

Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

BY SCOTT M. LEWIS, S.J.

Much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. Yet, when handled with care, apocalyptic theology has much to offer us. At its core it is about new creation, transformation, and change. It can demythologize our institutions and deflate human arrogance.

Charles Kimball's thoughtful and sober reflection illuminates the call of our time—the call to create a religious consciousness that is life-giving and contributes to building a world of peace and justice:

At the heart of all authentic, healthy, life-sustaining religions, one always finds this clear requirement. Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religions, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed. When religion becomes evil, these corruptions are always present. Conversely, when religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions, a process that is urgently needed now. Unlike generations that have gone before us, the consequences today of corrupted religion are both dire and global.¹

Unfortunately, the post-9/11 years have been marked by paranoia and fear and a collective hardening of hearts. At the same time there has been some healthy and honest self-criticism on the part of more thoughtful and sensitive representatives of all religions. They have sought the sources and causes of religious violence and have examined theological statements and the Scriptures themselves in an effort to understand why some people are convinced that God condones religious violence or even requires it. There

are no easy answers or panaceas for numerous factors contribute to hatred and violence. And no religion is innocent: there is a tendency to place all of the blame on Islamic extremists, but as Martin Marty notes, "I can say with confidence that the killing dimension of religion is an interfaith phenomenon."²

DANGEROUS FUEL FOR RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

An increasing number of studies have focused on apocalyptic theology as the fuel for much of history's religious violence. Apocalyptic is a particular theological mind set and symbolic world that can be found in all religions, both Christian and non-Christian, as well as in some secular revolutionary ideologies. Much of religious violence, regardless of the religious tradition in which it is found, draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration and symbolism.

The element of apocalyptic theology that is most dangerous and subject to misinterpretation and misuse is the myth or paradigm of cosmic warfare. This portrays the world as a vast battlefield on which a war of cosmic dimensions between good and evil is being waged and the committed believer as a divine warrior on the side of light and good. This cosmic dualism of good versus evil, light versus darkness, and truth versus falsehood etches a deep imprint on the religious imagination, and encourages the idealization of one's own group and demonization of the other. This is often reflected in rhetoric such as "evil empire," "Great Satan," and "axis of evil." Marty summarizes the problem well:

Believe in one all-powerful God. Believe that this God has enemies. Believe that you are charged to serve the purposes of God against these enemies. Believe that a unique and absolute holy book gives you directions, impulses, and motivations to prosecute war. You have, then, the formula for crusades, holy wars, jihads, and, as we relearned in the year just passing [2001], terrorism that knows no boundaries³

Apocalyptic warfare is often linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious in nature and is a response to the perception that the world has 'gone terribly awry' and that the situation is truly desperate. It is weapon of hope for extremists of all varieties, especially anti-abortion extremists, racial supremacists, as well as those haunted by various conspiracy theories such as the illuminati, UFO's, Jewish-Catholic-Freemason plots, irrational fears of the United Nations or the U.S. government, and so on.⁴ According to Mark Juergensmeyer, many view this cosmic warfare as their only hope:

The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a world view and an assertion of power. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered.

The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself.⁵

The following conditions are essential ingredients for the violent expression of the cosmic war myth. The first and probably principle condition is when the defense of one's basic identity and dignity — faith, race, culture, and so on — is believed to be at stake. This is often coupled with a sense of humiliation or powerlessness. When losing the struggle is seen as unthinkable and disastrous or when the situation is truly hopeless and unwinnable in human terms, violence is not far behind. The mythologized struggle enters the world and history in concrete form. It becomes sacralized, violence is legitimized, and it becomes a fight to the death between martyrs and demons. Lifted up above the bonds and limitations of ordinary society, the committed cosmic warrior feels empowered as an agent of God and as such is not accountable to the limitations of ordinary law and morality.⁶

The most pernicious danger of apocalyptic, especially in our own violent and polarized times, is what it is doing to our own consciousness. Apocalyptic in the intertestamental and Second Temple period (about 515 B.C. to 70 A.D.) rarely counseled direct violence on the part of believers — at least in the immediate

moment. Believers were to bide their time patiently, for vengeance belonged to God and would be dealt out appropriately on the day of divine intervention and judgment. But this also strengthened what Krister Stendahl called “the perfection of hatred” (after Psalm 139:22, “I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies”). One's

hatred was perfected by leading a normal and righteous life, avoiding violence, and even practicing kindness, but with a growing and eager anticipation of the approach of God's vengeance and the settling of accounts.⁷

At first glance this might seem benign — avoid violence and leave the punishment and retribution to God. There can develop, however, an eagerness for the anticipated violence that is disturbing and devoid of love. The

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almost gleeful relish with which the authors of the *Left Behind* series describe the destruction of thousands of unbelievers and members of the Antichrist's forces should make us pause and reflect. It is a command from a stern and emotionless Christ figure that annihilates in very graphic and dramatic ways so many human lives. It draws its 'inspiration' from Revelation 19:11-21, a passage filled with gore and the slaughter of God's enemies (based on Isaiah 49:2 and 63:1-6). This image of Christ is virtually impossible to reconcile with the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount – the Christ who commands non-resistance, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love for one's enemies. The divine violence of apocalyptic writings contributes to the formation of our collective image of God. All too often this image portrays a harsh, punishing deity who is willing to kill to achieve divine goals.

The inherent dualistic outlook of apocalyptic encourages believers to engage in what psychologists call "splitting." When individuals have difficulty integrating aspects or qualities of self or others that they deem unacceptable, painful, or repugnant, they often split them into completely separate and opposing entities. This usually results in either idealization or denigration of people or groups – they become good or bad to the extreme. This is often projected out onto the world: our group is all good, but the other is completely evil. This was the case after 9/11 with many people: America is good, Islam (or anyone faintly resembling a Muslim) is evil. And Muslim extremists simply reverse this caricature of reality. It prevails in many of our ethical debates with abortion being a perfect example. It poisons our political process. We become capable only of a binary mode of thinking – everything is expressed as either/or, good/bad, yes/no. Rather than engaging in rational discussion of issues that are difficult and complex, the religious orthodoxy, personal integrity, or patriotism and loyalty of those with whom we disagree are often questioned or attacked. The rhetoric becomes so unbelievably shrill and the opposition is painted in such negative and almost demonic terms that dialogue, civility, respect, or reconciliation become almost impossible. And how can it? If it is simply a battle between good and evil, compromise is impossible.

But is all apocalyptic theology inherently negative or violent? Its original intention was to bolster the courage and resistance of a persecuted group and to that end it counsels eschatological patience and endurance as well as the importance of making an immediate choice and commitment. It was originally a Jewish theological response to persecution during the Maccabean revolt and was expressed most eloquently in the Book of Daniel, especially chapters 7 and 12. There was a large body of apocalyptic literature at the turn of the era, and the early Christian movement borrowed extensively from it. Christianized forms of apocalyptic are found throughout the New Testament: Mark 13, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4-5, and the Book of Revelation are prominent examples.

An apocalyptic strain has always run through Christianity and it forms the basis of an important element of Christian belief – namely, the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. But there has been considerable confusion and disagreement over when the Second Coming is going to occur. Pinpointing a date and time and making the appropriate preparations has always been the work of apocalyptic movements both within mainstream Christianity and at its fringes. The Book of Revelation is the principle interpretative tool for these movements and this is a source of many problems. The cryptic and symbolic nature of the book is susceptible to reading into the text various one-to-one connections with contemporary events and individuals. The symbols and narrative are powerful and engage the unconscious, the emotions, and the religious imagination, exercising a tenacious hold on the consciousness of the fervent believer.

This engagement of human emotions and imagination is both the blessing and curse of apocalyptic. The one-to-one connection that many readers make with events and personages of their own time, together with the militant combat myth, have caused great harm in both Jewish and Christian settings. Apocalyptic – especially when tinged with messianic hopes – was discredited in Jewish eyes by two major disasters. The first was the second revolt against Rome in 132-136 A.D. that resulted in the thorough destruction and paganization of Jerusalem.⁸ The second was the apostasy of the messianic pretender Shabbatai Zevi in 1666.⁹

Jonathan Kirsch describes the battles depicted in Revelation as symbolizing a great “culture war” in which the Greco-Roman culture of the first century is portrayed as demonic and opposed to God. In the middle ages, in a continuation of the culture war, the enemies of God were corrupt church officials and clergy and their secular counterparts. Apocalyptic interpretations of Revelation provided energy for the followers of Joachim of Fiore, the Spiritual Franciscans, the Peasants Revolt of 1376, and finally the Reformation. Despite initial misgivings about Revelation, Luther enthusiastically portrayed the papacy as the Antichrist and the favor was returned. This helped to fuel apocalyptic hysteria and violence until the bloody suppression of the movement led by Thomas Münster in 1525. The dubious label of “Antichrist” or “Beast of Revelation” has been pinned on popes, emperors, kings, Muslims, and many others. There have been many modern candidates for the title, among them Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, and Henry Kissinger.¹⁰

The apocalyptic worldview and its symbolism are also significant players in contemporary culture wars. The language and symbolism of Revelation has been applied at times to ecumenism, feminism, meditation, abortion, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the United Nations, non-Christian religions, the European Union, Jews, Masons, the Catholic Church, secular humanism, various types of psychology, and the barcodes used in

merchandising.¹¹ Nothing is quite safe, and by ramping up the religious rhetoric anything considered negative or abhorrent becomes evil and not merely erroneous. The conspiracy theory, with the disguised forces of darkness lurking everywhere, is a force to be reckoned with in contemporary culture.

Along the theological spectrum there are many interpretations of Revelation and the end times. Closer to the evangelical end of the spectrum, the symbolism of Revelation is believed to portray the world's final days and this is usually believed to be imminent. Towards the opposite end of the spectrum – usually represented by mainline churches – the events portrayed in Revelation are believed to be symbolic of a perennial struggle between godly forces and those of evil. The consensus of academic scholarship is that the message was addressed to the situation of a first-century audience and as such would have had to have been comprehensible to them. As a powerful psychological tool, it unmasked the pretensions of the seemingly invincible Roman Empire and demythologized it in the consciousness of the communities to which it was addressed. The message was loud and clear: God rules the world, not Rome. Pseudo-divinities such as the emperor Nero are usurpers and will be defeated by God in the end. Confessional differences in the interpretation of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages of the Bible will always exist. There can be, however, a reasonable consensus on some of the dangers and pitfalls of apocalyptic and religiously healthy ways of presenting apocalyptic's enduring spiritual message.

WARNING SIGNS OF CORRUPT RELIGION

The bulk of the problem lies with our understanding and application of apocalyptic theology. Kimball enumerates certain signs of corrupt religion that if unchecked can result in destructive energy and violence. Foremost among these signs is the tendency to contrast an idealized version of one's own religion with the most egregious flaws and defects of the religion of others. Apocalyptic contrasts the saved and unsaved as well as those who belong and those who do not very sharply. 'True' Christian believers are distinguished from 'false' ones. This slides very easily into reinforcing group identity against outsiders, whether they are non-believers, partial or 'defective' believers, or those who are different in any way. This tendency has fed into anti-Semitism, sectarianism, religious bigotry, as well as pogroms and crusades of all varieties. This group identity can also be turned inward and used to marginalize elements of one's own group such as women, laypeople, dissidents, or gays.

Blind obedience to charismatic authority figures or to religious institutions is a danger for all religions. But when this obedience is amplified by someone's claims to be the channel of privileged communications from God or special interpretive insight into the hidden meaning of apocalyptic symbolism, disaster and tragedy are often not far behind. The tragedies of Waco

and Jonestown were the result of narcissistic spirit-inflated egos attempting to enhance their own claims to power and absolute control over others. Openness to criticism and debate as well as the practice of discernment would have prevented the terrible loss of life. Kimball gives us a salutary warning: “Authentic religion engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world.... Beware of any religious movement that seeks to limit the intellectual freedom and individual integrity of its adherents.”¹²

The manipulation of apocalyptic time is a dangerous enterprise. As a further sign of unhealthy religion many attempt to establish an ideal time, either in the past or in the future. In Christianity this might take the form of attempting a return to some idealized and pristine state of the Church in the distant past. But apocalyptic presents another possibility: rushing headlong to a time in the future in which God’s intervention has destroyed evil and ushered in God’s kingdom of peace and prosperity. The problem is that often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some decide that God needs a helping hand – that is, they attempt to speed things along and force God’s hand. For example, there is a fervent desire (and occasional attempt) on the part of some ultra-orthodox apocalyptic Jewish groups with the support of some Christian evangelical allies to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem on the temple mount. But there is an appalling disregard for the fact that the space is occupied by two mosques very sacred to Muslims. The fact that the political consequences would be catastrophic is of little concern and is even seen as a necessary part of the final apocalyptic event and a spur to the return of Jesus.

Closely related to this is the danger of conducting foreign policy under the influence of an apocalyptic-infused mindset. Two recent American presidents have commented on their belief that we are living in the end times and have been willing to paint adversaries

in demonic terms. This is not a healthy imaginative window on the world for those who bear the authority and power to initiate a conventional or nuclear attack, especially when a final apocalyptic battle is seen by many as part of God’s plan. The real danger is that violent conflict is then seen as inevitable, even preordained, and it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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HANDLING APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGY WITH CARE

Is Christianity inherently violent? Is there any place for apocalyptic in our faith? Several things should be kept in mind. First of all, the Book of Revelation was not viewed as the core of Christian faith in the very early church. In fact, it was viewed with distrust and suspicion, for it was so obtuse that the diverse interpretations were disruptive to church life and unity. For example, the Montanists in the second century were an apocalyptic product.¹³ Revelation tells us very little about Jesus Christ and nothing in the way of his teaching.

Secondly, there is considerable scholarly debate on the question of apocalyptic itself. Did the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament originate with Jesus or were they the product of the early church? While this remains a controversial issue, the consensus inclines towards the view that Jesus indeed shared in the apocalyptic worldview of Second Temple Judaism. But the debate should at least warn us against dogmatically clinging to apocalyptic as essential to Christian faith. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount should remain the canon within the canon and the interpretive key for the rest of the gospel. This Jesus reached out with compassion, respect, and mercy to the most despised and hated members of his culture regardless of their group identity, lifestyle, or their religion, and he forbade his followers to even think or speak evil of others. The values of the kingdom taught in the Sermon on the Mount were manifested perfectly in the life and person of Jesus himself.

If handled with care, apocalyptic theology still has much to offer us. Using the model of a cosmic and divine play or drama, it can help to demythologize our own institutions and deflate human pretensions and arrogance. As a theology of hope it counsels patient endurance and encourages us lest we be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the evil, injustice, and suffering in the world. The bar is raised very high for human justice and ethical behavior, and all human structures, institutions, and aspirations are measured by God's standards rather than ours and eventually it is God who is victorious. Even the dualism of apocalyptic is overcome after the process is complete: the earth is unified and reconciled, and the polarities of the former age—Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female—are transcended.

At its core apocalyptic is about new creation, transformation, and change. It remains for the skilled and imaginative preacher or teacher to tell the story of God's cosmic project and ultimate victory in ways that are inviting and attractive rather than frightening and violent. It is the nonviolent aspects that must be emphasized—the overcoming of our inner dualism in thought and action. Evil must be overcome and transformed by love and compassionate justice. Life and the issues it brings are complex, requiring rational dialogue, compromise, and humility. And above all, it must be continually emphasized that light and darkness, as well as good and evil, reside in every human being.

NOTES

1 Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 39.

2 Martin Marty, "Is Religion the Problem?" *Tikkun* 17 (March-April 2002): 19.

3 *Ibid.*, 20.

4 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, third edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 153–154.

5 *Ibid.*, 158.

6 *Ibid.*, 164–166.

7 Krister Stendahl, "Hate, Non-Retaliatio, and Love," *Harvard Theological Review*, 55:4 (1962): 349.

8 During the second Jewish-Roman war in 132-136 A.D., the Jewish rebels believed their military leader, Simon bar Kokhba, was the Messiah. He established a sovereign state for two and a half years, before Roman armies retook the Judean territory and the emperor Hadrian barred Jews from living in Jerusalem.

9 Shabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), a rabbi in the city of Smyrna on the western coast of Anatolia, declared in 1648 that he was the true Messiah. His followers, called Shabbateans, desired to make him sultan of the Ottoman Empire and to restore the nation of Israel. When Shabbatai's treason was discovered and he was brought before the sultan in 1666, Shabbatai committed apostasy and converted to Islam.

10 Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World. How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 12. See also Paul Boyer, "The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, edited by Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 534–543.

11 Kirsch, *End of the World*, 220.

12 Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 72.

13 Montanus and two prophetesses had ecstatic experiences and proclaimed prophecies that superseded the apostolic teachings of the Church. The movement became increasingly extravagant and heretical in its claims.



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