

The State of Apocalyptic Studies

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Voltaire once observed "Sir Isaac Newton wrote his comment upon the Revelation to console mankind for the great superiority he had over them in other respects." How strange to find Newton, the paragon of modern science, a devoted student of apocalyptic speculations. The skeptical Voltaire sounds a more comfortable note for most of us, one close to modern dismissals of apocalypticism as a bizarre, even dangerous, delusion.

The seven papers for this session on "Eschatology, Millenarian Movements and Visions of the Future" remind us that apocalyptic eschatology has had a long history, and, despite its dubious and even destructive, moments, shows no signs of vanishing from the scene as we enter the third millennium C.E. These essays invite reflections from many directions. I would like to signal out only three in these brief remarks. In ascending order of significance they are: (1) issues of definition; (2) the question of the inner logic and function of apocalyptic ideas; and (3) how we judge the role of apocalypticism.

I. Definitions

All these papers makes use of the same complex of terms (apocalypse/apocalypticism, eschatology, messianism, millenarianism, prophecy). The fact that the contributors do not take time to define their understanding of the terms signifies, I believe, something of the progress that has been made in studies of ideas of the imminence of the end over the past generation. There is now a common field of study indicated by these words, one generally accepted by scholars, despite some disputes about terminology and the scope of the phenomenon. It may, however, be helpful to begin with my own sense of the meaning of the terms, if only to test the limits of this agreement.

I suggest that eschatology and prophecy are to be understood very broadly: the former word indicates any belief system about the last events of history and what lies beyond them; the latter originally signifies any kind of message delivered by a divinely-appointed messenger. Apocalypticism, derived from the Greek term for a genre of Jewish and Christian revelatory literature, qualifies and limits both eschatology and prophecy by introducing

the notion of a message sent from God announcing the imminence of the events of last days. "The end is near," proclaims the apocalyptic prophet, whether that end be imminent in a chronologically predictive sense, or in some more vague, but often no less powerful psychological way. Finally, millennialism and messianism, at least in the classic meaning of these terms, represent aspects of the scenario of the endtimes announced by the apocalyptic prophet or prophetess. Millennialism describes the hope for a final "Golden Age" to come before the end, whether of the "thousand years" predicted by John (Apoc. 20:1-6), or of some other period, determinate or indeterminate. Messianism is the belief in a human deliver who will function as the champion of divine justice in the ultimate struggle between good and evil. Often the messiah or messiahs are associated with a millennial era, but this is not necessary.

II. Functions

Why apocalypticism? Where did it originate and for what purpose? How has it functioned? How influential has it been?

These seven papers reflect recent study that argues for a much larger role for apocalyptic ideas and movements than was recognized a half-century ago. C. Carozzi and R. Rusconi look at the prevalence of apocalypticism throughout the Middle Ages. M. Caffiero and P. Lenihan show that, contrary to established wisdom, apocalypticism did not suffer a severe decline with the Enlightenment, but rather flourished in various ways in Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. V.I. Mildon brings us up the present, arguing that while West may have become "post-millennial" in the 20th century, this is not the case with Russia. On the Jewish side, R. Goetschel points to a broad strand apocalyptic messianism percolating through medieval and modern Judaism from the Sefer ha-Zeruvvavel (possibly seventh century) to Rabbi Kook and up to the present. S. Arjomand persuasively demonstrates that the apocalyptic and messianic elements in Muhammed and the early centuries of Islam have been much neglected and that their relation to earlier Jewish and Christian apocalypticism is in need of further study.

These papers also demonstrate that many older views about the nature of apocalypticism have been questioned and even superceded in recent scholarship. Let me cite just three. First, the idea that apocalyptic texts are always a literature of consolation created by minorities in times of persecution must be rejected. To be sure, this has often been the case, but the

persecution thesis is too narrow and one-sided to explain such a broad and varied phenomenon. While the Book of Daniel, for example, reflects the trials of faithful Jews under the persecution of Antiochus IV, the even earlier apocalyptic materials in 1 Enoch cannot be located in any concrete situation of repression. Apocalyptic literature may perhaps be described as a literature of crisis, but crisis is very much in the eye of the beholder, and we need to be more attentive to the mechanisms which allow sometimes relatively minor events to be given world-historical import by the apocalyptically-minded.

A second hypothesis that now seems wanting is the view that sees apocalypticism as primarily a disruptive, potentially revolutionary, phenomenon. As a form of religio-political rhetoric the apocalyptic worldview is characterized by great malleability, as is shown in the papers of Rusconi, Caffiero, and Arjomand, for example. It has often been employed in opposition to the established order seen as a manifestation of the powers of evil--though the opposition has been more often realized by "dropping out" of society than by revolutionary action. However, apocalyptic ideas have also provided fuel for transcendentalizing established institutions, or at least their eschatological projections into the end times, as the history of the Last Emperor and pastor angelicus legends in Christianity shows. Finally, a third view of apocalypticism that increasingly seems wanting today is to see it as an early, primitive stage in the development of the western monotheisms--one to be outgrown once these religions reach a certain level of intellectual and cultural development. Given the persistence of various forms of apocalypticism, it seems more likely to suppose that, whether understood literally or non-literally, apocalypticism is an inherent aspect of western monotheistic faiths. The issue is not between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic versions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; but rather between different interpretations of the inherent apocalypticism of all three faiths.

The appropriately-numbered seven papers for this apocalyptic session suggest a number of aspects of the ways ideas about the imminent end functioned over almost two millennia. Rather than highlighting specific applications and uses, I would like to note two of the broad philosophical grounds for the attraction of apocalypticism before proposing a more specific cross-religious framework for investigating one aspect of the apocalyptic scenario, i.e., messianism.

A significant part of the appeal of apocalyptic eschatology

resides in its ability to help humans cope with two of the essential mysteries of existence: temporality and theodicy. In a famous phrase, Mircea Eliade spoke about "the terror of history." Implicitly or explicitly, most human societies have tried to relate the quotidian succession of the lives of individuals and of the development of institutions to the larger questions of meaning that societies have tended to frame in transcendental fashion--that is, in light of a permanent, divine world of meaning. Carozzi's paper on the relation between the liturgical calendar of medieval Christianity and the dramatic view of universal history found in the apocalyptic scenario highlights one aspect of how Christian apocalyptic views have dealt with temporality. From a broad comparative perspective we can say that apocalypticism, with its sense of divine control over history and its conviction that God has revealed the framework of events in which the individual is called to ultimate decision, has been an effective way, at least for some groups, to relate the confusion of everyday life, particularly in times of stress, change, and unforeseen development, to wider issues of meaning. Literal predications based on apocalyptic programs have usually not been fulfilled (let us not forget those that have--e.g., Dispensationalist Fundamentalist belief that the Jews would return to the Holy Land), but this failure of prediction has not lessened their appeal to those caught in "the terror of history."

The power of apocalypticism is also closely tied to theodicy, at least as it is framed in the western monotheisms where evil is generally seen as the product of perverted choice rather than part of the metaphysical structure of the universe. If the struggle between good and evil is inscribed into history as one of its defining characteristics, then it may seem logical to believe that it must also be solved within history. All solutions hitherto observed are at best partial--good sometimes triumphs, but more often evil seems dominant. Apocalyptic belief in the ultimate victory of goodness--its hope for a final age of peace and justice--helps explain the special hold the apocalyptic imagination has had for more than two millennia.

The hope for the final and definitive triumph of goodness within history has often been connected with belief in a coming messiah, a God-sent deliver and vindicator. Messianic beliefs, as a number of these essays remind us, have been among the most significant aspects of apocalypticism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And yet the ways in which messianism has functioned in the three related traditions have been remarkably diverse.

Apocalyptic Jews, such as the Habad movement of the present day, continue to look forward to the coming of the messiah, while Christianity has had to face the problem of what happens when the messiah has come but ordinary history and the struggle between good and evil continues. A somewhat comparable situation is to be found in Islam, where as Arjomand has shown, the messianic components of Muhammed's identity can be tied to apocalyptic readings of the "seal of prophecy" found in Daniel 9:24 and the promised "paraclete" of John's gospel (e.g., Jn. 16:13-14).

The Christian solution to the dilemma of the messiah who has already come was to work out a distinctive notion of sacred time that Oscar Cullmann delineated in the phrase, "already but not yet," that is, that the messiah has indeed come, but he is also still on the way. The effect that this conception of Heilsgeschichte had is vital for understanding the dynamics of Christian messianism. If the returning Christ of the Last Judgment always takes center stage in the drama of the last times--there can be only one real messiah--nevertheless, the ongoing conflict between good and evil and the apocalyptic sense that evil will grow in strength as the end draws near led to two distinctive trajectories in the history of Christian apocalypticism. The first is the emphasis given to the anti-messiah, the dread figure of Antichrist. While there are comparable figures in Judaism (Armilus) and in Islam (the Dajjal), they do not seem to have the centrality and potency that Christian apocalypticists have given to Antichrist. The second effect of the already-but-not-yet character of Christian sacred history is how it allowed for the creation of an assisting cast of what I call quasi-messiahs, such as the Last World Emperor and Angelic Pope, to share in Christ's final triumph over evil. These figures, as I have argued elsewhere, are new creations designed to provide transcendental apocalyptic validation to major developments in Christian history, specifically the conversion of the Roman empire and the growth of the medieval papacy. The fact that Islam has a similar arrested understanding of Heilsgeschichte is an important factor in understanding the creation of the ideas of the Mahdi and the Qa'im. Nevertheless, further study of comparative messianism and what it has to tell us about the dynamics of apocalyptic beliefs in the three related traditions would be a fruitful avenue of research.

III. Evaluation

Finally, and briefly, there is the thorny question of the

evaluation of apocalypticism, an issue posed directly in the paper of V.I. Mildon, but one that sooner or later confronts any student of the phenomenon. The dangers of literal apocalypticism, both past and present, the ways in which it has worked to foster irrational fear, inordinate self-righteousness, blazing hatred, savage conflict, and cruel repression, are too well-known to need documenting here. But a look at the full story also compels us to admit that an apocalyptic sense of God's plan at work in history as allowed many apocalyptic groups to survive persecution, to nurture and defend religious traditions, and to refuse to surrender to powerful agents of oppression. It has also fostered the hope without which societies and religious may well perish. To separate the good from the bad in the history of apocalypticism is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task.

It may well be, of course, that we do not have to. Perhaps society in the 21st century will move beyond the need for apocalypticism and live in a world where millennial hopes and the fears of impending doom are no longer necessary. This is already perhaps the case for many segments in Western society, but scarcely for all. The growing strength of Fundamentalist movements in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as well as the various forms of what can be called "secular apocalypticism," notably in the more radical aspects of the ecological movement, argue that those who predict the disappearance of apocalypticism may be no more correct in their prophecies than the most discredited of the apocalyptic prophets of the past two thousand years. "The end is not near"--at least the end of apocalypticism.