

Apocalypse as Religious and Secular Discourse in *Battlestar Galactica* and its Prequel *Caprica*

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Abstract

The concept of the end of the world is inherent in religious discourse. Illustratively, in Medieval Christianity, a divine power was held responsible for cataclysmic events. In the post-Hiroshima era, the concept of apocalypse has taken on secular meaning. Not surprisingly, given recent history, the apocalypse has become a prominent component of popular television epics; broadcast narratives, such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica*, entwine both Biblical and secular versions of the apocalypse, thereby creating a novel apocalyptic discourse which, instead of establishing the apocalypse as an end, uses it as a foundation, as a thought-provoking means of conveying a political message of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, of encouraging self-reflectiveness; and as a way of denouncing the empty rhetoric of religious extremism.

Keywords: Television series, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Caprica*, religion, Book of Mormon, Bible, Book of Revelation, John of Patmos, Genesis, Adam, Garden of Eden, Heaven, God, fall of man, the beast, false prophet, angel, Second Coming, resuscitation, apocalypse, end of the world, nuclear apocalypse, Hiroshima, post-apocalyptic, genocide, intertextuality, parody, pastiche, religious satire, 9/11, America, religious terrorism, suicide bombing, cyborg, robot, humanity, monotheism, polytheism.



The television series *Battlestar Galactica*¹ establishes its chronology between a nuclear apocalypse that has just taken place and the threat of a potential future apocalypse,² both at the hands of human-looking cyborgs called Cylons. *Caprica*, its prequel series, set fifty-eight years before the nuclear detonation, unfolds the events leading up to the apocalypse in *Battlestar Galactica*. Indeed, *Caprica* functions as if it were part of a puzzle, supplying the missing pieces which gradually fill narrative gaps purposefully left open by *Battlestar*

¹ For the sake of convenience, individual episodes are referenced in the following abbreviated manner (full episode references appear in the bibliography): BSG 1x01 refers to *Battlestar Galactica*, season 1, episode 1; CAP 1x19 refers to *Caprica*, season 1, episode 19. Episode titles are only provided when specifically relevant; for instance, if they reference the Bible.

² Unless otherwise stated, the term 'apocalypse/Apocalypse' is used in this article in its secondary and popular sense of an event of great importance, violence, etc. like those described in the Book of Revelation, the term being lower case throughout when used in a secular context and having an upper-case first letter when used in a scriptural context.

Galactica. In both series, whether explicitly or implicitly, the apocalypse is omnipresent and structures the narrative, be it with the permanent threat of extinction that the characters face in *Battlestar Galactica*, or through the general sense of doom and gloom that viewers experience watching *Caprica*, as they are driven to investigate and over-interpret each detail and line of dialogue in an effort to make sense of the apocalypse to come.

Battlestar Galactica is a remake of a 1978 series by the same name, created for ABC by Glen A. Larson, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Woolfe 2008: 303);³ the original series accordingly incorporated numerous Mormon references.⁴ *The Book of Mormon* does not depict an Apocalypse per se, but it indirectly refers to the Revelation of Saint John in the First Book of Nephi, in which Nephi speaks of an Angel who appeared before him and told him that the Apostle John would write about the end of the world (Nephi 14. 18–27). Glen A. Larson's original title for *Battlestar Galactica* was 'Adam's Ark', which appropriately conveys two of the show's most prominent themes: exodus after annihilation (symbolised by the Ark) and the birth of the human race (embodied by Adam).⁵

As a consequence, religious discourse pervades both series. Recognisable features of the Book of Revelation are intertwined with the characters' personal religious agendas, as well as more trivial and profane agendas, leading to confusion, imposture or even parody of the Bible.⁶ Apocalyptic discourse in *Battlestar Galactica* and its prequel *Caprica* thus hinges on a deliberate confusion between the religious and the secular: neither of the series attempts to provide a faithful visual illustration of the apocalyptic events foretold in the Book of Revelation and, as such, neither adheres to identifiable end-times prophecy belief systems (such as for instance premillennialism, dispensationalism or preterism) nor promote eschatological discourse at large. The monotheistic 'One true God' to which allusion is made in both series remains a mysterious entity, wholly disconnected from the Judæo-Christian God of the Holy Bible. Striving to make sense of the strange collage of religious

³ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also abbreviated as LDS Church) is the official and formal name of the Mormon Church.

⁴ These references have been discussed at length in two prominent articles: see Neumann (2013: 226–43) and Wolfe (2008: 303–17).

⁵ Glen A. Larson was not involved in the remake developed by Ronald D. Moore but the bulk of the storyline, the religious themes and the main characters lived on in the remake, so that he was credited as 'Consulting Producer' on *Battlestar Galactica* as well as on *Caprica* as an homage.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon provides the following definition of parody: 'Parody [...] is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied [...] usually signalled by irony. [...] It can be critically constructive as well as destructive. [...] Parody is transformational in its relationship to other texts' (Hutcheon, 2000: 32, 38).

intertextuality within the series,⁷ the viewer is led to understand that religious references here fulfil two complementary objectives. First, they legitimise the two opposing religions (monotheism and polytheism) depicted in both series by referencing easily identifiable real-world religions; from a narrative standpoint, this has the advantage of escaping the lengthy and complex exposition that would have been entailed by the invention of two entirely fictitious religions bearing no resemblance to existing ones. Secondly, by choosing not to adhere to the real-world Judæo-Christian apocalyptic belief system, the writers of these series are left free to link the apocalyptic narratives they unfold to whichever meaning best befits their agenda. This ‘pick-and-choose’ attitude towards references from both the Judæo-Christian Bible in general and the Book of Revelation in particular serves to introduce a key ingredient of distance from religious doctrine, which in turn enables parody, irony and satire to creep into the apocalyptic discourse of the series,⁸ thereby creating, as this article will demonstrate, a novel apocalyptic discourse which, instead of establishing the apocalypse as an end, uses it as a foundation, as a thought-provoking means of conveying a political message of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, of encouraging self-reflectiveness; and as a way of denouncing the empty rhetoric of religious extremism.

1. Apocalypse as punishment: appropriating the Book of Revelation

Battlestar Galactica opens *in medias res*: a nuclear apocalypse has just taken place — a nuclear detonation which destroyed the Twelve Colonies and triggered the Second Cylon War, forcing humans from the twelve planets (each planet forms a Colony) into exile. The narrative initially provides no clues as to why the Second Cylon War began. A caption at the beginning of the pilot simply states that the Cylons ‘decided to kill their masters’ (*Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*). We are then gradually given to understand that the Cylons revere the ‘One true God’, whereas humans worship Gods (plural), who bear a striking resemblance to the Gods of the Greek Pantheon.

When we examine religious themes and references in *Battlestar Galactica*, we discover clear analogies with the Holy Bible; for example, the apocalypse is popularly known as ‘the

⁷ Gérard Genette defines intertextuality as ‘*la présence d’un texte dans un autre* [the presence of one text within another]’, a textual relation which includes quoting, plagiarising and making allusions, and whose field of application is the whole body of the work (Genette 1982: 8–9; author’s translation).

⁸ Linda Hutcheon defines satire by contrast to parody: ‘Satire is extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction. [...] The obvious reason for the confusion of parody and satire [...] is the fact that the two genres are often used together. Satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes. Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgments, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized’ (Hutcheon, 2000: 43–44).

Fall', which clearly suggests the Fall of Man and Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3;⁹ this reverses the Biblical sequence of events, according to which the Apocalypse is the final event, described in the last book, not a trigger of events, described in the first. Incidentally, this parallel with the Fall of Man implies that man's sin in *Battlestar Galactica* predates the beginning of the series, thereby justifying the creation of its prequel *Caprica* in order to explain the reasons leading to the Fall.

Caprica offers sharp tonal and thematic contrasts with the darker post-apocalyptic *Battlestar Galactica*: wide-angle shots of lush sceneries and dreamy seaside landscapes surrounding the opulent designer house of the main characters (the Graystone family) alternate with vibrant street scenes from the eponymous planet and thriving city of Caprica; the colour scheme is radiant and, after the teaser sequence, the pilot episode begins with a frivolous game of tennis between Amanda and Daniel Graystone as their friendly butler robot Serge watches. In this respect, the settings of Caprica City function as a kind of utopia, as the proverbial Garden from which the humans will be expelled after the apocalypse in *Battlestar Galactica*. Nevertheless, the seeds of dystopia are immediately sown: they are apparent in the teaser sequence of the pilot, which immerses the viewer in V-Club,¹⁰ a clandestine virtual nightclub fraught with sex, debauchery and violence, which enables young Capricans to enact vicariously their most decadent fantasies, as ennui pervades their lives. Religious terrorism is also introduced in the pilot, as Ben, a teenager, detonates his suicide vest aboard a train, saying, 'The One true God shall drive out the many', and killing hundreds in the process (among which, the protagonist Zoe Graystone), thereby infusing the series with feelings of grief and loss that foreshadow the Fall. This early juxtaposition of human hubris and sin with punishment (in the form of an explosion and in the name of religion) serves to produce a primitive watered-down echo of the global nuclear apocalypse brought about by religious terrorism in *Battlestar Galactica*. In addition, it contributes to the establishing of thematic continuity between the two series and to the linking of secular and religious discourses revolving around the apocalypse.

The opening titles of *Caprica* show a graveyard on a densely clouded night (the surname 'Graystone' is highly evocative of gravestones). One tombstone is inscribed with 'Adama', the family surname of the other family which features prominently throughout the series, a

⁹ All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Bible of 1611.

¹⁰ In the series, V-Club is one of the many universes generated by Caprican hackers inside V-World, a virtual game created by Daniel Graystone, that the characters access by putting on 'holobands', which are computerised eyeglasses.

discreet Biblical allusion, in that mortality is one of the consequences suffered by Adam as a result of the Fall and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.¹¹

Genesis, which describes the Fall, is followed by Exodus, which describes the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt and their years of wandering before reaching the Promised Land. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the Fall is also followed by an Exodus; the characters face trials and tribulations on their way to a promised land called Earth, and many episode titles refer to the Bible in general and the Book of Revelation in particular; for example: 'Rapture' (BSG 3x12), 'Revelations' (BSG 4x12) and 'He That Believeth in Me'¹² (BSG 4x3). Specific allusions to symbols present in the Book of Revelation also abound. Throughout the series, reference is made to the Sacred Scrolls, which form the basis of the Twelve Colonies' polytheistic faith. The Sacred Scrolls discuss the Exodus from planet Kobol as well as the legends of Earth. One of these scrolls is the Book of Pythia, which foretells the events that the 47,000 or so human survivors of the Cylon-triggered apocalypse face. In Revelation 5. 1 John says that he 'saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne [God] a book written within and on the back side, sealed with seven seals',¹³ which contained God's message. Among other things, it consists of a prophecy about the future of humanity and hints that humanity's path is predetermined. In the case of the Sacred Scrolls, the allusion is fairly faithful to the spirit of the Book of Revelation.

However, elements of the Book of Revelation can also be subjected to distortion, parody, irony and satire in *Battlestar Galactica*. For example, Commander Adama is referred to as 'the beast' by Cavil, after the former has been shot by Boomer: 'Thus is the beast decapitated' (*Battlestar Galactica: The Plan*). Revelation 13 mentions a beast who speaks 'in blasphemy against God' (Revelation 13. 6) and who must be killed like he has killed: 'he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword' (Revelation 13. 10). The irony here is that it is not Commander Adama who is the false prophet metaphorised by the beast of Revelation but Cavil the Cylon.

¹¹ God warns Adam that eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge will make him mortal (whereas eating of the tree of life will make him immortal): 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (Genesis 2. 17). As a consequence, when Adam and Eve share the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God expels them from the Garden and makes them mortal: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Genesis 3. 19). Adam dies after having lived 930 years (Genesis 5. 5).

¹² 'Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die' (John 11. 25–26).

¹³ At the time that the Book of Revelation was written, books were written in scroll format.

Another example is the reference in Revelation 1 to the ‘Son of Man’: ‘And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the son of man’ (Revelation 1. 13); this is speculatively interpreted as a reference to Jesus. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the Cylons are called ‘the Sons of Man’ (or, alternatively ‘Humanity’s Children’ (*BSG: The Miniseries* and *CAP 1x19*)) and the drama initially introduces seven Cylon models. In this context, their being likened to Jesus Christ appears altogether ironical given their robotic nature. This could also be interpreted as an element of religious satire: the iconoclastic parallel drawn between Cylons and Jesus Christ might be construed as a criticism of the way religion can, in extreme cases, dehumanise people: one only has to think, for instance, of religious terrorists who commit senseless acts while blindly following their interpretation of religious doctrine.

Moreover, in Biblical numerology, the number seven symbolises perfection:¹⁴ in the Book of Revelation, the beast, the personification of evil, has seven heads, and this use of the number seven to describe evil constitutes a symbolic warning that evil can take on many faces, especially appealing ones;¹⁵ this is echoed by the casting of beautiful and sexy women to play humanoid Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*, all of which at some point commit acts of terrorism. A further instance is that of the pregnant woman in Revelation 12; Cylon n° 6, Sharon Agathon, will become pregnant with a daughter.

Finally, Revelation 10 and 11 evoke an angel. Traditionally, in religious apocalyptic literature, angels bear the revelation of God, which occurs in the form of dreams or visions and prophesies events to come (Apocalypse-soon.com). In *Battlestar Galactica*, three characters are openly referred to as angels: Caprica Six, Kara Thrace, also known as Starbuck, and Gaius Baltar.¹⁶ Furthermore, in *Caprica*, Sister Clarice reveals, in a discussion with Amanda Graystone, that Zoe Graystone received the word of God from angels: ‘Oh, you think I led her? No. Oh, no. She led me. She was the one who talked to angels. They guided her. Zoe saw it all’ (*CAP 1x18*). Both Kara Thrace and Zoe Graystone act as messianic figures: Zoe Graystone is the first humanoid Cylon who will pave the way for all future Cylons;

¹⁴ For a lengthy and extremely thorough discussion of the meaning of the number seven in the Bible, see Adela Yarbro Collins (1996: 55–138).

¹⁵ ‘John sometimes uses the numbers seven or three to highlight the kingdom of evil’s hollow mimicry of the divine’ (Beale 1999: 64).

¹⁶ In the finale of the series, Baltar sees himself and Caprica Six as angels: ‘I see angels, angels in this very room. Now, I may be mad, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not right. Because there’s another force at work here. There always has been. It’s undeniable. We’ve all experienced it. Everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can’t fathom, let alone explain by rational means. Puzzles deciphered in prophecy. Dreams given to a chosen few. Our loved ones, dead, risen. Whether we want to call that ‘God’ or ‘gods’ or some sublime inspiration or a divine force we can’t know or understand, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. It’s here. It exists, and our two destinies are entwined in its force’ (*BSG 4x20*).

before dying in the train bombing, Zoe Graystone had created an avatar copy of herself in V-World. This later enabled her to download her avatar self into a Cylon robot prototype created by her father and therefore perpetuate her own existence. The epilogue scene ‘The shape of things to come’ of the series finale of *Caprica* (CAP 1x19) thus shows Zoe being reborn in a birthing tank (also referred to as a ‘resuscitation tank’ in the series) as a humanoid Cylon, a parody of Messianic Resurrection and of the Second Coming.

Kara Thrace’s status as an angel is more ambiguous: seen first as a foul-mouthed insubordinate pilot who enjoys drinking, gaming and recreational sex, she progressively gains enlightenment after she returns from the dead. Cylon n° 2, Leoben Conoy, tells her: ‘I look at you now. I don't see Kara Thrace. I see an angel blazing with the light of God, an angel eager to lead her people home’ (BSG 4x07). Her messianic role is established in the series through cryptic negative prophecies spoken by the Cylon Hybrid: ‘Kara Thrace will lead the human race to its end. [...] She is the herald of the apocalypse. The harbinger of death. They must not follow her’ (*Battlestar Galactica: Razor*). The etymology of the word ‘harbinger’ provides useful insight as to why she was labelled ‘Harbinger of Death’: the term comes from the French word *héberger* (to welcome under one’s roof), and as a resurrected character, Kara Thrace arguably harbours death inside her. The cryptic message would then be that humans must not follow her in death, as only she will be resurrected. Indeed, in a true parody of Jesus’ death, of the resurrection and of the Second Coming,¹⁷ Kara Thrace dies as her plane crashes (BSG 3x17) and is resurrected two months later (BSG 3x20) as a real corporeal person to fulfil her mission and lead the survivors to Earth. Another archaic meaning of ‘harbinger’, also derived from French, is someone who is sent ahead to provide lodgings, which is what Kara Thrace does by leading the survivors to Earth (TV.com, *Battlestar Galactica* Forums). Having completed her mission, Kara Thrace eventually vanishes in the series finale (BSG 4x20), presumably to return to Heaven.

It would therefore appear that this recycling of Biblical motifs within the series serves an objective of distancing: the dramas firmly and repeatedly establish their spirituality, perhaps in order to appeal to the 92% of American audiences who, according to Gallup polls, believe in God,¹⁸ while at the same time offering perspective through the use of parody of religious

¹⁷ All four Gospels say, or imply, that Jesus’ tomb was discovered to be empty ‘on the first day of the week’ (Matthew 28. 1, Mark 16. 9, Luke 24. 1–3 and John 20. 1), he having risen from the dead. Kara Thrace rises two months after her death but her remains are discovered along with her crashed plane on planet Earth (BSG 4x11).

¹⁸ 2012 Gallup Poll on religious practices in America: 92% of American adults believe in God, 77% of American adults in 2012 identify with a Christian religion and 69% percent of American adults are very religious or moderately religious (Gallup Polls).

apocalyptic themes. The justification for both dramas' adopting such a strong religious stance while simultaneously distancing themselves from traditional religiosity appears to be rooted in the producers' desire to establish them as thought-provoking political shows. In particular, the events surrounding 9/11 and their aftermath seem to have played a decisive part in establishing the dramas' message, as Executive Producer David Eick explains in an interview for the DVD bonuses of *Caprica*:

When we were breaking the original story for *Battlestar Galactica*, it was shortly after 9/11 of '01. And so there was a great deal of discussion about how this religious strife had led to these horrible acts of violence. And that greatly informed the agenda of the antagonists, the Cylons, in *Battlestar*.

Speaking of the elaboration of the dominant theme of the series *Caprica*, Executive Producer Jane Espenson likewise adds: 'The idea of religion and the fervent action that can come out of religion seemed like a natural' (*Caprica*, Season 1, Part 2). In the light of these two producers' observations, we shall see how both series draw a parallel between iconoclastically appropriating Biblical apocalyptic prophecy and the way religious terrorism and false prophets divert religious texts to justify the unjustifiable: in short, how do the series strategically develop fictitious apocalyptic narratives in order to cope with the real-life trauma of 9/11?

2. Revelation: denouncing the false prophets of a profane apocalypse

The narrative structure of *Battlestar Galactica* relies on a complex chronology, based on the eternal return of the apocalypse. Their monotheism or polytheism notwithstanding, there is common ground between all the characters in the shared belief in the 'Cycle of Time', a belief that parallels the myth of eternal return (or eternal recurrence), a concept found in many religions and philosophies, both present day and ancient. The belief in the Cycle of Time is expressed very early on in the series, when Cylon Leoben, talking to Kara Thrace, says: 'All this has happened before, and all this will happen again' (BSG 1x08), a quote from the human's canon of scripture, the Book of Pythia, referred to earlier. The quote, which recurs at regular intervals throughout the series and is also echoed once in *Caprica* (CAP 1x09), serves as a cautionary tale: another apocalypse is just around the corner if the characters do not modify their behaviour. Indeed, this is illustrated during the humans' space Exodus: as they search for a new habitable planet, they come across the ruins of two previously inhabited planets, Kobol (BSG 1x12) and Earth (BSG 4x10, 'Revelations'), which both suffered destruction following nuclear apocalypses in times that predate the *Battlestar Galactica* diegesis. As the characters finally land on a New Earth in the series' finale, a narrative twist

reveals by way of a flash-forward of 150,000 years that this New Earth is actually *our* Earth: we see the present-day Time Square and realise that the futuristic story we have watched occurred in our past (BSG 4x20). As pictures of Cylon robots flash across the electronic billboards of Time Square, the viewers are left to ponder: are we doomed to repeat endlessly the cycle of apocalypses?

This dominant philosophy within the series can be interpreted on two levels. The first is intrinsic to the drama: the revelation that the characters are, at any point in the story, simultaneously immersed in a pre-apocalyptic and a post-apocalyptic cycle serves as a catalyst; it is only when they become aware that they are trapped in this cycle that the characters finally attempt to seek the necessary enlightenment that will enable them to break it. The second is external to the drama: the recurring apocalypses serve as metaphors for America's repeated failed attempts to deal with the enduring trauma of 9/11; as the audience witnesses the obvious visual similarities between the charred ruins of the skyline of Earth (BSG 4x10, 'Revelations') and the Manhattan skyline and Ground Zero after 9/11, there can be little doubt that what *Battlestar Galactica* seeks to achieve is nothing short of a *catharsis*.

Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature features many works (ranging from the well-known canonical apocalypses of Daniel and John, to the lesser known apocryphal or pseudepigraphal apocalypses of Enoch, Baruch, Ezra, Zephaniah, Abraham, and of the Testaments of Abraham and of Levi, etc.), which differ radically in theme and content. One theme common to all, however, is the judgment/destruction of the wicked; which in some works is paralleled by the judgment/destruction of the world (Collins, J. 1998: 7). Another common feature is transcendent eschatology (Collins, J. 1998: 11): in these works, the power to end the world solely rested in God's hands. Thus, in the New Testament, after God ended the world in an Apocalypse, the souls of the faithful would be saved and forever dwell in the celestial New Jerusalem, the kingdom of Heaven (Revelation 20–22). As such, New Jerusalem symbolised a return to the Garden, especially in its mention of 'the tree of life' (Revelation 22. 2), which echoed 'the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil' mentioned in Genesis 2. 9.

Hiroshima marked a turning point in apocalyptic literature: mastering nuclear technology gave humans God-like powers of destruction and precipitated the evolution of apocalyptic literature from the religious to the secular (Flori 2008: 5). The corollary of this secularisation of the apocalypse was the disappearance of the promise of Heaven. German philosopher Günther Anders refers to this process as 'apocalypses without kingdom' (Anders 2006: 294).

From this perspective, both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica* are thematically rooted in a secular post-Hiroshima world. Humans are responsible for creating Cylons as limited robotic beings and then enslaving them. For the Cylons, this constitutes the cardinal sin for which humans are to be punished and which justifies genocide by means of a nuclear apocalypse. Their desire to crush the human race hides behind a veil of religiosity, but this desire is in truth compounded by social grievances and by a very trivial and secular anger.

Another reading of Revelation in the series may be based upon the Greek etymology of the word ‘apocalypse’, *apokalupsis*, which means ‘lifting the veil’. Both series seek to denounce religious fanaticism and racism. As such, the events of 9/11 constituted an avowed source of inspiration, and visual references to 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror abound in *Battlestar Galactica*. These references include visual pastiches of famous, widely circulated, and highly recognizable press photographs illustrating the consequences of 9/11 and of the ensuing ‘War on Terror’ led by George W. Bush;¹⁹ for example: scenes depicting skyscraper ruins (BSG 4x10, ‘Revelations’ and *BSG: The Plan*), people covered in dust (*BSG: The Plan*), memorial walls with the photographs of the missing and deceased along with flowers and miscellaneous memorabilia (BSG 3x10), formal tributes paid to flag-draped coffins (*BSG: The Miniseries*), posters illustrating fear-mongering tactics (‘Remember, anyone could be a Cylon!’)²⁰ and, last but not least, torture, water-boarding (BSG 1x08) and terrorist summary execution scenes, for example, the episode with which Cylon Leoben Conoy is ruthlessly airlocked out of the Battlestar ship (BSG 1x08). Ronald D. Moore’s deliberate choice to use a handheld camera to achieve a gritty documentary feel while shooting *Battlestar Galactica* was specifically designed to contribute added realism to the drama. This stylistic choice was intended to help render the series’ message exemplary in its depiction of the consequences of religious terrorism; it was also partly meant as an homage to ‘cinéma-vérité’ and highlights the fact that 9/11 created a turning point in representation of apocalyptic narratives.

The events surrounding 9/11 and their aftermath played a decisive part in establishing the message of both series, as was widely relayed, notably by the online entertainment press:

[‘Sci Fi’s ‘Battlestar Galactica’ remake’] may have taken place in a galaxy far, far away, but it was one of the TV shows most heavily inspired by 9/11. [...] Wrapped up in science-fiction drag, [...] what had been a cheesy ‘Star Wars’ rip-off in the 1970s was transformed into an unapologetic 9/11 allegory, in which a content and secure civilization tries to rebuild after a devastating attack by a bunch of religious zealots. [...] Because it had the added remove of

¹⁹ Linda Hutcheon sums up Genette’s definition of pastiche in the following manner: ‘Pastiche is imitative [‘in its relationship to other texts’] [...] Pastiche [...] aims at similarity’ (Hutcheon, 2000: 38–39; Genette, 1982: 34).

²⁰ *Battlestar Galactica* promotional posters designed by Sci-Fi Channel.

science-fiction, it could be blunter or more provocative than many fictional takes on post-9/11 life set in the real world (Sepinwall).

By taking arms against a religiously tolerant society practising a different religion, the Cylons both express religious intolerance and fanaticism: their desire to punish metaphorises terrorism in the name of religion as well as the way religious texts can be hijacked to serve fanatic agendas.

The Cylon apocalypse is referred to as a genocide of the human race and constitutes a fantasised extinction of moderate societies once fundamentalism takes over the world. President Roslin encapsulates this disaster scenario of extinction as she attempts to make Commander Adama realize the extreme gravity of their plight:

The human race is about to be wiped out. We have 50,000 people left, and that's it. Now, if we are even going to survive as a species, then we need to get the hell out of here and we need to start having babies (*BSG: The Miniseries*).

One of the prominent features of apocalyptic literature is the idea that people fighting on the side of good are an oppressed minority resisting evil legions and that, as such, their self-righteous actions are justified (Stevenson 2013: 97). It is well known that until Emperor Constantine granted freedom of religion with the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., Christians were an increasingly oppressed and martyred minority, suffering persecution first, in the middle decades of the first century, by Jews and later, within a pagan dominated Empire, by the Romans; there are several references to such persecution in the New Testament.²¹ Interestingly, in both series, the notion of oppressed minority repeatedly shifts perspective. In *Caprica*, monotheists are the minority, and Sister Clarice, through a series of fallacious self-justifications, rationalises mass murder and suicide bombing in the name of her religion. She heads a terrorist faction, the Soldiers of the One (also known as 'S.T.O.'), the fundamentalist strong arm of the monotheist Church. The narrative reveals that Cylons grew in numbers and went from minority (as enslaved robots and as the followers of a new fringe religion) to oppressors of the human race, which they attempted to exterminate. Thus, in the course of seasons 1 to 3 of *Battlestar Galactica*, humans become the oppressed minority, but their fate changes in season 3, episode 7 (*BSG 3x07*), as they regain the upper hand and face the opportunity to commit genocide themselves against the Cylons by destroying the Resurrection ship, the ship, which should they fall into harm's way, enables Cylons to download their

²¹ See, for example, the account of Stephen's arrest and stoning to death by Jews in Acts 6. 8–8. 1, and the references in the Book of Revelation to the sufferings of the Seven Churches of Asia and the martyrdom of individuals (at the hands of Romans in the late first century), as in Revelation 6. 9–11. Persecution is foretold in Luke 6. 22–23.

knowledge and consciousness into new identical copies of their bodies, through the use of ‘resurrection tanks’, thereby allowing them to cheat death.²² Through this reversal of perspective, the viewer comes to understand that if both sides believe in the righteousness of their actions as oppressors, then the logic upon which they operate must be flawed (Stevenson 2013: 116).

Both dramas, then, reveal that the monotheists as well as the Cylons are not collectively duped by the ideology they convey. In *Caprica*, a member of the established monotheist church, Obal Ferras, confronts Sister Clarice: ‘So you really want to serve God? [...] or do you want to be God?’ (CAP 1x11). Indeed, in the series, false prophets and cliché guru figures abound. Sister Clarice’s terrorist plan involves killing 30,000 people in a stadium using martyrs who, thanks to V-World, will gain eternal virtual life in avatar form. She calls this plan ‘Apotheosis’ and tries in the following terms to convince the monotheist church to embrace it:

Imagine a world in which death has been conquered. In which eternal life isn’t a dream, but a reality. 30,000 Capricans will die in the fire. A select few will be reborn, those who have accepted the One true God into their hearts. Only they will savour life everlasting in a virtual heaven that we have built. (...) I offer you a religion that removes the need for faith (CAP 1x11).

Sister Clarice’s rhetoric with its promise of ‘life everlasting in a virtual heaven that we have built’ for the ‘select few’ clearly mirrors that used by fanatics down the ages to radicalise potential adherents, such as radicalised Muslims, who are, it is popularly thought by some, indoctrinated to believe that suicide bombing will earn them seventy-two virgins in Heaven.²³ Apart from this, her assertion that ‘death [will have] been conquered’ is in Christian terms unthinkable; the mere idea of obliterating death also eliminates the Final Judgement and, therefore, constitutes blasphemy, an offence against the Deity, since it denies the power of God to be the sole arbiter in these matters. Removing ‘the need for faith’ also defeats the general purpose of religions in the first place and appears particularly satirical here.

Etymologically, ‘apotheosis’ means being deified. After discovering that she can manipulate the computer code of V-World to suit her needs, the Zoe Graystone-Avatar declares that she is God on two different occasions (CAP 1x16 and 1x19). The Book of

²² Their Resurrection ship grants Cylons immortal lives by automatically downloading their consciousness into a brand new copied body once the previous one has been destroyed.

²³ The seventy-two virgins are not mentioned in the Quran as such, however, they are mentioned in the Hadith (a collection of traditions and narratives which feature the sayings of Prophet Muhammad and his daily practice of religion (‘the sunna’), which Muslims must obey and emulate). For a list of quotes from the Hadith relating to the 72 virgins, see: http://wikiislam.net/wiki/Authenticity_of_72_Virgins_Hadith.

Revelation warns repeatedly against false prophets, who will burn in a lake of fire for their sin (Revelation 20. 10). The most explicit reference to false prophets, however, can be found in the First Epistle of John: ‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world’ (I John 4. 1). As further embodiments of the false prophet, two Cylon n° 1 copies, called Cavil, who pose as polytheist priests among humans, have no qualms, once discovered, in denouncing the existence of the very God in whose name they have committed genocide or ordered suicide bombings against the human ‘cockroaches,’ as they call them: ‘There is no God. Supernatural divinities are the primitive’s answer for why the sun goes down at night’ (*BSG: The Plan*). One of the more enlightened Cavil copies, after spending some time on planet Caprica with the human resistance, completely demythologises Cylon spirituality and the way Cylons hide behind a pseudo-religion to perpetrate genocide by confronting a more fundamentalist Cavil copy aboard the Battlestar ship:

Fleet-Cavil: Do you really believe it was a mistake to attack the humans?

Caprica-Cavil: Rather intensely, yes. [...] We had a temper tantrum in the form of a cataclysm because we wanted [the Final Five Cylons] to treasure us, the [number] Ones, more than humanity [...] (*BSG: The Plan*)

In truth, Cavil’s grievances are anything but religious. They belong to the realm of the profane and constitute a mixed expression of hubris and neurosis. We ultimately learn the true source of his self-centred desire to punish the humans: he deeply resents them for creating him as a limited robotic being who could not perceive the wonders of the universe the way he secretly wished to.²⁴ Similarly, at the beginning of the series *Caprica*, Zoe Graystone’s rebellion, though masquerading as religious fervour, does not truly stem from religious concerns: it appears as a futile adolescent outburst of rage against her parents. It takes time before her teenage fury evolves into a sense of her true purpose and a desire to use her newfound power to manipulate the computer code in order to reshape V-World into a better place by purifying it. Once she has achieved her goal, she destroys Sister Clarice’s false prophet heaven in a fit of very God-like anger: skies darken and fire erupts from the ground (CAP 1x19), in a fitting illustration of the ‘lake of fire’ of Revelation 20. 10. The elaborate

²⁴ Cavil:

I don’t want to be human! I want to see gamma rays. I want to hear x-rays and I want to ... I want to smell dark matter. Do you see the absurdity of what I am? I can’t even express these things properly, because I have to ... I have to conceptualize complex ideas in this stupid limiting spoken language. But I know I want to reach out with something other than these prehensile paws ... and feel the solar wind of a supernova flowing over me (*BSG 4x15*).

visual effects of the computer-generated scenes of Zoe reshaping V-World appear particularly striking: Zoe shatters the corrupt town of V-World and replaces its fallen buildings with majestic mountains, wild landscapes and waterfalls; she instils warm colours and greenery; in short, she makes the world enchanting once more and offers what could be deemed a possible return to the Garden.

Similarly, it is no coincidence that the characters of *Battlestar Galactica* should give the name 'New Earth' to the planet they successfully discover and colonise in the series' finale, given that in Revelation 21, John of Patmos states: 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away' (Revelation 21. 1). By infusing recurring religious references within the secular discourse, both series strive to re-establish the promise of the kingdom. Perhaps, the true underlying message conveyed by the dramas is that the trauma endured by America as a result of 9/11 can only be appeased by renewing the promise of a kingdom, after what felt like an apocalypse. Only then, once their abrupt finality has been erased, will death and sacrifice become acceptable. This message can also be inferred from the opening titles of *Caprica*: after closing-in on the tombstone inscribed with the name 'Adama', the camera travels forward to the statue of a winged angel in the cemetery, then focuses on its hand, which is cut; the wounded hand slowly appears to come alive as it fades into Sister Clarice's hand (whilst the cemetery backdrop fades into the interior of a church); she clutches it to her chest, then extends it, healed, holding out a blue infinity sign, as though to intimate that suffering in death will ensure eternal life.

Conclusion

To conclude, both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica* combine religious elements with secular elements. In its nuclear manifestation, the Cylon-triggered apocalypse is clearly secular in nature, but the characters and motifs used bear strong similarities with the defining features of religious apocalypticism in general and directly echo the storyline of the Book of Revelation in particular. However, going beyond a simple illustration of apocalyptic tropes, both series appropriate Biblical references as they strive to dismantle the empty rhetoric of religious extremism and question America's attempts to come to terms with a post 9/11 world. One of the recurring archetypes conveyed by apocalyptic literature and cinema is the opposition between individualism and collectivism. Going beyond the fallacious justifications provided by both series for the apocalypse endured by its human characters, one of the questions that *Battlestar Galactica* repeatedly asks is why should humans survive the apocalypse and be saved? The unexpected answer provided is that they should not. In the words of Commander

Adama, ‘One has to be worthy of surviving’.²⁵ How does one become worthy of surviving according to the moral of the dramas? By accepting otherness, in whatever form it might present itself, and by choosing collectivism and tolerance. In the series finale of *Caprica* (CAP 1x19), Sister Clarice pleads for the recognition of Cylons as ‘differently sentient’ beings and as humans’ equals. Likewise, in *Battlestar Galactica*, after having fought each other for the better part of four seasons, Cylons and humans finally overcome their racist prejudices and hatred of each other to find a middle ground and live together harmoniously. Illustratively, in *Battlestar Galactica*, the path set after the apocalypse is a journey of initiation, of progressive enlightenment, a spiritual *Bildungsroman* for the characters.

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²⁵ Cf. Commander Adama’s speech for the decommissioning ceremony of the *Battlestar Galactica*:

You know, when we fought the Cylons, we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question ‘Why?’ Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed and spite, jealousy, and we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept the responsibility for anything that we’ve done, like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God, create life. And when that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn’t our fault, not really. You cannot play God then wash your hands of the things that you’ve created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can’t hide from the things that you’ve done anymore (*BSG: The Miniseries*).

Athena Sharon Agathon alludes to his earlier speech, when she says, ‘Humanity never asked itself why it deserved to survive. Maybe you don’t’. This leads Commander Adama to observe to Kara Thrace: ‘It’s not enough to survive. One has to be worthy of surviving’ (*BSG* 2x12, ‘Resurrection Ship, Part II’).

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