Jayne Svenungsson

From Apocalyptic Demonization to Theological Responsibility

Mit den spürbaren Auswirkungen von Klimawandel, politischen Unruhen und tobenden Kriegen finden sich apokalyptische Bilder und das Konzept des Apokalyptischen selbst derzeit gehäuft in der Politik, der Populärkultur und den Massenmedien. Der Aufsatz bedenkt die Gefahren, die mit apokalyptischer Bildsprache einhergehen, insbesondere ihre Tendenz, die Idealisierung der eigenen Gemeinschaft und die Dämonisierung anderer zu fördern. Dabei kommt den christlichen Kirchen als Trägern dieses komplexen biblischen Vermächtnisses eine besondere Verantwortung zu. Eine Hauptaufgabe der Theologie der Gegenwart ist daher, Kirchen und andere öffentliche Akteure mit Perspektiven und Werkzeugen zum Verständnis und zur Interpretation der affektiven, tief verwurzelten, aber größtenteils unbewussten Wirkweisen apokalyptischer Bilder und Motive auszustatten, die derzeit angesichts kultureller und politischer Herausforderungen auftauchen.

Apocalypse, ideological criticism, Book of Revelation

Jayne Svenungsson (ORCID: 0000-0001-6022-1006) ist Professorin für Systematische Theologie an der Universität von Lund und derzeit *Principal Investigator* im sechsjährigen Forschungsprogramm *At the End of the World* (www.endoftheworld.lu.se). Sie hat unfassend zu politischer Theologie und Geschichtsphilosophie publiziert.

A few months into the Ukraine war, former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev issued a warning to the Western world, stating that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were 'already on their way', although the West could still try to find a diplomatic solution to deal with the situation. At the same time, Volodymyr Zelensky quoted Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 Vietnam War drama '*Apocalypse Now*' as he addressed the violence of the Russian invasion during a speech at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. As the war has dragged on, references to apocalyptic images – including the looming threat of a 'nuclear apocalypse' – have proliferated not only in the propaganda of both countries but also in the media reporting of third party countries.

The information warfare surrounding Ukraine is just one example of how apocalyptic images as well as the concept 'apocalyptic' are today regularly invoked in politics, popular culture and mass media. Many other examples could be given. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, speculations that the fourth seal of the Apocalypse had been broken flourished in evangelical circles.

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Throughout the pandemic, references to apocalyptic motifs were also made more broadly, as in the widespread notion of COVID-19 as 'nature's revenge' on humanity. Finally, such allusions to apocalyptic images in relation to the ecological crisis are being made also independently of the pandemic, as scientists, journalists and artists are struggling to convey the gravity of the situation.

Doomsday Scenarios

The frequent allusions to age-old images of doomsday scenarios testify to how apocalypticism, for better or worse, has never gone away from societies rooted in the biblical tradition. Although apocalyptic visions of a coming glory have sometimes served to give people hope and strength in difficult times, there is also a darker side to apocalypticism. From its ancient roots to its contemporary manifestations, the apocalyptic imaginary carries with it a dualism of good versus evil that encourages idealization of one's own community and demonization of the other.

The Book of Revelation is emblematic in this respect. Despite its culmination in a powerful message of a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21:1), the road to this redemptive vision is lined with violence. The prerequisite of the restoration of the righteous is the destruction and elimination of those deemed godless and wicked. The Book of Revelation is also notoriously known for consolidating some of the most enduring misogynist motifs in the Christian imaginary, including the 'whore of Babylon', whose punishment is described in grotesquely sexualized terms (Rev. 17–18). Although the passage in question is a metaphorical depiction of the desired destruction of the Roman Empire, having a woman represent a violent colonial power is nonetheless to link evil and oppression with the female sex.

The proliferation of apocalyptic tropes and images in our time carries the risk of reactivating and intensifying several of the harmful stereotypes that come along with this legacy. Consider, for example, the visual representations of Muslims used by far-right parties across Europe, such as the infamous anti-minaret poster launched by the Swiss People's Party in 2009, displaying a grim-looking woman in a black chador surrounded by minaret towers jutting out of the Swiss flag. Although it sparked outrage in Switzerland at the time, the iconography was quickly seized upon by other nationalist parties. Barely a year later, the Sweden Democrats issued a campaign advert showing an elderly white lady being chased by a horde of burqa-clad women pushing prams, the message of which was a promise to safeguard pension funding at the cost of immigration. Although most of the nationalist parties have today abandoned such conspicuous displays of xenophobic attitudes, the attitudes themselves have not disappeared. On the

contrary, they have become widely accepted, as testified to by the large number of Europeans today voting for anti-Muslim parties.

Ideological Potency

To understand the ideological potency of the imagery used by these two parties, it is important to recognize how they resonate with age-old apocalyptic tropes about Islam's role in the tribulations of the Last Days. Especially in times of political unrest on the eastern borders of Europe, fears that the Christian continent would succumb to hordes of invading 'Ishmaelites' have been exploited to justify 'holy' wars. It is also noticeable that the purported threat of Muslims to Europe in both instances is represented by women – now, as then, female cunning and sexuality (in this case fertility) is cast as the ultimate root of evil.

To be sure, these are just a few examples of the potentially damaging effects of the apocalyptic imaginary in Western history. The most constant symbolic other of Christian apocalypses throughout history has been the Jew, and it would be equally possible to trace the deep history of contemporary antisemitism back to ancient and medieval stereotypes of Jews as ungodly deceivers. However, these few examples should suffice to make my point clear: with the intensified use of apocalyptic language and imagery in politics, journalism and popular culture comes the risk of reinviting and reinforcing – intentionally or not – an array of stereotypical representations of the other: of women, immigrants or anyone who does not fit into a purported Christian European identity.

Undesirable Values

This finally brings me to the question of undesirable values. It should be clear, from what I have written so far, that my response to this question is closely related to some of the developments that we are experiencing in Europe today. As the effects of climate change, political upheaval and ravaging war are palpable, apocalyptic language with its clear definitions of right and wrong, good and evil, true and false, becomes attractive. Such has always been the case. History provides ample examples of how times of crises tend to trigger scapegoating behaviour and demonization of the other. Learning from history, the answer to the question of what values should not guide us, should therefore be clear and simple: dehumanizing notions of people as well as degrading notions of other living beings and of the natural world.

It may be tempting to object here that this is neither a very surprising nor a very radical answer from a Christian theological viewpoint. After all, Christian theology takes its inspiration from instructions such as 'Truly I tell you, whatever

you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25: 40), or 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). At its best moments, Christianity – churches as well as individual Christians – has embodied these ideals, sometimes with astounding bravery. However, everyone knows that this is just one side of the coin. Throughout history, Christianity has also been profoundly implicated in violent othering processes, ranging from scapegoating and sexual oppression to outright terror and persecution. While these crimes are often described as perversions of the Bible and the Christian legacy, reality is a bit more complicated. As already indicated by my brief references to the Book of Revelation, xenophobic and misogynist assumptions are not merely deviations from the Bible and its legacy – they are present in the texts themselves as well as in numerous historical and contemporary interpretations of the Christian Gospel.

While the question of undesirable values is easy to respond to, the more challenging question for Christian theology is therefore how to handle this double-edged legacy, especially in times when some of its most harmful tendencies are being reactivated (although my focus so far has been on Europe, examples could be drawn from across the globe, including the aggressive apocalyptic Christianity of the evangelical far-right in the United States). As carriers of this complex legacy, Christian churches have a special responsibility. A major task for theology today is therefore to provide perspectives and tools that allow churches as well as other civil agents (journalists, teachers, scholars) to interpret and understand the affective, deeply rooted, but largely unconscious ways in which apocalyptic tropes and images resurface in response to today's cultural and political challenges.

Double-edged Legacy of Apocalyptic Imagery

Let me end by briefly indicating a few recent examples of how this critical task can be carried out. Focussing on Christian discipleship, the Aberdeen-based theologian Philip Ziegler has taken issue with the assumption that the apocalyptic strand of the Bible inevitably engenders polarizing behaviour. In his 2018 book *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology*, he makes use of metaphors of militancy and struggle typical of apocalyptic language, but only to show how the core message of the Bible turns the standard interpretation of these terms around. Drawing on Karl Barth and other central Protestant thinkers, Ziegler advances a radical Christocentric view and argues that the Bible's apocalyptic message is ultimately a call to refuse the violent structures of this world.

Ziegler's approach is significant because it reminds us that the apocalyptic imaginary is not only or necessarily damaging – it can also be profoundly emancipatory depending on how we interpret and enact it. This is an assumption which is shared by Thomas Lynch in his 2019 book *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*. While equally committed to exploring the radical resources of apocalypticism, Lynch, by contrast, rejects traditional ideas of the apocalypse as an intervention of a transcendent divine agent. Concerned that such ideas will lead to escapism and a downplaying of human agency, Lynch instead proposes an immanent political theology focussed on resistance to the inherent injustices of the present world order.

A similar concern, finally, is voiced by Catherine Keller *in Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (2021), the most recent of her many contributions to the topic. Even more explicitly than Lynch, Keller addresses the concrete challenges of apocalyptically motivated escapism. Within large swathes of evangelical Christianity, for example, biblical depictions of natural devastation are being read as literal predictions, nurturing fatalistic approaches to climate change or even outright hostility towards progressive environmental politics. Contrary to such readings, Keller sets out to explore the potential of biblical apocalypticism – especially the Book of Revelation – to inspire courage to stand in resistance to ecological exploitation. Instead of reading the violence and destruction depicted in Revelation as threatening predictions of future facts, she reads them as revelations of fatal patterns characteristic of imperial power in all ages.

Fatal Patterns of Imperial Power

These recent efforts to engage critically with apocalypticism are all good examples of how theological responsibility may be exercised today. For, whether we like it or not, apocalyptic images of nature, war and perceived enemies continue to mark their presence in contemporary cultural and political life. The challenge to be continuously pondered is therefore how to live with the apocalyptic imaginary – so deeply engrained in our collective cultural mind – in constructive and responsible ways. Like Ziegler, Lynch and Keller, I believe that it is only through a more thorough engagement with the apocalyptic tradition in all its complexity that we can find resources to interrupt its potentially violent lure.