

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology

Dialogue with B. Patrick Williams

Patrick: Well, my friend, I sympathize with your concerns relative to the violent judgment of God as understood by many evangelicals to be “coming soon.” The end of his world has been portrayed as a violent, cataclysmic event that results in horrific destruction as a result of God’s judgment of those who have rebelled against him. I think there are many ways in which you and I can clarify some important issues around this material.

I understand your worries regarding Bush’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the destruction of the environment, and America becoming a “police state” comprised of the poorly educated who lack “government services.” Do you think it’s possible for evangelicals to hold to a belief in an end times judgment by God while still caring for the environment, desiring to prevent war, advocating for government services and solid education?

Josh: Frankly, Patrick, I do not. For centuries one of the bedrock assertions of Christianity has been its dualistic withdrawal from the actual, material-political world. The Neo-Hegelian critique of Christianity unearthed a great insight into the aggressions and exterminations perpetuated in Jesus’ name. Basically, Feuerbach, Marx, and others criticized Christianity as an “individualistic” religion that preached personal salvation and renunciation of the material/political world because this world was “corrupt” and damned by God. You know

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the story. Christianity has always been about “personal salvation,” and when evangelical, about “saving souls.” Mainline Christianity in terms of the message communicated to the lay-people, as we both know, has never been concerned with the *real politick* matters of this world. In almost every single historical example that I can call to mind, the call to *reform* the existing world as a “mandate from God” has been met with resistance from mainstream Christianity and condemned as heresy, which is ironic as the down-and-dirty, minister-to-the-poor, fuck-the-authorities-and-status-quo attitude of most heretic reformers and revolutionaries is closer to the original mandate of Jesus. I think mainstream Christianity from its very origins in the early church is a perversion of Jesus’ material message of “The Kingdom of God” is *of this world, in this world, embodied in real people*. This has always been a revolutionary message. It got Jesus killed. Its gotten a lot of other people killed as well (Martin Luther King Jr. & Oscar Romero are two very popularized, contemporary examples).

Personally, Patrick, I feel you have an overly idealized and naïve view of what Christianity means and how it is practiced, especially in the U.S. You might try to defend your “Christianity” with “band-aid” programs of prison ministries, soup kitchens, missions trips, youth outreach, etc, but each of these programs are ultimately self-serving, thinly veiled attempts to “save souls” and are not all that concerned with alleviating the socio-economic pain and suffering of the body and exploited communities. And one of the most time-tested truisms of what I’m saying, ala Bertrand Russell, has been the perverse and detestable stance of Christianity on sex. In the world we live in, it is absolutely immoral and obscene to deny birth control and family planning, yet the church continues to do so.

Patrick: Well, frankly my friend, I’m disappointed that you don’t think an end times believing evangelical can also value the environment, seek to prevent war, and advocate for

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government services and education. I was hoping that you would offer a thoughtful perspective as to how an evangelical might channel some of his/her energy into “this-worldly” concerns; instead, you’ve taken a position governed by intellectual, theoretical considerations that distorts your perceptions. Of course, an evangelical who believes in the end-times can support taking care of the environment, seek to prevent war, advocate for government services and education. I am one.

I’m afraid that your bias against Christianity is compromising your ability to think critically. You offer valuable points of view but then you over simplify them and reduce them into one sided, dogmatic positions. These issues are multi-faceted and more complex than you’re allowing. For instance, of course there are Christians who have fled from the practical realities of the world, but there are many Christians who embrace the problems of the world. Martin Luther King Jr. was an ordained Baptist minister.

And what of this false opposition that you’ve set up between the Kingdom of God as being otherworldly versus the Kingdom of God being “*of this world, embodied in real people*”? Of course it is. You assert that I “might try to defend my ‘Christianity’ with ‘band-aid’ programs of prison ministries, soup kitchens, missions trips, youth outreach, etc, but each of these programs are ultimately self-serving, thinly veiled attempts to ‘save souls’ and are not at all that concerned with alleviating the socio-economic pain and suffering of the body and exploited communities.” On what do you base this?

What you’ve offered is a sweeping generalization and oversimplification that outruns what you should claim in good conscience. Your exhortation that people’s suffering and pain should be relieved is valid, but how can you reduce the only concern to that of saving souls? I’m not an expert on Christian missions, but my understanding is that missionaries work to achieve

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the holistic well being of those they minister to. Your one-sided assertion that all Christians care about is saving souls and that they don't care about other needs is utter nonsense. Your list ("prison ministries, soup kitchens" etc.) makes my point. These are activities that meet peoples' real needs where they are, in the world. It's not either/or. If you care about someone, you want to help the whole person. Of course, if you believe that someone's soul is in jeopardy, you want to share the gospel. But, if you love that person, you also want to relieve their suffering. There are all sorts of Christian ministries all around the world that work for the this-worldly good of others.

Josh: You are right, to some extent, about my over-generalizing and in places losing a grasp on the complicated motives that go into any human action, but my general criticism about "Christian" motivations stands, and you didn't even try to address it. The militant atheist Christopher Hitchens, whom I respect in some matters and disagree with him on many others, wrote a very good book on Mother Teresa (who is soon becoming a saint) exposing her work with the poor as a self-serving mission to save souls for God and that alone. Mother Teresa admitted as much in an interview with Hitchens. The Vatican Council, during their trial to evaluate the "saintliness" of Mother Teresa even called Hitchens in as the "Devil's Advocate" to criticize Mother Teresa and make a case against her life (of course his council did not win the day). Here is a "holy" woman, a "saint," by the most general of Christian standards and she devoted her life to working with the poor, but what did she really do? Did she actually raise any individuals or families or villages or societies out of socio-economic poverty? No. Did she try to alleviate the suffering of the poor she came into contact with by constructing hospitals, family planning centers, job-training centers, modern schools? No. What did she do? She mythologized the idea of being "poor" and told the poor that they were truly blessed and would

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be rewarded in the next life, in the *coming* “kingdom of God.” All she did was save souls, and whatever material comfort she might have given the various individuals that came into contact with her was a secondary concern.

Thus, I do make a generalization, yes, but based upon the creed-driven religion that you follow, the primary mission of Christianity is to “save souls for Christ” and ministering to the socio-economic needs comes a distant second – at best! And your uncritical and shallow invocation of Martin Luther King Jr. is a great case in point. Martin Luther King Jr. was not initially interested in the civil rights movement. He was a Christian minister, as you point out, primarily interested in being a minister and saving souls. For the first part of his career, King tried to address racism and inequality through Christianity and the Southern Baptist Church, but he could do little and his white superiors and fellow clergyman disapproved of his more radical opinions and his growing conviction in organized protest. The official line of Christianity at the mid-point of last century was that every human *soul* (not body) was equal before God and that reform, if it should come, should come eventually in “God’s time.” Martin Luther King Jr. had to go against his church and join forces with the secular NAACP and other non-religious affiliations (like the central role played by the radical, homosexual Bayard Rustin in the civil rights movement who has been marginalized for several decades).

So, to return to my original criticism, but rephrasing: yes “there are all sorts of Christian ministries” that do “work for the this-worldly good of others” as you say, but they do so primarily in order to “save souls for Christ,” which you cannot deny. I have seen first hand or been told by people with first hand experience what goes on during mission trips, prison ministries, aiding the poor via homeless shelters and missions, working with street kids, volunteering at Job Corps, and various other “Christian ministries.” While the primary stance of

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“saving souls for Christ” does not *necessarily* prevent or preclude addressing the socio-economic circumstances of the world’s “oppressed,” based upon the tract record of Christianity, I think there is clear evidence for arguing that Christians more often than not address and meet the needs of the “spiritual” first, and socio-economic problems second, if at all. And further, when Christians do address the socio-economic realm, it tends to be through the value system of Christianity, thus when I was a part of a missions-trip in my youth we went to Mexico not to build a school, but to build a mission and hold “revival meetings.” Now at the mission, there was an orphanage for the handicapped, which meet the needs of say 10 or so children, but the institution was a mission built for training missionaries and serving the needs of the church, not primarily for helping Mexican orphans. This is the predicament and what I consider to be the moral pathology of Christian “ministries:” the “salvation” of the “soul” seems to be the primary concern, while ministering to the needs of the body and addressing systematic injustice are not always addressed.

Patrick: You write: “John advocating a systematic destruction of the ‘damned’ seems no different than Hitler’s program of Holocaust or Neo-Nazi visions of racial cleansing.” Then, you move to connect such violent extermination with the “wars of aggression” by President George W. Bush, asserting that both G.W. Bush and “fanatic, right-wing evangelical Christians” desire to cause a “despicable Imperial bloodbath.”

First, however much you may dislike Bush, it seems a real stretch to try to compare the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis. Second, I certainly don’t know of any evangelical Christians who would advocate wholesale killing of the unsaved; thus, your comparison between the Nazis and the Bush administration and “fanatic...evangelical Christians” doesn’t hold much water. Of course, there are a few mentally ill, unbalanced people

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who claim to be Christians yet shoot abortion doctors and might advocate such violence; but, to my knowledge, there are not many of them. Third, John's Revelation is very different from Hitler's Holocaust. John's Revelation is descriptive of an anticipated future event; the Holocaust was a proactive murder campaign that actually occurred. Revelation used highly metaphorical, non-literal language; the Holocaust was replete with ultra-literal, concrete language about who was to live or die based on purportedly racial characteristics. Finally, John's Revelation originated out of a persecuted, oppressed community seeking deliverance from their suffering; the Holocaust was a murderous assault by a powerful imperial nation (Germany) upon their (and their neighbor's) minority Jewish populations. Thus, John's Revelation and the atrocities of the Holocaust are in fact very different.

Josh: Ah, Patrick, now your logic and historical knowledge seem to be compromised. First, I do not compare the Holocaust with Bush's Imperial wars, but I do compare both back to John's intolerant vision, which celebrates the exclusion and execution of a categorically stereotypical group, the "damned." You are right to say that John's vision is an "anticipated future event," which is tantamount to saying a dystopic plan of future genocide, and as such, it has inspired and continues to inspire fantastic visions, which can very easily deteriorate into some nut-case's delusional rampage to actually enact a genocidal campaign. I'm not saying that most people who read *Revelation* or the *Bible* and go out to kill people, but it has happened and continues to happen. Perhaps one of the most potent historical examples was the militant arm of the U.S. abolition movement and John Brown in particular. Also, if you read *Revelation* and the Neo-Nazi propaganda, race war inciting novel *The Turner Diaries* the similarities are frightfully manifest. And people *DO* go out and act on *The Turner Diaries*, Timothy McVey (the Oklahoma City Bomber) is perhaps the best well known. So what I'm saying is that Revelation

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fits within a “genocidal genre” and it is, thereby, little different from Hitler’s plan for the Holocaust. I also think George W. Bush’s murkily defined foreign policy of “axis of evil,” “preemptive strike,” and “war on terrorism” are also well within the genocidal genre and Bush’s Imperial plan is a world catastrophe waiting to happen.

Your historical generalization of Nazi Germany is completely inaccurate, ironically enabling you to misread the similarities between the Nazis party and the early church. The Germany of the Nazis was not a “powerful imperial nation” as you describe, but more akin to the early church who you described as “a persecuted, oppressed community seeking deliverance from their suffering,” albeit the nature of the persecution surrounding post WWI Germany was quite different from the early church. I don’t want to go into a long historical lesson here, but as I think you well know, Germany was one of the weakest Imperial powers to begin with, but lost its Imperial domain after WWI, whereby, the drastically one-sided Treaty of Versailles put Germany into an economic straight-jacket, which, combined with the U.S. stock market crash in 1929 felt the world over, handicapped the social democratic Weimar Republic, which was never able to get off the ground, and this lead to very deep seated socio-economic animosity percolating within the majority of Germans, which, combined with the virulent anti-Semitism using Jews as a scapegoat for all of Germany’s ills (anti-Semitism already incubating in Europe for a thousand years due almost exclusively to Christianity, see the great book by Jacob Katz *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933*) enabled a popularly elected Nazi party to push through the fascist Third Reich and Hitler’s reign of terror.

Similarities? The young disgruntled Hitler and his early Brown Shirt followers where a bunch plotting malcontents who felt persecuted by a “Jewish/liberal conspiracy.” The Christians became a scapegoat for all of Rome’s ills and were a persecuted minority. Hitler composed his

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epic *Mein Kampf* in jail. John composed *Revelation* while exiled on island of Patmos. Both the Nazis and Early Christians composed fantastical, cataclysmic apocalypses that served to exercise personal feelings of persecution, exclusion, and socio-political unrest. The Nazis, to the human race's infamy, enacted their despicable genocide. Elements of the Christian church are eagerly awaiting their opportunity to do the same.

Patrick: You write: "now your logic and historical knowledge seem to be compromised." No my friend. You are right to clarify that you were comparing the Holocaust and "Bush's Imperial wars" with "John's intolerant vision" and not with one another. However, keep in mind that if A=B and B=C, it's reasonable to infer that A=C. Your imprecision is more at issue here, not my logic or knowledge of history. Ironically, you go on to assert that all three (*Revelation*, the Holocaust, and Bush's wars) fit into a "genocidal genre;" hence, you validate my earlier point about your comparison between the Nazi mass murders and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I suggest you sharpen your own understanding and your own explication of what you are trying to assert.

You write: "Your historical generalization of Nazi Germany is completely inaccurate." My friend, you would do well to embrace some humility. I've read Katz's book, and your brief historical lesson is accurate, but beside the point. What you fail to see is that when Hitler was the leader of Nazi Germany (1933-1945), he was very much an imperial ruler over an imperial power who nearly conquered much of the world. The similarities between Hitler's supporters and the early Christians are superficial at best when compared with the similarities between the Hitler's Nazi Germany and the Roman Empire. While a generalization indeed, the comparison between Hitler's Germany and the Roman Empire is historically obvious. I encourage you to

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focus more on the issues at hand my friend; I suggest you spend less time criticizing my perspectives and more time examining and evaluating your own positions.

What “elements of the Christian church” are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to commit genocide in a way analogous to the Nazis?

Josh: Yes, the mature Third Reich did have ambitions to be an Imperial power and conquer the world, you are right on this point, but I stand by the coherence of my associations, which are not black and white equations (=), they are simply comparisons. But by the very nature of your last question you seemed to have missed my point completely: the coming “genocide” is the supposed “end-times” prophecy found in St. James’ *Revelation*. Now of course this genocide will never happen because the “end-times” prophesied by St. James is only a myth – it will never happen. But there are a significant number of Christians out there who do think the “end times” will happen and when it does, the majority of the world will supposedly be cast out into the fiery pit of hell to burn for eternity. That is my point. The illusion of St. John has been uncritically turned into powerful dogma, which too many people take literally. This greatly concerns me because implicitly or explicitly the *Bible* advocates genocide and I don’t think that is a value that we should be teaching our young.

Patrick: I was fortunate to attend an excellent lecture by John Dominic Crossan on the subject of Revelation. Crossan asked us to imagine what it would be like to have our children or friends or family members on a bus that was blown up by a terrorist bomb. What would we want to do to the perpetrator? A few people tried to offer sanctimonious and/or idealized answers, but Crossan pressed them – how would you feel, if your mother, brother, sister, son, daughter was killed? What would you want to do? Examine your hearts, Crossan said. Many of you, he continued after a pause, would want vengeance. Now, he transitioned, imagine that you are part

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of a persecuted community, being oppressed by the Roman government. Your people are tortured and killed. Would you want vengeance? Many of you would, he answered for us. Now, whether that's right or wrong, that's the motivation behind the Apocalypse of Revelation. Whether we agreed or not with the bloody vision of Revelation, Crossan wanted us to be sympathetic to the suffering that brought that book about.

Now, for Crossan, that's all Revelation is – a historically conditioned book in which a persecuted minority wished vengeance upon its Roman oppressors in symbolic language. From Crossan's point of view, one might extrapolate that the Christians who produced Revelation are more closely analogous to the Jews who were massacred by the Germans than their Imperial Roman oppressors. Evangelicals would see Revelation more prophetically; that is, evangelicals would see Revelation as being both about the past as well as the future. Part of what is so interesting about Revelation is that the language is very much non-literal. I recall Marcus Borg talking in class and at my master's thesis defense about how fundamentalist evangelicals like Hal Lindsey interpret attack helicopters out of passages that describe insect type monsters. In my own view, Revelation is derived from a vision of the future that also spoke to the past, but I don't think you can correlate current events with the details of Revelation.

Josh, you are an intelligent, thoughtful person who I both like and respect. What I don't understand is how you seem to have over-connected such different ideas together as if they are fundamentally the same? Granted, there is violence and violent language that is common to all three of these scenarios; but beyond that, these are very different historical occurrences. Why have you closely connected disparate ideas such as the Nazi extermination campaign, Bush's wars in Iraq/Afghanistan, and the Book of Revelation?

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Josh: Because in my mind they are connected. Religious intolerance is closely connected with social and political intolerance, which leads to discrimination, persecution, pogroms, death camps, and genocide. You mentioned the episode with Crossan, which is a good illustration and allows one to sympathize with the psychology of the early church, but it does not justify the book of *Revelation* or make it any less perverted. John's *Revelation* is the product of a violently delusional mind. I do not think there is any other way to evaluate the message of that book, whether you believe it to be historically conditioned or allegorical, it still unequivocally sanctions genocide.

Such “visions” are dangerous, whether we sympathize with the delusional dreamer or not. History overwhelmingly corroborates my argument. Let me take one current example as a point in fact. Over a half century ago the Holocaust was happening and no “civilized” country cared to help the Jews, not even the U.S. Nothing was done by the Allies to help the Jews and no country wanted a large influx of Jewish refugees. The only place remotely open to a mass immigration was Palestine, which many Jews under the banner of Zion had been trying to fashion into Israel. But, despite the Jewish myths to the contrary, Palestine already had an established community of Palestinians and a minority Jewish population ruled by the Imperial English who were protecting their oil-rich cash crop economies in the Middle East and the strategically important Suez Canal.

Religious luminary Martin Buber wanted a cooperative Jewish and Palestinian State, with an open immigration policy to help save European Jews. Nobody was listening. British interests kept Jewish immigration to a trickle, thus the large portion of immigrants who made it to the “Promised Land” were illegal, and the Palestinians were hostile because the Zionist interests did not want cohabitation; they wanted a Jewish State and the Palestinians out. This, as you know, has created the tragic situation, whereby, the oppressed Jewish community became in their

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turn oppressors. Israel with implicit U.S. support launched a preemptive war in 1968, another preemptive war into Lebanon in 1982 (where former Prime Minister Barak committed “death-squad activities”¹), and a continual encroachment of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem via an aggressive and zealous settler movement implicitly backed by the Israeli government, which has now lead to a large, concrete wall being built on Palestinian land to protect Israeli interests. The state of Israel has become an aggressive entity, stealing large amounts of land illegally and relentlessly persecuting the Palestinian population, often killing innocent civilians while bulldozing the economic lively hood of an entire people.

While I agree that individual Palestinians have perpetuated numerous horrors via suicide bombers, the Palestinian people and Islam are not the root causes of the violence in Palestine. Even pro-Israel sources like *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* have recently acknowledged this fact. The pro-Bush Interventionist Fareed Zakaria titled his Aug 25, 2003 *Newsweek* column, “Suicide Bombers Can Be Stopped.” In the article he wrote: “we treat suicide bombers as delusional figures, brainwashed by imams. But they are also products of political realities.” Zakaria, unlike most other pro-Israel media analysts asked, “What had made this conflict one that moves people not merely to kill but to die?” And here I want to end this historical lesson with the proposition that “ends must justify means” and “means must justify ends.” The bloodthirsty revenge fantasies of bloody discrimination and elimination of whole populations found in the babblings of St. John, John Brown, Hitler, or William Pierce open the way for delusional fanatics to incite violence and to kill. Look at the political realities of Israel where an oppressed community metamorphosed into a violent State oppressor and the perverted “ends” of a greater Israel tantamount to the “political genocide” of the Palestinian cause. Projected socio-

¹ Baruch Kimmerling, "From Barak to the Road Map," *New Left Review* (Sept/Oct 2003), 136.

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political-religious ends must reflect positive human values, thus, no more revenge fantasies, no more apocalyptic Revelations, no more final judgments, no more “damned.”

Patrick: You write regarding Revelation: “But certainly anyone who would dare assert that what John described is actually going to come to pass in the near future is completely bereft of sanity or tolerance.” And, you write (the quote from *Revelation* 14:19-20): “No rational person with a shred of decency could condone this violent and genocidal program of extermination.” One of the lessons of my master’s thesis (in which I interviewed 19 evangelical Protestant Christians) was not to take evangelicals “too literally” (an expression of my friend Chris Anderson); thus, I must recognize that a disconnect existed between stated beliefs and actions. In other words, I found that evangelicals who believed things I found objectionable (i.e. that unless one believes in Jesus as their savior, he/she will be eternally damned; that God through Jesus will come and judge the world in the end-times) were some of the most kind, loving, honest, humble, and real people I’d ever met. Hence, there was a huge disconnect between the beliefs I found to be problematic and the actions I found worthy of admiration. As a result of this, I couldn’t help but realize that evangelical Christians and evangelical Christianity are much more nuanced and complex than I’d previously thought. Do you accept this disconnect between beliefs and actions? How do you understand it?

Josh: Yes, you are certainly right on the mark, but the “disconnect” does not necessarily translate into benevolence. My father was a fundamentalist Christian and, while on the whole a loving man and a good father, he could be an intolerant bigot and authoritarian brute. While he never had the power to inflict his intolerance or authoritarianism outside his family, I certainly felt the brunt of his tirades and was told more than once as a thinly veiled threat that “sinners were going straight to hell.” Like I mentioned in Chapter one, I was also later condemned by

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my father and told I was going to hell because of my vow of atheism. All atheists, as any good Christian fundamentalist will tell you, go straight to hell. It is basic Christian dogma. I have also been confronted by many other Christian friends, family, students, and strangers with the same sentiment. So, while many people have told me that a fiery lake awaits me when I die, I am aware of the impotent “disconnect” of these intolerant head-cases and I have been able to deflect the message from the intent of its author and not take the threat of hell seriously. But this does not justify the root intolerance and violence at the root of many people’s understanding of Christianity. Condemning someone to hell is a form of psychological violence; it is a type of ideological fascism. But, yes, in the U.S. there is a “disconnect,” all things considered, however, think about fundamentalists with the same type of intolerance and violent religiosity in Pakistan, India, Israel, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt to name a few hot spots. Given a certain type of socio-political atmosphere that “disconnect” can easily disappear. So while I will agree that there is a certain “disconnect” between ideology and action in most mainstream Christians and fundamentalist Christians, I still think the intolerant and implicitly violent strains of thought within the *Bible* and Christian discourse are a lurking psychosis and a *potential* threat to anyone critical of Christianity.

Patrick: You write that belief in the end-times “is one of the strongest and most obvious demonstrations of the deep psychopathology of the Christian religion.” What is the essence of this deep psychopathology?

Josh: First and foremost is the attitude of “world denial” that most Christians display. Christianity has always been about putting faith and hope in another world and waiting for that world to come, which of course, ironically, is directly opposite of Jesus’ original message. It has taken Christianity 2000 years to acknowledge this world and the human body as real certainties

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and not tainted, transient vessels, but even so most Christians still place the emphasis of their lives *outside* this world and *outside* of the human body. I think that is a psychological sickness and it is a root cause of a lot of the social and environmental problems we are faced with. Particularly psychotic is the “end times syndrome” that allows a lot of Christians to passively accept social-political ills as fated and ultimately up to God to deal with, specifically George W. Bush’s opportunistic, short sided, and damaging environmental policies are a great example of an unbalanced mind. Either Bush is a completely cynical opportunist and liar or he actually thinks this world will soon perish when Christ returns in triumph. Either way, destructive nonsense!

Patrick: You write of John’s Gospel: “One is also confronted with another aspect of Jesus that is significantly lacking in the other Gospels and that is ‘judgment.’” You have taken a richly nuanced and complex text - spiritually, theologically, and literarily insightful - and radically oversimplified it. John’s gospel contains many, many elements, but I would argue that it argues more for the importance of love than anything else. Real, authentic existence is found in Christ; without that one will suffer dislocation as a result of being separated from true life. This is descriptive of reality, not an enthusiastic condemnation. John’s gospel is about the value of following God in Christ – what that looked like in Jesus life and how it can play out in all of our lives. There is the element of conflict between the early Christian movement and the Jews; it is out of this conflict that John is writing, so I concede there is forceful “judgment” language that you find objectionable; however, that is only a part of this rich gospel. John is telling the story of the incarnate Son of God through the rich narratives and theological truths that come with his insights as an apostle and original disciple of Jesus Christ. Each gospel writer brings his own unique perspective to bear as he tells this most important of stories. To assert that the essence of

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John's Gospel is judgment seem to me an overstatement and a misrepresentation; John's gospel is most centrally about love and how to be in right relationship with God in order to live a life of freedom as one was created to do. Here are some examples from John's Gospel to illustrate that it is most centrally about love and the life-giving relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus offers assurance to his followers because He and God are with them: 1) "Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (*John* 14:19-21). 2) "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (*John* 14: 27). 3) "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (*John* 14:1). Thus, Jesus is telling his followers how they might live calmly and authentically through relationship with Himself and God. Here Jesus emphasizes the importance of love: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (*John* 13:34-35). Hence, Jesus commands that his disciples must love according not just to feelings but also to actions. To follow Him as Lord means one must Love; it's a command, not an option.

In *John* 10:10b, Jesus explains his central purpose: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." This is the essence of the Gospel of John and the essence of the Christian faith as known through a relationship with God in Christ. As Jesus asserts: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (*John* 31b-32) and "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in

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me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (*John* 7:37b-38). The relationship with Jesus then as now is about authentic existence and freedom.

One of my favorite passages in all of Scripture occurs in John’s Gospel Chapter Eight: the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus challenges the crowd ready to murder her: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” [Gradually, all her accusers and would-be murderers depart, and Jesus asks,] “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” [She responds in the negative.] “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin” (*John* 8:7b-11). I could go on and on, but suffice to say that the Gospel of John is clearly about much more than judgment. Further, there are such rich concrete details and points of spiritual truth that, agree or disagree, I don’t see how you can dismiss this work as “fantastic and otherworldly” unless there is something else being brought to bear. Quite frankly, my hunch is that you must be operating from an assessment colored not by the actual text of John, but rather, from the painful place of wounded-ness resulting from your experience of judgmental and narrow-minded Christianity as evidenced by your father and others close to you. How do you understand your reduction of John to being centrally about judgment and not about love and “full” life as found in Christ?

Josh: First, you have misread my criticism. When I criticize the *Gospel of John* I do so in larger context than you seem to be able to admit, i.e. in relation to his other book *Revelation*, and thus I am addressing his corpus as a whole. I agree that John, who often refers to himself in his Gospel as the disciple whom Christ “loved,” makes the issue of love an important theme. But I would argue that his Gospel is overshadowed by the theme of “judgment” as no other Gospel is, especially when one considers the message of *Revelation* – and yes, my own preoccupation with this aspect of John’s message has been influence by my own negative

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experiences with Christianity. However, I find your argument for “love” naively superficial, which is indicative of most Christians who intellectually hide from the implications of *Revelation*. The same author penned these two books, thus, you cannot read one without being cognizant of the other. I find your preoccupation on “love” to be representative of your own interpretation of Christianity in general: you select and focus on what you want to, you do not engage the larger literary or historical context, and you ignore those passages and texts which run counter to your argument or have socio-political interpretations outside your own. I will admit that my readings of Christianity in this chapter have been one-sided, but one-sided for a point: there is an explicitly intolerant and exceptional attitude in the *Gospel of John* which leads up to a genocidal furry in *Revelation*. Yes, this is not the whole story of this writer, but it is an important part. And my emphasis has been to draw attention to the disgusting and dangerous objectives within the texts of John and Christianity as a whole. Sure there is a “disconnect” as we discussed earlier, but in my mind the *Bible* promotes a pathological and violent sub-text, which with certain frames of mind or in certain socio-political contexts can be a bomb waiting to go off.

And the *Bible* and Christianity should not bear the exclusive brunt of this criticism. I think *fundamentalism in general* is a pathological state of mind: explicitly dangerous and implicitly violent because there is embedded intolerance and violence in every major religious tradition’s texts and theology. Look to India, Pakistan, and the Middle East and you will find countless examples of violent fundamentalism. Look at the U.S. and you will also see a violent Imperial fundamentalism at work as well. Are all Americans violent Imperialists who want to conquer the world? Absolutely not. In fact, most Americans seem to deny that the U.S. is involved with any Imperial ventures at all. But every American implicitly reaps the benefits of

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living in the richest country in the world, which is dependent upon aggressive Imperial foreign policies, and most Americans have a strong patriotic identification with U.S. aims and objectives in the world, although they remain blissfully ignorant of U.S. violence perpetuated around the globe. Thus, one cannot blame the black-and-white minded fundamentalists who condemn *all* Americans as Imperialist aggressors, or conversely, the black-and-white minded fundamentalists who sincerely believe that the whole world wants to be just like (“us”) the U.S. In both cases you have pathological attachment to a “fixed idea,” which has little to no corroboration with the actual state of the “real” world and this fanatical attachment to religious or political dogma becomes the colored blinders used to “see” the world in one, and only one, way – the “right” way. Thus, this moral attitude readily encourages intolerance, and given the violence lurking in human nature, it can explode into discriminatory campaigns that can in turn lead to more drastic and despicable measures.

Take Ann Coulter’s lunacy for example. Not only does she proclaim that only one political party has the right to exist in the U.S., but she has flatly stated, “We need to execute people like John Walker in order to physically intimidate liberals, by making them realize that they can be killed too” - this in a speech before the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2002. Now we both know that Ann Coulter is an obscene opportunist and mentally off balance, and we can both admit that there is “disconnect” in the majority of dogmatically Republican head-cases, but Coulter is threatening to kill liberals simply because they are liberals. That scares me. I don’t like to think of myself as a marked man, but according to both the dominant political dogma of Conservative Republicanism and mainline Christianity I’m doubly “damned.” How is this supposed to make me feel? What if someone came up and told you, Patrick, because you are a Christian and politically conservative you deserve to not only die, but also burn in hell

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for eternity? How would that make you feel? Safe? Secure? Consider my predicament as a politically radical atheist and tell me I'm misreading the situation.

Patrick: You write: "...you have misread my criticism. When I criticize the Gospel of John I do so in larger context than you seem able to admit." My friend, I suggest you watch the arrogant and condescending language you are directing toward me. It doesn't bode well for your arguments or for you as a person. Plus, it seems disrespectful and obnoxious. So let us return to your original criticism: You write: "I agree that John, who continually refers to himself in his Gospel as the disciple whom Christ 'loved,' makes the issue of love an important theme. But I would argue that his Gospel is overshadowed by the theme of 'judgment' as no other Gospel is, especially when considers the message of Revelation."

First, before we consider *Revelation*, let's make sure that we understand the *Gospel of John*. *John* and *Revelation* are two different texts with different themes and purposes. I'm happy to deal with context relative to *John* and *Revelation*, but I'm not going to accept your oversimplifying one text into the other unless you make a much stronger case. Right now, your analysis of both texts leaves something to be desired. I'm glad that you recognize the importance of the role of love as a theme. However, I think your point about judgment in John's Gospel is an oversimplification and even a distortion of that Gospel, which seems to rely almost totally on your interpretation of *Revelation*; it's unpersuasive.

Your charge that John's Gospel is "overshadowed by the theme of 'judgment' as no other Gospel is" is simply inaccurate. To test your claim, I grabbed my *NIV Study Bible* and flipped it open to the *Gospel of Luke*. Starting with *Luke* Chapter 4, I flipped through Luke's Gospel looking for Jesus giving references to judgment/negative consequences, stopping at Chapter 14. Here are a few of the passages that I found:

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- “I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town” (Luke 10:12).
- “But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths” (Luke 10:14-15).
- “But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Luke 12:5).
- “I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:3).
- “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Issac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13:28).

See also: (Luke 6:45-49), (Luke 8:9-15), (Luke 8:16-18), (Luke 10:16), (Luke 12:8-10), and (Luke 12:47-48).

Based on this, I don't see how the *Gospel of John* is any more judgmental than the *Gospel of Luke*; thus, your claim is incorrect. My original intent was to go through all the gospels, but such a move seemed unnecessary after reading through the *Gospel of Luke*. I suggest you pay more attention to the charges you make and the evidence you use to support them.

You write: “I will admit that my readings of Christianity in this chapter have been one-sided, but one-sided for a point: there is an explicitly intolerant and exceptional attitude in the *Gospel of John* which leads up to a genocidal fury in *Revelation*.” What are you basing this on? I sympathize with your concerns re: fundamentalism and Americans being unconcerned with US foreign policies. Plus, I don't know if Ann Coulter is mentally off-balance, but I'd say she's obnoxious, arrogant, and unsophisticated in her thinking.

I've been told I'm going to hell before, and I don't like it. So, I suspect it doesn't make you feel very good either. For my part, I wouldn't pretend to be sure about who is going to hell and who isn't. It's not for me to decide. One of the dangers of making such judgments is that it inevitably locates a person's focus on another and away from himself/herself; that's nearly always problematic because our own faults are the hardest to see.

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There is wisdom in your words my friend, no doubt, and I'm learning from our engagement. And, I'm valuing our dialogue greatly. But, the wisdom in your words is mixed with sloppy and incoherent thinking that does not do justice to your very valid and real concerns. Perhaps you should take more time in processing and synthesizing your arguments. I encourage you to embrace some humility lest your prejudices against Christianity blind you like the prejudices of the fundamentalists you argue so vehemently against.

Josh: Good stuff, here Patrick. But let me make a few clarifications, which you seem to be dancing around, but I do not see how I have been refuted by your responses: yes, you are right in saying that “judgment” does play a role in all the gospels to some extent, however, Mark, Matthew and Luke did not go on to pen the disquieting teleological fantasy found in *Revelation*. Also, and I know you know this, there is considerable evidence that Mark was written first (some 50-75 years after Jesus' death) and that Mathew and Luke where based off of Mark's original text, but John's text, which is the latest Gospel narrative included in the *Bible* – written some 100 years after Jesus' death – seems to have been written independently from the other three gospels. John's gospel is the most “mythological” and factually suspect, or another way of stating this would be to say that John's gospel is the most “creative” and it really stresses the point that Jesus was “God” (hence the repetition of “I AM”). Your point about Luke does nothing to disprove my argument that “judgment” is an important theme in John. It seems to only strengthen my case that an exclusivist emphasis on judgment is central to Christian dogma. We will let that argument stand for another day. My point has been that “judgment” is an important part of the gospel narrative of John and John carries that theme of judgment to a disgusting conclusion in *Revelation*. Now while this does not encourage Christians to practice genocide, it does leave an implicit “narrative of genocide” at the core of Christian exceptionalism, which I find to be both

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disconcerting and potentially dangerous – and we both know that while the majority of Christians do not aggressively seek to send the “damned” to hell, there have been small and large campaigns to this effect throughout history. That’s my point. I don’t see how my argument is problematic, however, I will admit that I have been personally discriminated against and condemned by Christians for my views in the past and this has lent a certain passion and rhetorical arrogance to my position for which I apologize if it has gotten out of hand. As I have said before in our conversations outside of this book, based upon my personal experiences with intolerant individuals (especially American Christians) I tend to be very intolerant of “intolerant attitudes or positions.” While you have been entirely just and kind in our friendship, I do carry a certain apprehension with regards to your deepening commitment to evangelical Christianity, and I have found your uncritical attitudes towards several important issues to be very disconcerting.