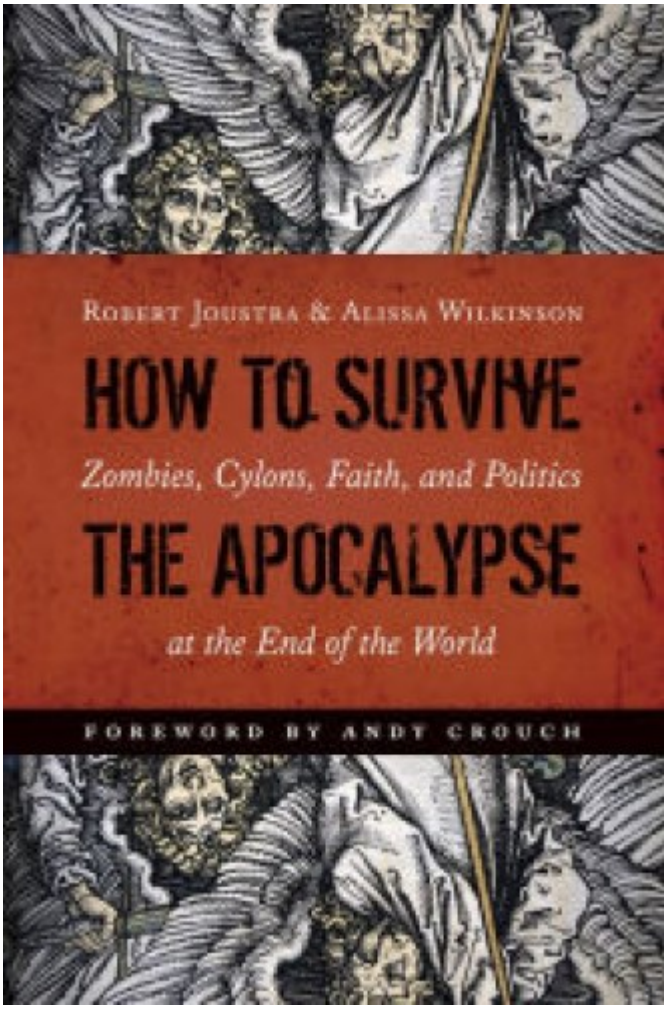
How does it end?

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the June 22, 2016 issue

In Review



How to Survive the Apocalypse

By Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson
Eerdmans

As we found our seats and the lights dimmed, my seven-year-old and I watched the world end five times. Not in a strictly final way—two such endings were part of sequels, and one seemed to bid fair to kick off a new series. We endured this

gauntlet of heavy-looming spacecraft and cataclysmic mutant gods in order to see the new *Star Wars* film, which featured the destruction of five more planets (all accomplished in one mercifully brief go).

I was tempted to shield my son's eyes and my own, less from the trauma of the images than from the curious implications of dwelling so repetitively and at such grandly budgeted length on one story after another of The End.

Why is it so profitable to make these apocalyptic entertainments? Art has long been a way for a society to imagine its own end. The visions may be hopeful or despairing, admonitory or fatalistic. They may be apotropaic talismans, warding off our anxieties by letting us experience them in a limited form ("Today we are canceling the apocalypse," a character in *Pacific Rim* says). Or they may be cold anticipations, like Stanley Kubrick's brutally satirical *Dr. Strangelove*, in which the world ends to the soundtrack of "We'll Meet Again." But the sheer width and breadth of apocalyptic themes and images in popular culture is, if not unprecedented, at least startling. We seem to be telling ourselves something, if under obscure signs.

Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson survey a broad swath of apocalyptic pop culture in search of what, exactly, we are telling ourselves. Their itinerary takes us through prominent antihero dramas (*Breaking Bad, Mad Men, House of Cards*), zombie stories (*The Walking Dead, World War Z*), science fiction (*Battlestar Galactica, Her*), and dystopian fictions of various kinds (*Game of Thrones, Scandal,* and *The Hunger Games*). They discern common and connected themes across works that at first glance share nothing more than a gnawing despair about the state of the world.

These are works, they argue, of secular apocalypse. As they are apocalyptic, they are connected to a literary tradition that is older than the Bible. As they are secular, they express the explicit norms and implicit contradictions of our secular age. "They're stories that have the distinct sense embedded in them that this social order can't last—that we are, in fact, near the end of something."

The ambitious and perhaps novel interpretation of these varied cultural products through the twin lenses of religious apocalypse and secularism requires the authors to orient us quickly to a good deal of material that can't be found on the most discerning viewer's Netflix queue. An early chapter introduces in some detail philosopher Charles Taylor's theory of the secular age—that is, the age of the modern and postmodern West. The secular age is not an age without faith or

religion, but rather an age in which having faith is radically optional, a choice among choices rather than the background assumption of a traditional or premodern culture.

Far from being a mere subtraction of beliefs or practices, secularity (in Taylor's telling) is the creation of something new. Instead of being "porous selves" inhabiting collective identities and susceptible to good or bad spiritual influences, we have become "buffered selves," isolated from the world and each other and thrown back on our own pathless search for authenticity. Instead of exploring an expressive, meaning-rich cosmos, we now operate in an impersonal, intrinsically meaningless universe. Instrumental rationality is, for us, the measure of all things.

Taylor's massive work on this topic has shaped the thinking of a significant segment of the Christian intelligentsia. Some have been tempted to make of this thesis an apocalypse of its own, connecting it to every baneful fact of discourse or morality. Joustra and Wilkinson nod to this temptation before resisting it. The world is not, in fact, going straight to hell. The cultural developments of the secular age are not unequivocally bad or good. But they create their own dysfunctions, still quite young and easily undetected, which constitute "the malaise of modernity."

That malaise, it turns out, is what their book is about. The antiheroes are men cut loose from the horizons of meaning that in ages past both limited moral choices and gave them significance. Their search for authenticity, a key concept in the literature (and polemic) on the secular age, is driven by "a malformed understanding of how finding our identity works."

So Walter White, the cancer-stricken nebbish of *Breaking Bad*, turns himself by small steps from a schoolteacher into a ruthless self-made drug kingpin—first out of desperation, then increasingly out of pride. "I am the one who knocks," he tells his wife, who clings naively to a more innocent version of Walter. This unmoored, freely chosen but nugatory self-assertion represents the "triumphant, arrogant march" of the secular antihero "toward what he conceives of as not his doom but his glory."

Analogous themes come to the fore in the mild near-future dystopia of Spike Jonze's 2013 feature *Her* or the abyssal fantasy world of *Game of Thrones*. The technological and political advance of autonomy brings with it a poverty of human connection. In the wealthy, decadent Capitol of *The Hunger Games*, the "iron cage" of modernity enables boundless hedonism while rendering systemic injustice invisible to its

residents. When the ways that power legitimates itself are unmasked, as they are in *Game of Thrones*, what's left are endless competing subjectivities. "We inhabit inescapable horizons," Wilkinson and Joustra comment on the cynical realism of *Game*, "and our Secular self-delusions always have a clock on them. Tick, tock."

Yet for all its erudite diagnosis, *How to Survive the Apocalypse* is not suffused with *Walking Dead* levels of doom. Modern apocalypse reveals and conceals at the same time. "Society moves in all directions," Joustra and Wilkinson remind us—it moves toward new syntheses and forms of order as well as fresh expressions of chaos. In the redeeming choices, however few, that are available in postapocalyptic hellscapes, we can glimpse wisdom for our own "preapocalyptic" times, "an account of the self that is truly *apocalyptic*, that bears within it the revelation of who we are, what we're for, and where we're going."

The book concludes with an intriguing analogy. "We need new Daniels," the authors insist, referring to the Old Testament prophet who rose to prominence in Nebuchadnezzar's court with a daring combination of principle and flexibility. Daniel is "the patron saint of the apocalypse," a model for Christians (or really anyone with a worldview not wholly conformed to the postulates of the secular age) who want to live in and serve a fragile, fraying world while proposing and defending bigger, better ideas of what it means to be human.

This clear-eyed but cautiously hopeful conclusion comes as a bit of a surprise after the book's many tours through imagined ends of the age. Joustra and Wilkinson's apocalyptic politics rest on the assumption that democratic societies suffer primarily from a deterioration of public virtue (in the broadest, least moralistic sense). If we could check and perhaps correct this deterioration by building and serving "faithful institutions" within the secular age, we could allow for greater human flourishing. The apocalypse is, it seems, primarily within. It is cultural and psychological, not historical and natural. One can only hope that this theory is right.

But what if it's not? What if modern, secular, democratic societies need something more drastic than a cultural renovation from within? It may be that the horizon that both enables and limits our culture is narrower and harder than that of medieval Europe or ancient Babylon. The environmental, economic, and even technological imbalances of our society—and the institutional crises issuing from them—may run far deeper than even Charles Taylor's theories suggest.

The writers of television shows seem to suspect this. *Breaking Bad* may be a classic secular age tragedy, but it is equally a tale of the Great Recession. *House of Cards* chronicles a power-hungry man's battle with the intrinsic meaninglessness of self-fashioning, but it also holds a fun-house mirror up to a period of chronic institutional failure. *The Hunger Games* critiques hedonism, but it also extrapolates from our present age of hyper-inequality. And it doesn't take much squinting to see an ecological subtext to the modern zombie apocalypse. Secular apocalypse is a guide to causes, not just symptoms.

To describe our own time as preapocalyptic, for instance, requires the exclusion of considerable evidence from outside the cultural boundaries of the developed, democratic West. The frightening dynamics of the 2013 government shutdown in the United States look considerably worse as they play out in Brazil, and downright terrifying in places where state failure is advanced, sometimes with the help of U.S. policies—places like Syria and El Salvador, whose refugees from the end of their world are pleading for entrance into ours. The relative preponderance of fear over generosity in our response is a strong indication of how we will react when the dislocations start closer to home.

The ironies and reversals that history holds for the great and powerful are a subject of apocalypse, too. In his short apocalyptic novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), South African author J. M. Coetzee imagines an unnamed empire that, like any empire, "dooms itself to live in history and plot against history," ruthlessly and vigorously seeking to delay its destruction—the sooner or later toppling of "the globe surmounted by the tiger rampant that symbolizes eternal dominion."

Such plotting is costly. Whole civilizations were brought to nothing to make room for ours. Our civilization undertook this grim task without any help from the malaise of late modernity. If anything, that malaise has been deepened by the growing knowledge of what we have been, and still are, quite capable of, in all the antiheroic brilliance of our reigning ideologies. We live toward the precipice of our world, but only just behind us are the other worlds we've ended to get here. Perhaps when the lights are lowered, we are indulging in the most deeply submerged and horrid thrill of all—the thrill of watching chickens come home to roost.

The astonishing, quiet apocalypse of the 2015 film *Ex Machina* illustrates this thrill perfectly. In a utopia built by immense wealth and rendered smooth by technology, folly and hubris, two great poles of human nature, conspire to unleash a world-ending version of artificial intelligence. The ending, the evolutionary abolition of

humanity in which humans are both the driver and the mere instrument, is predetermined. Only the timing is unknown. At its glorious height a world discovers, too late and by surprise, precisely what it can’t control. For centuries, a whole civilization can be the one who knocks. But sooner or later everyone has to open the door.