of this book focuses on such cases. For instance, Friedrich Engels praises Thomas Müntzer – a Christian apocalyptic figure from the Reformation – and interprets his vision of the kingdom of God as a communist ideal. The appreciation that an atheist like Engels has for Christian apocalyptic thought makes clear that it can offer resources for secular theories of politics. In light of such examples, it would be a mistake to dismiss secular apocalyptic thought as a confused concept. Studying these examples offers insight into why the apocalyptic tradition proves to be a persistent force in politics.

Given that apocalyptic thought clearly does influence some secular thinkers, the question then becomes how best to study it. My modest proposal is for a more focused approach that reins in some of the more ambitious claims about apocalyptic thought's influence. By trying to find apocalyptic influences everywhere, scholars often end up making shaky arguments vulnerable to criticism. I suggest instead the following alternative: to focus on cases where secular thinkers *explicitly* mention religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or concepts, so that the link between secular thought and the apocalyptic tradition is clear.

[51] See Raymond Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220.

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This approach studies secular apocalyptic thought in a way sensitive to the critiques raised by Shklar and Blumenberg. Since explicit references to apocalyptic thought are necessary to make claims about its influence, there is no place for speculative claims based, say, solely on a text's remark about catastrophe. By raising the level of evidence needed to make claims about secular apocalyptic thought, this proposal limits opportunities for reading apocalyptic influences into a text based on ambiguous evidence (e.g., the cave remark in Bush's speech after September 11). Such constraints help check confirmation bias, a risk that scholars inevitably face when searching for secular apocalyptic thought in historical and contemporary texts.

Some might raise the following objection: this chapter's proposal addresses one error only to heighten the risk of another. By raising the standard of evidence required, the proposal reduces the risk of a false positive – claiming to find apocalyptic influences that are not there. Yet this higher bar increases the risk of false negatives – not detecting apocalyptic influences because the evidence required is lacking. Certainly, some thinkers draw on apocalyptic thought without directly recognizing their debt to it. Isn't it important not to overlook such examples?

Admittedly, the proposal suggested here limits the scope of cases that clearly count as secular apocalyptic thought. But in excluding cases that do not explicitly reference religious apocalyptic thought, this proposal does not mean to imply that apocalyptic influences are necessarily absent from such cases. It rather says that we cannot know. In these cases, scholars can note similarities between imagery found in secular and apocalyptic texts. Yet they should be careful to avoid concluding that the latter influenced the former. That claim would go beyond the available evidence. A key to ensuring the credibility of research is being frank about its limitations. Unfortunately, some of the more ambitious claims about secular apocalyptic thought overlook the limitations of available evidence, which undermines their credibility.

The negative connotations often associated with apocalyptic thought give scholars further reason to avoid applying this label to political thinkers and texts unless they have strong evidence of its influence. As Blumenberg points out, many claims about secular apocalyptic thought have the effect of casting doubt on the legitimacy of political beliefs. Since calling political thought apocalyptic can leave the impression that it is bizarre and irrational – even if that is not one's intention – it is irresponsible to use that label loosely. Doing so risks damaging others' reputation as a result of claims based on mere speculation. Scholars need stronger evidence before making claims about secular apocalyptic thought.

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What follows in the text is an attempt to put into practice this modest proposal for studying secular apocalyptic thought. In particular, Part II adopts this approach as a guide for selecting cases that illustrate how apocalyptic thought makes its way into politics and takes secular form. But before turning to specific case studies, we first will try to understand more generally what draws secular thinkers to apocalyptic thought.

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