

Dialogue 1

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology¹

By J. M. Beach

Evangelical Christianity in its preoccupation with Jesus as “Christ,” and the more modern obsession of literal interpretation of the *Bible*, have together passionately given birth to a host of millennial schemes, whereby, the “end of the world” becomes perpetually immanent. This eschatological urge seems to be ingrained in the very origins of the early “Christian” communities whose devotion and love of Jesus not only exalted him into a messiah figure as the “Christ,” but also transfigured the violent and unjust death of the revered teacher in creative tales and compensating myths, whereby, Jesus as the “Christ” would return sword in hand, to cleanse the world of all evil doers, banish the hordes of Satan into a fiery pit, and end human history in order to inaugurate a 1,000 year triumphal reign of God before leaving the earth with the elect for an eternity in Heaven. The grandeur of this delusion does not diminish the powerfully immanent emotional attachment that Christians have for centuries attached to their desire for the divine to finally and for all descend and bring about the lost paradise of “God’s” supposedly “original vision.”

The apostle John especially added theatrical flare to the mythological pretense underpinning his more fictional than factual accounts of Jesus’ life. The metaphysical introduction of John’s Gospel is truly awe-inspiring and a testament to the Greek influence on the early Christian communities. The divine, rational order of “Logos” comes down from the heavenly realm of the ethereal firmament to become “flesh” and “live among us.” This is just

¹ This essay is based on J. M. Beach, "Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *Studies in Ideology: Essays on Culture and Subjectivity* (Lanham, 2005).

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology

one of the wonderful metaphors that John invokes to mythically inflate the majesty of Jesus.

John proves himself the most literate of the four canonical authors, as he is steeped in the ancient traditions of Greece and Judea, and like Paul, John pilfers the Jewish Old Testament for obscure passages to put forth as prophetic revelations of the “Son of God.” One is told time and again in John’s Gospel that Jesus was not “of this world” and, thus, his significance lies in a more perfect, heavenly realm outside the boundaries of earthly existence to which sinfully mortal humans must aspire.

One is also confronted with another aspect of Jesus that is significantly lacking in the other Gospels and that is “judgment.” In John 9:39 Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment,” which while playing into the established prophetic school of thought found in the Old Testament becomes, in relation to John’s otherworldly portraiture of Jesus, a frightful glimpse of the angry tyranny let loose by Jehovah in days of old. In John’s Gospel it seems more a threat than anything else. To use a vulgar paraphrase: “God going to cleanse this putrescent hell-hole of a planet and you better be on the right side or else!” Thus, when John’s Jesus tries to back track a bit in John 12:47 by saying, “I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world” it seems shallow and insincere, especially since Jesus, just one verse later, says, “on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge” (12:48). Jesus’ real message, John has made perfectly clear, is that “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), I am “God:” over and over Jesus says “I am he,” which is code for accept me or else face judgment and eternal damnation.

During the trial of Jesus, John has Pilate rhetorically ask, “What is truth” (18:38)? Of course any close reader of John’s gospel knows the answer, which is the very bedrock assertion of the Christian faith and the line perhaps most quoted by modern Christian fundamentalists:

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology

Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). John metaphorically uses “truth” more than any other Gospel (1:17, 4:23, 8:32, 14:6, 14:17) and explicitly sets up the chauvinistic and exclusive dogma that Christianity is the only “true” faith and way to “God.” Thus, in an early fundamentalist fiat, it should come as no surprise when John passes off his entirely fantastic and otherworldly Gospel as literally “true” (21:24).

It is in this same distortion of the notion of “truth” that John pens an even more perverse and outlandish tale of “revelation,” “final judgment” and the “end of the world.” In *The Birth of Christianity*,² John Dominic Crossan has persuasively argued that a “nonapocalyptic eschatology” existed within the early communities of Jesus’ followers and that only later did a revisionist “apocalyptic eschatology” arise over fifty to one hundred years after Jesus’ death, embodied in such documents as the Gospel of John and in John’s “Revelation.” John’s Revelation deserves a place amongst the Greco-Roman pagan myths as a prototypical visionary drama of contamination, ritual cleansing, and rebirth. 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. Thus, the whole enduring notion of the “end of the world” and the modern Christian fundamentalist’s dogmatic expression and adherence to this lunacy is one of the strongest and most obvious demonstrations of the deep psychopathology of the Christian religion.

John, over two thousand years ago, thought “the time is near” (Revelation 1:3) and thus urged the underground communities of Christians to bide their time and endure repression because the triumphal Christ would be coming soon for revenge (1:7, 9). The first part of John’s

² John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), Ch 17 & 18.

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology

“Revelation” seems no revelation at all, but merely a bunch of violently dictatorial threats thinly veiled in the voice of Jesus as vengeful “God.” Over and over John’s “voice of God” says, “repent” or be destroyed. John’s “God” decrees a totalitarian nightmare more horrible than any Christian crusade to date: “I will give authority over / the nations; / to rule them with an iron rod, / as when clay pots are / shattered” (2:26-27). Then the book deteriorates into a vengeful bloodbath of “trials” and “tribulations” because “the Lamb that was slaughtered” (5:12) has come back to judge the earth and “reign” triumphal, and, incidentally, to reward the chosen servants of “God:” For you have taken your / great power and begun to reign. / The nations raged, but your wrath has come, / and the time for judging / the dead” (11:17-18).

The climax of John’s “Revelation” comes when an “angel of the Lord” decrees that the “beast” of Satan and his hordes will be defeated and these demons and the whole earth will be judged in blood:

So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles. (14:19-20).

And this is the pacific Christianity of love and forgiveness? No rational person with a shred of decency could condone this violent and genocidal program of extermination. John advocating a systematic destruction of the “damned” seems no different than Hitler’s program of Holocaust or Neo-Nazi visions of racial cleansing (for example, *The Turner Diaries*). John’s apocalyptic vision is a truly sickening and despicable instance of bloodthirsty intolerance, but resonant with a host of historical geo-political campaigns of Christian tyranny, most recently the wars of aggression by George W. Bush. Bush’s professed belief that he is a “servant of God” and his declaration of war against the vague, spiritual enemies like “terrorists” and the “axis of evil” seem eerily reminiscent of John’s bloody revelation. It would seem fitting if George W. Bush

The Dangers of Apocalyptic Eschatology

just came out and quoted scripture in Revelation as his ultimate justification for war and

American consolidation of power:

In righteousness he judges and makes war...He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God...From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "Kings of kings and Lord of Lords" (19:11-16)

I do not think there is any better description of the Imperial motivations of George W. Bush than this, nor do I think there is any other conclusion in the minds of fanatic, right-wing evangelical Christian fundamentalists than this despicable bloodbath.

The human race must leave behind all primitive notions of catastrophic and violent destruction of "evil" if any rational and just consensus is to govern the world. I think the time for uncritically celebrating the historically conditioned apocalyptic visions of the past is over. Are we living in the end times? If George W. Bush and his administration have their way the world will be engulfed in wars; America will turn into a police state with no government services and poor education (unless your rich!); Christianity will be promoted as the one, "true" way to "God;" and the environment will be rapped of resources and polluted beyond recognition to the point of catastrophic species extermination and the untold consequences of Global warming. To the question, "are we living in the end times?" I would reply, perhaps, perhaps. But I would add, it has nothing to do with "God."