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# The Danger of Dreaming about the Apocalypse

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# The Danger of Dreaming about the Apocalypse

## **Abstract**

"It remains for us, then, to exegete our own social imaginary, to discern what threads are laid as part of our Christian culture and which are rooted in our national culture."

Posting about social imaginary and references to it in the book *How to Survive the Apocalypse* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-danger-of-dreaming-about-the-apocalypse/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, end of the world, culture, society, stories

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# The Danger of Dreaming about the Apocalypse

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 [inallthings.org/the-danger-of-dreaming-about-the-apocalypse/](http://inallthings.org/the-danger-of-dreaming-about-the-apocalypse/)

Donald Roth

January 4, 2018

Society sure seems to be going to hell in a handbasket.

Now, people have always said that. But still, it's difficult to see news of global disasters, war, terrorism, economic instability, government corruption, protest, and other unrest without thinking that something significant is going on in the world lately. Especially for us in the United States, it's hard to imagine that the rapid pace of change in technology, in the makeup of the economy, and in social norms during the last 20-30 years isn't fundamentally changing who we are as a society. When big issues like our collective identity seem to be up for grabs (or under threat, depending on your perspective), it's natural for us to take on language that is similarly grand, speaking of issues in increasingly religious and even apocalyptic terms.

This week, "In All Things" is running a series of articles connected to Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson's *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World*. This wonderful book connects our popular culture with an analysis heavily rooted in the work of Charles Taylor, and it provides a fantastic, accessible introduction to the mind of that thinker. This isn't the first time that society has been fascinated with stories about people at the end of their ropes or at the world's last hour, but this fascination also points to a sense that momentous things are afoot.

In the spirit of the book, let's unpack the importance of what Charles Taylor calls the "social imaginary" and how our perception of desperate times might validate increasingly desperate measures.

## **The Social Imaginary**

As Charles Taylor writes in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, a "social imaginary" is the way "people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others" and the architecture of the expectations we have for one another. These imaginaries are embedded in the "images, stories, and legends" of a large group of people which enable certain "common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." Put more plainly, the social imaginary is the sense of the moral order carried by a group of people through the stories they tell about their history and who they desire to be. That is, our social imaginary is the story we tell ourselves about who we are.

The crucial aspects of this concept lie in who shares a social imaginary, what it's made of, and what effect it has. For Taylor, the social imaginary is much broader than ideology or theory. The social imaginary is something shared by intellectuals and illiterates alike by virtue of their

shared cultural context. If it's possible to say that two people come from the same culture, then the shared aspect of their identities is grounded in the same social imaginary. It might be appropriate to think of the social imaginary as the beating heart of culture.

So, how does a social imaginary come to be? Taylor argues that theories and practices can infiltrate the social imaginary from multiple levels, particularly through major formative experiences, but the true imaginary of a society is that which becomes embedded in the rituals, songs, and stories that define a community. Although the social imaginary shapes our conscious intellect, it exists in a space connecting our intellect and our action, and, as a result, it can be a difficult thing to nail down or define comprehensively.

The upshot of all of this, however, is in what a social imaginary does. For Taylor, the social imaginary defines the borders of what sorts of social actions we consider acceptable. That is, it gives legitimacy to how we interact by shaping our expectations of behavior. The example Taylor brings up is that of a protest. If someone were to tell you to organize a protest, what would you do? Perhaps you would make signs, plan a march, hold a rally in a public park—but, importantly, what *wouldn't* you do? In the American context, the success of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is tied deeply to its nonviolence. It might be legitimate to shout passionate, even offensive chants, but violent action does not seem appropriate within our social imagination of protest.

### **You don't believe we're on the eve of destruction?**

Here's where all of this becomes so important today: if the world is going to hell in a handbasket, if there's a culture war, if we're standing on the wrong side of history, then the scope of what feels appropriate, what is legitimate, changes.

Yuval Levin argues persuasively in *The Fractured Republic* that both the political right and left are defined by a nostalgia for the past, with the right longing to maintain/return to the optimistic cultural consensus of post-war years, while the left longs for the sense of purpose and progress that marked the 1960s. Levin argues that this dichotomy is tied closely to the maturation and life cycle of the Baby Boomer generation. When read through Taylor's lens, the social imaginary of today's politics is tied to memories of an idyllic childhood (the 50s), the ardent activism and rebellion of youth (the 60s), the confusion of young adulthood (the 70s), and the maturation and investment of adulthood (the 80s), all of which are now threatened by the young upstarts working through their own lifecycle (00s-10s).

We often joke about fashions recycling every few decades, and it's old wisdom that history repeats itself. Pundits have claimed that the Iraq War protests of the last decade were attempts to reenact the protests of the Vietnam War. Similarly, the movements for gay and now transgender rights are borrowing heavily from the Civil Rights era, while the Black Lives Matter movement seeks to recapture and press forward the momentum of decades past. The events of past decades cast long shadows over the present, and the continued popularity of

the songs and stories of those times echo into the sense of what we're doing today, mixing together with a passion and taste for progress rooted in the advent of a new millennium and the maturation of America's largest generation.

Look at the past few years. We have not legitimized violence at a broad level of society, but increasing numbers of people have begun to feel it is called for. A swell of populism saw the ascendancy of Donald Trump, backed even by many white Christians who either enthusiastically supported the call to "drain the swamp" or who were at least willing to hold their noses to secure a favorable Supreme Court nominee. Tensions have continued to ratchet up, and we can only pray that we don't end up reenacting the end of the 1960s, in which there were more than 4,000 bombings in one year. However, if we're singing ourselves songs of the apocalypse, there may be no escaping the tactics that come with it.

Finally, then, what should we do with the concept of "social imaginaries" as a Christian community? To start, we should be conscious that we have been invited into a very different social imaginary from that of the culture around us. The Bible invites us into a shared identity as God's people, and it presents us with a rich covenant history to root us in that identity. When we gather, we worship through song, sermon, and story in a way that should draw us further into that new identity. It can be tricky to navigate the tension of being both American and Christian, of being "not of this world" while we "seek the welfare of the city" in which we find ourselves, and while we confess "the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." However, it is indisputable what identity should be primary for Christians.

It remains for us, then, to exegete our own social imaginary, to discern what threads are laid as part of our Christian culture and which are rooted in our national culture. We must use this awareness to speak more boldly in the language of story, to richly embed ourselves in who we are, teach that to our children, and learn to sing of all the beauties this particular social imaginary contains. Ultimately, we believe in a coming apocalypse as well, but Scripture's imagination around how we remain ready for the Day of the Lord looks very different from a culture that envisions itself working out or warding off the apocalypse. There can be danger in dreaming of the apocalypse when, as Christians, our kingdom is not of this world. Let us labor then in readiness and faithfulness, not fear or desperation, because, although our days are numbered, they are numbered by a God who prevails over all things.