

I have been describing my ideas about the book I'm proposing to write, tentatively called Expecting the Apocalypse. In the past couple of posts I've talked about the heightened expectation that the world would be ending soon with the return of Jesus, an originally fundamentalist Christian view that started off in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that has moved into much broader circles in American culture. Part of my book will be looking not only at this religious view, but also at how it has, in our lifetimes, moved into a variety of secular discourses, and is, in fact, in its secular guise, all around us, affecting seriously what is happening in both society and politics, and therefore of real importance for our daily lives.

If I write this book, it will be the first time I've ventured outside of biblical and early Christian scholarship involving "religion" into areas of cultural importance to most people living in the modern world - which is another way of saying that this kind of material is not something that I have to \*show\* is interesting (as in almost all my other books) but something that people are already, inherently, deeply interested in, absorbed by, and invested in. Now \*that\* should be not only a change and a challenge for me, but also incredibly absorbing and intriguing (for me)

Here is the first of two posts of how I explain it to myself.

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### Secular Discourses of the Coming Apocalypse

One of the striking phenomena within broader American culture is that these expectations are no longer restricted to Christian fundamentalist circles. As many cultural historians have observed, the notion of an imminent apocalyptic end of humanity has seeped into numerous secular discourses.

The turning point, as one might have imagined, was 1945 and the advent of the nuclear age. For the first time it became abundantly and terrifyingly clear that world-wide destruction was not simply a divine prerogative but a very real human possibility. It could happen if the wrong fingers pressed just a few buttons. Given the cultural and (ultimately) religious heritage of the makers of modern culture, this possibility came to be expressed, naturally, in Christian apocalyptic terms, even as the content was purely secular.

In some ways this secularization was anticipated by earlier anti-modernist fears in the wake of scientific and technological developments, as seen, for example, in the literary world in the first half of the nineteenth century with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and at the end of the century, far more auspiciously, in H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds. Well's novel was arguably the first secular "apocalypse," modeled on the book of Revelation itself, where the "supernatural" beings of superior intelligence and power who invade the planet in the form of barely humanoid beasts, threatening worldwide destruction and the end of humanity, were not divine angels and demonic forces (as in Revelation), but Martians. And the deus ex machina that ultimately averted the ultimate destruction of the planet was not a deus at all, but a natural process of life on earth (bacterial infection).

The secular apocalypse developed some over the decades to follow, but it was with the nuclear age that fears of an imminent end of all things in a final battle of Armageddon took shape. It would be impossible to treat all the cultural manifestations in a single book, but they most clearly involve literary fiction (in such disparate guises as Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's Fail Safe, Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle, or even King's The Stand) to film, from nuclear disaster movies (e.g., On the Beach; Dr. Strangelove), to nuclear fall-out

monster movies ([Godzilla](#) and [Them!](#)), to science-fiction invasion movies ([The Day the Earth Stood Still](#); [The Day the World Ended](#)), to post-apocalyptic movies ([Mad Max](#); [Twelve Monkeys](#)). And this is not to mention television (from [The Day After](#) to, say, [Battlestar Galactica](#)).

These apocalypse artefacts are a relatively recent phenomenon, driven, of course, by very modern concerns. But they are expressed, in many ways, through very ancient modalities, known for the bulk of American history almost exclusively through Christian apocalyptic thought, especially as embodied in the New Testament book of Revelation, the most influential piece of literature to explain and narrate what will happen in “the end,” which is “coming soon.” In part, my book will explain the not-always-obvious connections between such literature and film and the biblical Apocalypse, especially based on the widespread assumptions about it that have been disseminated into our culture through fundamentalist readings of it.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, apocalyptic discourse, both religious and secular, has moved into other directions, also “supported” by an understanding of what will produce the coming Armageddon. Nuclear weapons are still an ongoing nightmare, of course; but coming now to the apocalyptic forefront are other cultural and political phenomena: we will wipe ourselves out not with bombs but by climate change; or it will not be a Soviet invasion that destroys the West, but Islamic terrorists. The processes, mechanisms, and culprits change, but the end result remains very much the same: the end is coming soon.

For the past four decades, in particular, the Christian expectation of Armageddon has moved beyond now-familiar cultural artefacts into the realm of social movements and American political discourse and policy. In terms of social movements, it is impossible to understand the Branch Davidians and the disaster in Waco apart from David Koresh’s own rather bizarre interpretations of the book of Revelation, as he saw its “predictions” coming true in his own time, community, and personal ministry. The FBI failed (or rather, refused) to recognize the hermeneutical root of Koresh’s thought, misgauged his motivations, and acted accordingly, with spectacularly bad results.

On the other hand, a “secular” version of apocalyptic thought lay behind Heaven’s Gate: it would be UFO’s, not God, who intervened on this planet. This view was explicitly based more on Star Trek than the Bible, but it was an interpretation of Star Trek inspired by an American tradition of reading Revelation. A very different secular social manifestation of the coming apocalypse is shared widely within the Militia Movement in its response to the threatening “New World Order,” as understood by Christian apocalyptic preachers (e.g., Pat Robertson).

To see if the End *\*really\** near, you need to keep reading these posts, and that will require you to start at the Beginning, by joining the blog. Doing so gives you access both to all the archives — 5-6 posts a week for the past seven years! — and to those yet to come, assuming there is still a planet left for us to blog on....



[Armageddon and American Politics](#)  
[Fundamentalist Visions of the End of the World](#)