

Limiting the Dangers of Utopian Hope

As Chapter 6 explored, it is highly doubtful that ideal theory can identify the ideal society with confidence and serve as a reliable guide to social action. Because of future uncertainty, ideal theory ultimately rests on faith, not plausible arguments for the ideal it proposes. So ideal theory ends up in a role similar to that of apocalyptic thought – a source of utopian hope for those who accept it on faith. Such hope can have benefits. It instills efforts to advance justice with meaning by interpreting them as steps toward an ideal that is both possible and worth striving for. But not all aspects of utopian hope prove beneficial. As the history of apocalyptic thought makes clear, such hope also comes with real dangers – in particular violence.

This chapter examines the dangers of utopian hope and ways to limit them. It builds on the idea, emphasized throughout this study, that ideal theory shares overlooked features with apocalyptic thought. One long-standing worry with apocalyptic thought is that it promotes violence.¹ That fear has lurked in the background in the previous case studies of Thomas Müntzer and the Fifth

¹ See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Abbas Amanat and John Collins, eds., *Apocalypse and Violence* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies and the Council on Middle East Studies, 2004); Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Violence: Aspects of Their Relation in Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” in *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Thomas Heffernan and Thomas Burman (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 209–29; James Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence: Prophets of Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); James Jones, *Blood that Cries Out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40–55; Michael Sells, “Armageddon in Christian, Sunni and Shia Traditions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 467–95; Jamel Velji, “Apocalyptic Religion and Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press,

Monarchy Men, whose apocalyptic visions helped inspire violent rebellion. Today apocalyptic thought continues to be a motivating force for a range of violent groups, from Christian White nationalists to Muslim extremists.² Their shocking brutality makes it tempting to conclude that apocalyptic thought – and perhaps religion generally – is inherently violent. A closer look at apocalyptic thought, however, reveals that its greatest pitfall is one that also threatens ideal theory. Both apocalyptic thought and ideal theory can fall victim to false confidence regarding their ability to identify and achieve utopia. Purported knowledge of the path to utopia has justified all kinds of bloodshed and cruelty throughout history, yet the ideal never comes. When utopian hope turns into hubris, it can lead to disaster.

The apocalyptic tradition is incredibly diverse and, though strands of it encourage violence, others suggest strategies for minimizing that risk. In this way, the apocalyptic tradition offers unexpected insights to ideal theory on how to understand utopian hope. Partly in response to the explosive potential of apocalyptic belief, Jewish and Christian thought developed interpretations of such belief aimed at neutralizing its dangers. These religious traditions often stress the radical nature of human ignorance as it pertains to what exactly the ideal society looks like, how to bring it about, and when it might come. Such knowledge lies with God alone. Given the limits of human knowledge, it would be foolish and dangerous to try to force utopia into existence through our own efforts. That conclusion is in part discouraging, for it pushes utopia beyond our grasp. But there is also wisdom in it, for it captures the epistemic limitations that face utopian theorizing and the dangers of ignoring them.

Now in recommending epistemic humility, Jewish and Christian thought still hold on to utopian hope. This hope is grounded in faith and gives meaning to the difficult work of advancing justice under conditions far removed from utopia. By closely linking utopian hope *with* epistemic humility, the apocalyptic tradition – or at least certain strands of it – suggests an approach that ideal theory would be wise to imitate.

2013), 250–59; Frances Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Matthias Riedl, “Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer’s *Sermon to the Princes*,” in *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, ed. Michael Ryan (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 260–96.

² For case studies of contemporary apocalyptic groups who engage in violence, see Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 17–146.

FEAR OF APOCALYPTIC VIOLENCE

According to Bernard McGinn, a leading scholar of religious thought in the Middle Ages, the “apocalyptic worldview is inherently violent.”³ He qualifies this claim by noting that apocalyptic belief does not *always* lead to violence.⁴ But he does emphasize the salient role of violence in ancient apocalyptic texts. On this particular point, there is truth to his claim. Readers of apocalyptic literature do not have to search long to find violent imagery. Revelation 9:15, for instance, speaks of four angels of death set loose “to kill a third of human-kind” (see Figure 7.1).⁵ Another passage describes in gruesome detail the fate of the wicked and idolatrous: “Those who worship the beast . . . will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur . . . And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” (Revelation 14:9–11). Such vivid accounts of violence appear frequently in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts.

Interestingly, these texts rarely call on believers to engage in violence. That responsibility almost always lies with God, who enacts vengeance on the enemies of the righteous. At the same time that apocalyptic thought calls on believers to refrain from violence and accept martyrdom in the face of persecution (e.g., Revelation 2:10, 20:4), it celebrates God’s use of violence against the wicked. So in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought, violence occupies an ambiguous role not free from danger.⁶ Even if an apocalyptic text explicitly cautions against engaging in violence, its celebrations of divine wrath can motivate some to see themselves as agents chosen to inflict punishment on the wicked – especially when God tarries.

Beyond its violent imagery, apocalyptic texts portray a world divided between good and evil. Eternal peace and salvation await the righteous, while suffering and punishment await the wicked. Such a mindset can encourage the demonization of outsiders and weaken prohibitions on violence against them. Indeed, many who carry out genocide and religious violence see their victims as irredeemably evil and less than human.⁷ Apocalyptic thought, with its dichotomous view of the world, seems to promote a mindset prone to violence.⁸

³ McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Violence,” 209.

⁴ McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Violence,” 210.

⁵ New Revised Standard Version. All subsequent biblical quotes come from this version.

⁶ Amanat and Collins, “Introduction,” in *Apocalypse and Violence*, ii.

⁷ See Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 213–21.

⁸ Jones, *Blood that Cries Out from the Earth*, 40–45.



FIGURE 7.1 Angels of death from Revelation 9
Engraving from sixteenth century by Jean Duvet⁹

Because of their celebrations of violence, apocalyptic texts can appear out of place in religious traditions that elsewhere emphasize peace. The book of Revelation almost didn't make it into the Christian canon – many early lists of

⁹ This image is in the public domain and available on the National Gallery of Art's website at the following link: www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.33614.html.

the canon left it off^o – and some believe Christianity would have been better off without it. John Dominic Crossan takes that view due to worries over Revelation's incompatibility with the gospel message of peace, nonviolence, and forgiveness. The book's "pornography of violence" and portrayal of Christ unleashing vengeance on his enemies horrifies Crossan. "To turn Jesus into a divine warrior," he writes, "allows once again – but now terminally in the last book of the Bible – the normalcy of human civilization's violent injustice to subsume the radicality of God's nonviolent justice."¹¹ According to this view, the apocalyptic text of Revelation subverts Christianity's core message.¹²

These risks, of course, extend beyond just the religious traditions that gave birth to apocalyptic thought. Nonbelievers also draw on apocalyptic ideas and use them to advance political ends. This development is especially worrying for critics of apocalyptic thought. Arthur Mendel notes that, though "the world could afford the fantasy of Apocalypse" in the past, it no longer is tolerable in a nuclear age where its influence could have cataclysmic results.¹³ In his view, apocalyptic thought anticipates total destruction and risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, John Hall calls the migration of apocalyptic ideas from the religious to the secular realm an "ominous development."¹⁴ Apocalyptic thought, he argues, makes violence sacred. As a result, "the sacred violence of the warring apocalypse became grafted onto secular politics and social movements."¹⁵ So according to some, apocalyptic thought's continued influence in politics today poses grave risks – perhaps even an existential threat.

Apocalyptic thought has no shortage of critics and it is easy to see why. Its visions of utopia appear side by side with gruesome images of violence and scenes of mass destruction. These features suggest to many that apocalyptic thought is inherently violent and should have no place in religion or politics.

¹⁰ Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), 160–61.

¹¹ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 234.

¹² For an overview of how theologians and biblical scholars grapple with the challenge posed by Revelation's vivid descriptions of violence, see Rebecca Skaggs and Thomas Doyle, "Violence in the Apocalypse of John," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5, no. 2 (2007): 220–34.

¹³ Arthur Mendel, *Vision and Violence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1.

¹⁴ John Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 108.

¹⁵ Hall, *Apocalypse*, 131.

COEXISTING WITH APOCALYPTIC BELIEF

Religiously motivated violence grabs people's attention. Sometimes the means employed – crashing planes into buildings or beheading victims – are spectacular. Yet even if the means are more mundane, there still is something shocking about religious beliefs that push people to violence. It is easier to understand violence prompted by greed, lust, or revenge. These are emotions we all experience to some degree and can identify with. But killing someone over a 2,000-year-old apocalyptic prophecy? That is harder to understand – and thus an object of curiosity. When religious and apocalyptic beliefs motivate violence, it's difficult to look away. Because such violence receives outsized attention, it can seem more pervasive than it is.

In the vast majority of cases, of course, apocalyptic belief never turns violent. The widespread nature of such belief reminds us of that point. Polling finds that over a third of Americans believe Christ's Second Coming will occur before 2050.¹⁶ So in the United States alone, tens of millions of people hold apocalyptic beliefs, and there are even more worldwide. Almost all of them coexist peacefully with their neighbors. Only in an incredibly small number of cases does apocalyptic belief spark violence. For this reason, many scholars of apocalyptic thought reject the view that it is inherently violent.¹⁷

That conclusion stands in tension with views common to political theory. Many modern thinkers have a strong suspicion of religious belief that divides the world between good and evil – which apocalyptic thought often does – due to worries that it breeds discord and violence. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes, “It is impossible to live in peace with people one believes are damned.”¹⁸ Recent work on the history of toleration, however, gives us reason to question this assumption.

In her study *Mere Civility*, Teresa Bejan examines the thought of Roger Williams, who in founding Rhode Island embarked on one of the most radical experiments in religious toleration the world had seen. His support of religious freedom for even the most despised sects at the time did not derive, as one

¹⁶ Pew Research Center, “Life in 2050: Amazing Science, Familiar Threats: Public Sees a Future Full of Promise and Peril,” June 22, 2010, www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/legacy-pdf/625.pdf, 14.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 4; and Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism*, 59.

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. John Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), IV.8: 271. For the persistence of this idea in contemporary political theory, see Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 153–57.

might assume, from a respect for all faiths. As Bejan stresses, Williams held fervent religious and apocalyptic beliefs that led him to see most of his neighbors as damned – and he wasn't afraid to tell them so. It was *because of*, not in spite of, these convictions that he embraced a conception of religious liberty far more expansive than his contemporaries did.¹⁹

For Williams, religious freedom was key for ensuring that individuals were at liberty to evangelize their faith. As he was keen to point out, those who are religious opponents today could become members of the body of Christ tomorrow.²⁰ The neighbor who appears damned is not necessarily irredeemable. The way to bring them into the church is to evangelize to them rather than employ the state to persecute them – a step that inevitably would corrupt the church in Williams's mind. The Rhode Island experiment and its continuation in the United States today remind us that strongly held religious beliefs, including apocalyptic ones, do not guarantee violence. Those anxiously awaiting the end may see the world as sharply divided between the righteous and the damned, and even find the latter deeply disagreeable, while still coexisting with them in conditions free from violence.²¹

In sum, apocalyptic belief, like religious belief generally, proves too diverse to broadly characterize as violent.²² That characterization lacks nuance and fails to account for the simple fact that many hold apocalyptic beliefs without ever engaging in violence. To understand apocalyptic thought's relation to violence, it is necessary to identify more precisely what forms of it are linked to violence. We turn to that question next.

WHAT MAKES UTOPIAN HOPE DANGEROUS

Though there is often unease with apocalyptic belief's dichotomous view of the world, this feature alone is insufficient to spark violence. After all, people can see the world as divided between good and evil, while at the same time placing all responsibility on God to bring about the utopia promised.

¹⁹ Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 50–81.

²⁰ Williams writes: “[H]e that is a *Briar*, that is, a *Jew*, a *Turke*, a *Pagan*, an *Anti-Christian* to day, may be (when the Word of the *Lord* runs freely) a member of *Jesus Christ* to morrow cut out of the wilde *Olive*, and planted into the true.” See Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 3 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 95.

²¹ Bejan, *Mere Civility*, esp. 80.

²² For more on this point as it regards religion generally, see William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

According to this view, one patiently waits for God to act. To inspire violence, apocalyptic thought needs something more – belief that the elect have an active role to play in realizing God’s kingdom and should do so by any means necessary, including force.

Frances Flannery emphasizes this point in her study of apocalyptic groups that engage in terrorism. She makes a distinction between what she calls “passive” and “active eschatology,” and describes the latter as “one of the clearest indicators that a group will be violent.”²³ Passive eschatology counsels patience while waiting for divine intervention to bring about the ideal society, whereas active eschatology calls on believers to eliminate evil and realize the ideal society through their own efforts.²⁴ The latter mindset justifies action normally prohibited – like violence against others – since it serves the critical role of realizing the ideal.

This link between active eschatology and terrorism identified by Flannery highlights a key point: the same aspect of apocalyptic thought that makes it appealing for politics also makes it dangerous. Chapter 2 noted that apocalyptic thought’s political appeal partly lies in offering an apparent solution to a challenge that plagues ideal theory. In response to the worry that a truly ideal society seems beyond reach, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought points to an imminent crisis as the vehicle to finally realize the ideal. This mindset has advantages for politics because of the urgency it creates – *now* is the time for bold action to take advantage of the unique opportunity at hand. If that idea gains hold, it can become a powerful motivating force in politics. But this strategy comes with shortcomings. Due to future uncertainty, those predicting utopia and calling for violence to realize it cannot give plausible grounds to back up their claims.

That limitation is good reason to be wary of justifications for violence that appeal to apocalyptic thought. Such appeals call for *certain* bloodshed in the hope of attaining a highly *uncertain* utopia. If there were compelling evidence that violent action would bring about utopia, then one could make a strong case for violence. But in reality, there never is plausible evidence that violence will lead to utopia. The history of political violence motivated by apocalyptic belief suggests far less hopeful outcomes. At its worst, apocalyptic violence results in senseless bloodshed, like when thousands of peasants died heeding Müntzer’s call to realize God’s kingdom through revolutionary action.²⁵ At its best, it helps improve society while leaving it deeply flawed, like when

²³ Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism*, 133.

²⁴ Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism*, 65–67.

²⁵ See especially Riedl, “Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action.”

apocalyptic belief motivated Union soldiers during the American Civil War as they marched through the South and liberated slaves.²⁶

Even in these best-case scenarios, utopian hope by itself appears insufficient to justify violence. Calls for violence in pursuit of utopia are always dubious, considering that *no* action has yet to succeed in bringing about the ideal. Given the horrors of violence, it is wise to demand that justifications for it, at the very least, appeal to more certain and attainable ends than utopia (e.g., ending a concrete injustice like slavery). We can formulate this principle as follows:

Principle against utopian violence: Given deep uncertainty over the future, which makes it impossible to identify the ideal society with confidence, calls to engage in violence cannot be justified on the grounds that it will help realize utopia. Such an uncertain good cannot justify the evils of violence.

This principle does not demand pacifism. It leaves open the possibility that violence can be justified when there are plausible grounds to believe that it will achieve worthy ends (e.g., stopping an unjust aggressor from inflicting civilian casualties).²⁷ The principle does, however, treat all appeals to utopian goals as insufficient to justify violence.

So far we have focused on utopian hope's violent potential in the context of apocalyptic thought, but the principle against utopian violence highlights that this risk applies to ideal theory generally. What makes apocalyptic thought dangerous – a commitment to bringing about the ideal society through whatever means necessary – also can render other forms of ideal theory dangerous. Indeed, the danger of mixing utopian aspirations with politics is a recurring concern in political thought, expressed by various thinkers who embrace the principle against utopian violence or something close to it.

Atrocities during the twentieth century in particular prompted critiques of utopian political projects. Referencing the dangers embodied by the politics of Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, and Pol Pot, Isaiah Berlin writes: “[I]f one really believes that [a final] solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for

²⁶ See Terrie Dopp Aamodt, *Righteous Armies, Holy Cause: Apocalyptic Imagery and the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 46–49, 94–99.

²⁷ One objection to violence is its unpredictability due to the unintended consequences it tends to unleash. Some categorically reject violence for that reason. See Karuna Mantena, “Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 455–70. My argument does not rest on the claim that violence can never be justified, but those who take that stronger view have all the more reason to reject violence in pursuit of utopia.

ever – what could be too high a price for that?”²⁸ Though he understands the rationale behind this approach, the “search for perfection” ultimately strikes Berlin as “a recipe for bloodshed.”²⁹

Karl Popper expresses similar concerns. In his view, utopian projects inevitably come with epistemic uncertainty over how to achieve them, which makes violence appealing as a tool to overcome uncertainty and ensure agreement on a common political goal. He writes:

[T]he Utopian method, which chooses an ideal state of society as the aim which all our political actions should serve, is likely to produce violence [D]ifferences of opinion concerning what the ideal state should be like cannot always be smoothed out by the method of argument. They will at least partly have the character of religious differences. And there can hardly be tolerance between these different Utopian religions. Utopian aims are designed to serve as a basis for rational political action and discussion, and such action appears to be possible only if the aim is definitely decided upon. Thus the Utopianist must win over, or else crush, his Utopianist competitors who do not share his own Utopian aims and who do not profess his own Utopianist religion.³⁰

This remark comes well before the flurry of interest in ideal theory sparked by John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*. Popper makes a point often absent from current debates, which this study has explored: utopian or ideal theorizing resembles religious belief in its inability to provide plausible grounds for the ideal it champions. He worries that, faced with this dilemma, utopian theory may turn to violence to mobilize the collective action needed to realize its ambitions.

Some may object to these worries and argue that future uncertainty justifies violence in pursuit of utopia. Since we cannot be sure what the future holds, who can say that a particular utopian project will fail? And given that uncertainty, who has the right to stand in the way of sincere attempts to not just theorize about utopia but also realize it? The problem, though, is that realizing a particular ideal on a societal scale usually requires much of society to strive for it – including those with dramatically different utopian hopes (or none at all). Given future uncertainty, people lack compelling reason to believe that any proposed ideal accurately captures utopia. Even if no one can show that a proposed ideal is mistaken, that is different from offering plausible grounds to believe in it. As a result, deep divisions over the ideal are

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 15–16.

²⁹ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 19.

³⁰ Karl Popper, “Utopia and Violence,” in *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 483.

likely. Perhaps violence could overcome some divisions by compelling individuals to pursue the same ideal, but that course of action has obvious downsides. It violates the principle against utopian violence and inflicts immense costs on society for a highly uncertain goal.

As critics of apocalyptic thought and ideal theory point out, utopian hope comes with real dangers. If hope in utopia pushes us to realize it at all costs, it poses severe harms without the assurance that the ideal will ever come. That raises the question: Can we preserve utopian hope and its benefits while avoiding its more destructive elements? The following section looks at how religious traditions grappling with apocalyptic thought's explosive nature have tried to answer that question.

A REMEDY FROM WITHIN THE APOCALYPTIC TRADITION

In light of the concerns raised earlier, the apocalyptic tradition seems limited in what it can offer ideal theory. By pointing to crisis as the way to utopia, apocalyptic thought proves appealing to ideal theorists looking to explain how an ideal can be both utopian and feasible. This appeal, though, turns out to be illusory. Apocalyptic thought tries to justify dramatic political action, even violence, as necessary to realize utopia, but ultimately cannot provide compelling reasons for that claim. Given that defect, it may seem that ideal theorists would be better off ignoring apocalyptic thought altogether.

It's true that apocalyptic thought fails to provide an understanding of the ideal suited to guide collective action for a society. No form of ideal theory succeeds in that regard. The apocalyptic tradition suffers from a limitation common to all forms of ideal theory. That limitation should come as no surprise and doesn't preclude the apocalyptic tradition as a potential source of wisdom. In fact, dangers within this tradition have spurred reflection on how to contain them, resulting in strategies that offer insights on how to preserve utopian hope while avoiding its pitfalls.

Notably, one finds in Jewish and Christian thought strands of eschatology that take a humble approach to utopian hope, which proves particularly suited to guard against the dangers of apocalyptic thought. Three core principles define this approach:

- (1) embrace utopian hope;
- (2) accept that humans are largely ignorant of the ideal and how to bring it about; and
- (3) recognize the dangers of trying to force the ideal into existence.

With these principles, Jewish and Christian thought put forward a strategy that gives space for utopian hope but remains alert to its hazards. This strategy avoids having to abandon utopian hope because it approaches such hope with an attitude of epistemic humility.

Let's look first at the Jewish tradition, for which apocalyptic belief and utopian hope are central. Maimonides's Thirteen Principles, a popular summation of the Jewish faith, highlight this point. His final two principles state:

- (12) I believe with full faith in the coming of the Messiah, and, though he tarry, I anticipate him, nonetheless, on every day, when he may come.
- (13) I believe with full faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the time that the Creator, may His name be blessed, wills it.³¹

The Jewish tradition has long wrestled with how to understand these apocalyptic expectations. In particular, outbursts of messianic enthusiasm throughout Jewish history have made this task all the more urgent.

Two of the most famous examples are the revolt against Rome led by Simon bar Kokhba and the movement inspired by Sabbatai Zevi. In both cases, apocalyptic hopes ended in utter disaster. Heralded as the messiah, Bar Kokhba initially succeeded in achieving a short period of Jewish self-rule beginning in 132 C.E. Rome, however, struck back and within a few years destroyed Jerusalem, killed thousands of its inhabitants – including Bar Kokhba – and sent those Jews who survived into exile.³² The movement led by Sabbatai also met a sad end. This self-proclaimed messiah attracted followers across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East as apocalyptic expectations reached a fever pitch in the year 1666. But rather than restore Israel as predicted, Sabbatai eventually would deny his faith and convert to Islam.³³

Such disappointments have left a deep impact on Jewish eschatology.³⁴ Drawing on teachings from the Talmud and Midrash, some rabbis argue that

³¹ The principles appear here in their shortened, liturgical form and come from Steven Schwarzschild, "On Jewish Eschatology," in *The Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*, ed. Menachem Kellner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 209. For their original formulation, see Moses Maimonides, "Helek: Sanhedrin, Chapter Ten," in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Springdale, NJ: Behrman House, 1972), 422.

³² See Menahem Mor, *The Second Jewish Revolt: The Bar Kokhba War, 132–136 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

³³ See Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

³⁴ David Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 125–26.

there is a divine injunction against trying to force the end.³⁵ This warning captures the wariness in Jewish thought toward any human projects that aspire to realize apocalyptic hopes.

Isaac Bashevis Singer sums up this attitude at the end of *Satan in Goray*, his fictional account of Sabbatai Zevi. After detailing the many hopes that Sabbatai dashed, Singer closes with the moral of the story: “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: Then death will put away his sword: And Satan die abjured, abhorred.”³⁶ So the lesson of Sabbatai’s failure is not that we should abandon utopian hope. Instead, it teaches the importance of learning how to maintain such hope while also recognizing that its aims lie beyond our power.

An even more radical approach within Jewish thought for avoiding the danger of forcing the end is found in the idea of the eternal delay of the Messiah’s return. According to this view, the Messiah is always coming and believers should continually anticipate his arrival, but his return remains forever located in future time. Because the arrival of God’s kingdom exists perpetually in the *future*, there is no reason to believe that one can force its manifestation in the *present*. This feature of God’s kingdom means that one should continually strive for it, free from the hubris that one can ever attain it. Theologian Steven Schwarzschild defends this understanding of Jewish eschatology and explains its ethical implications: “[S]ince humanity is to strive to imitate God . . . and since they are to undertake these efforts in this world, the ultimate goal of ethics is to establish what is then called ‘the (Messianic) kingdom of God’ on earth. This is, of course, an infinite goal, infinitely . . . to be approached.”³⁷ Utopian hope – even when its aim is eternally delayed – gives meaning to partial steps toward the ideal, while cautioning against the presumption that we can fully achieve it.

Similar strategies appear in Christianity, which like Judaism has a long history of contending with apocalyptic hopes coming to naught.³⁸ Various passages from scripture lend support to a humble approach to utopian hope, such as the reminder that only God knows when he will bring about his kingdom. In the so-called Little Apocalypse from the Gospels, Jesus warns

³⁵ Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 211–34.

³⁶ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray* (New York: Avon Books, 1963), 160.

³⁷ Schwarzschild, “On Jewish Eschatology,” 218.

³⁸ See Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*; and Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

his disciples of wars, political upheaval, and persecution that will precede the coming of the Messiah. As to when this hope will be fulfilled, he cannot say: “But about the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). The only guidance he can give is “keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn” (Mark 13:35). By denying that anyone but God knows when his kingdom will arrive, these verses undermine all human claims about being on the verge of realizing utopia.

Augustine is the most influential Christian theologian in developing this line of thought. He stresses a sharp break between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms, and cautions against trying to calculate when God’s ideal kingdom will come or looking for signs of it in the world.³⁹ One of his foremost interpreters, R. A. Markus, explains how this understanding of eschatology shapes views on hope and progress: “Christian hope deflates all ideologies and utopias: in their place it sets provisional goals, to be realised piecemeal, and to be kept flexible and perpetually subject to revision and renewal.”⁴⁰ Augustine’s interpretation of eschatology does not jettison hope for an ideal future, but rather counsels skepticism toward anyone who purports to have a plan for achieving it.

As these examples from Judaism and Christianity illustrate, some of the strongest critics of apocalyptic thought’s violent manifestations come from voices that still identify with and operate within this tradition of thought. Because of this connection, they have a deep familiarity with the tradition and intimate understanding of its weaknesses. Some traditions may be so flawed that they are not worth preserving, but that is not the conclusion of theologians like Augustine and Schwarzschild. For they also see certain strengths in the apocalyptic tradition. Rather than scrap it, they focus on crafting the most compelling interpretation of apocalyptic thought – one that overcomes its most problematic features.⁴¹

On this goal, they have had some success. Both Jewish and Christian thought developed understandings of eschatology that encourage epistemic humility and warn against the hubris of believing that human agency can

³⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), esp. XX.7, XX.9, XXII.30.

⁴⁰ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 171–72.

⁴¹ For more on the role and value of criticism within rather than wholly outside a tradition, see Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); and *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

force the arrival of utopia. Obviously, that humble approach has not always prevailed – there is no shortage of apocalyptic sects that have pursued utopia, sometimes through violence. Importantly, though, that upheaval gave way to strategies for containing it. These strategies involve, at their core, recognizing the deep uncertainty that plagues any human effort to identify the ideal and bring it about. Given that uncertainty, they take a wary view toward justifications for violence that appeal to utopian goals. By pairing utopian hope with epistemic humility, the apocalyptic tradition offers an approach to ideal theory that tempers its ambitions and keeps its most dangerous aspects in check.

UTOPIAN HOPE WITH EPISTEMIC HUMILITY

If not approached with epistemic humility, utopian hope can have violent and destructive consequences. Both the Jewish and Christian traditions understand this point given their histories, and in response have developed accounts of utopian hope to guard against its dangers. That is a laudable achievement, but some may ask what utopian hope looks like in practice when we abandon claims to knowledge regarding the object of such hope. If we concede that we cannot identify the ideal with any confidence, what if anything is left of utopian hope?

The humble approach defended here does not render utopian hope a wholly empty concept. Though a complete picture of the ideal is beyond human knowledge, our ability to identify with greater confidence certain practices that are clearly unjust provides a sense of what the ideal is *not*. One finds traces of this intuition in apocalyptic literature, which frequently condemns present injustices and emphasizes that they have no place in the ideal to come. For instance, the book of Revelation rails against the cruelty, greed, and human bondage of the Roman Empire (Revelation 18). A negative understanding of the ideal, which excludes certain injustices from it, provides a basis for critiquing the present and cultivating an attitude never content with its imperfections. Despite its vagueness and incompleteness, this vision still represents a radical departure from the entrenched injustice of the present – and, as such, a source of hope for those who choose to embrace it.

Inevitably, embracing utopian hope will prompt some to use their imagination to further fill in their vision of the ideal. There is nothing necessarily wrong with such flights of the imagination. They have the potential to inspire new ideas and experiments within society that prove beneficial. But it is important to always remember the tentative nature of these visions, given the epistemic limitations inherent to ideal theorizing. Appreciating that fact

should keep us humble. 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.