

APOCALYPTICISM IN POLITICAL AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY: TOWARD AN HISTORICAL *DOCTA IGNORANTIA*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines political and liberation theologies as instances of apocalypticism, focusing in the work of Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino. The first section develops a heuristic framework for identifying and analyzing apocalyptic discourse in general, using the historical work of Bernard McGinn and the rhetorical analysis of Stephen O'Leary. The second section applies this framework to Metz and Sobrino, arguing that their theology is a legitimate, provocative, and instructive instance of apocalyptic discourse today, in part because of the way it integrates apocalyptic eschatology with Christology. In a final section, the intelligibility proper to this apocalyptic discourse is discussed by arguing a correlation with mystical theology with its discursive pair of cataphasis and apophasis. Just as this pair finds its context of meaning in the practice of contemplative prayer, apocalyptic affirmations and the reserve expressed in the eschatological proviso find their context of meaning in the practice of opting for the poor.

Apocalypticism is older than Christianity.¹ Its persistence in the United States, the world's most "modern" nation, shows its durability. This durability is evident, for instance, in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which, with its apocalyptic scenario, made him the best-selling nonfiction author of the 1970s, a success that others

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have imitated.² More recently, a 1995 *U.S. News & World Report* poll found that 53 percent of Americans believe that some world events of this century fulfill biblical prophecy.³ In the last few years, evangelical preachers (“premillennial dispensationalists”) have been able to play not only with the advent of the new millennium, but on associated phenomena like the so-called Y2K problem.⁴ Apocalypticism is not restricted to North America, however. Its incidence in diverse places from Waco to Tokyo indicates that, like fundamentalism, it has an appeal that crosses cultures and religions.⁵ Nor is it confined to religious fundamentalists, Walter Lowe argues that it reentered academic theology eight years ago, with Karl Barth’s interruptive, apocalyptically cast *Römerbrief*.⁶ For Roman Catholic theology, consider John Paul II’s encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, which paints reality in apocalyptic terms as a struggle between two opposed forces (the culture of life and the culture of death), and closes with a reflection on the woman and the dragon from Revelation 12.⁷ Even secular philosophers like Ernst Bloch earlier in the century, and Jacques Derrida today, find themselves strangely attracted to an element of Christianity and Judaism that has been evaluated on modern grounds as one of their most archaic remnants. What are we to make of apocalypticism?

Here we will consider the use of apocalyptic motifs and argument in political and liberation theology, represented primarily by Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino. I will argue that they offer a legitimate and theologically illuminating instance of apocalypticism’s place in Christian faith and theology. Before considering this usage, the historical work of Bernard McGinn and the rhetorical analysis of Stephen O’Leary will be used to construct a heuristic framework for identifying, analyzing, and evaluating apocalypticism. Finally, no modern discus-

²Hal Lindsey, with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970). Lindsey followed up with *The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon* (King of Prussia, PA: Westgate Press, 1980) and *The Messiah* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1982/1996). Of course, Lindsey is only one of the many practitioners of “premillennial dispensationalism” in the United States. For an overview, see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³“The Christmas Covenant,” *U.S. News & World Report* 117/24 (Dec. 19, 1994): 64.

⁴As reported by Lynn Neary: “Digital Rapture,” *Weekend Edition Saturday*, National Public Radio, 1/12/99.

⁵For apocalypticism’s presence outside of the United States, see the pertinent articles in the *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3, ed. Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998). See also the essays collected in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (London: Routledge, 1997), esp. Mark Mullins, “Aum Shrinrikyō as an Apocalyptic Movement,” 313-25.

⁶See Walter Lowe, “Prospects for a Postmodern Christian Theology: Apocalyptic Without Reserve,” *Modern Theology* 15/1 (January 1999): 17-24.

⁷*Evangelium Vitae*, nos. 102-5.

sion of apocalypticism can avoid the problem of making apocalyptic claim in a scientific culture, in which, as Rudolf Bultmann so trenchantly put it, any reasonable person knows that world history did not, and will not in the immediate future, come to an end.⁸ In the concluding section I propose that this problem be approached by a correlation between mystical theology and liberation theology. The former uses a discursive strategy of tightly interlaced cataphatic and apophatic statements to open up and articulate the place where God's presence is encountered, in order to nurture a disposition classically described as *docta ignorantia*—learned ignorance. I argue that the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in liberation and political theologies can be interpreted as part of a similar strategy: it corresponds to the cataphatic moment in mystical theology, and constitutes a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for articulating and nurturing a “contemplation in historical action” that is on the way to an “historical” *docta ignorantia*.

I. A Heuristic Framework

Apocalypticism is perhaps most familiar to North Americans from its presence in “premillennial dispensationalists” like Lindsey. Consequently, it is frequently associated with the construction of horrifying narratives of the end-time and the proclamation that history will end “tomorrow.” Scriptural and historical work show that the genre is far more complex and polymorphous.⁹ Two observations drawn from that long history will serve as starting points for an interpretive framework. First, whatever else it is, apocalypticism is a particular way of thinking and talking about God's agency in history and the community's role therein. Second, apocalypticism provides a rhetorical strategy for mustering the resources of a community in the face of grave challenges to its way of envisioning that divine agency.

First, then, what is at stake in apocalypticism is the established understanding of history, and, in particular the degree to which historical events are held to be transparent to the saving activity of God. What

⁸See Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology” in *New Testament and Mythology, and Other Basic Writings*, trans. and ed. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 5.

⁹For the biblical background, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). My historical overview relies on introductory materials in *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. with an introduction and new preface by Bernard McGinn (New York: Columbia University Press), and *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, trans. with an introduction by Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979). See also the historical overviews by McGinn and Marjorie Reeves in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions*, ed. C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 2-72, as well as the recently published *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3 vols., ed. John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998).

is distinctive about the apocalyptic imagination is that it ascribes a high degree of such transparency. This ascription becomes manifest either as the apocalypticist makes use of the received understanding of the nature of God's saving activity to illuminate events in history or as he or she seizes upon novel events in history to reinterpret the received understanding of the way God saves.¹⁰ Bernard McGinn describes the typical pattern that apocalypticism uses to map out this transparency as follows:

First, a sense of the unity and structure of history conceived as a divinely predetermined totality; second, pessimism about the present and conviction of its imminent crisis; and third, belief in the proximate judgment of evil and triumph of the good, the element of vindication.¹¹

This provides a way of identifying apocalypticism independent of its use of symbols and motifs now commonly associated with it (like those invoked by premillennial dispensationalists: the thousand-year reign, Antichrist, the rapture, etc.). Apocalyptic discourse focuses on the way God responds in history to evil, understood not only as something that impinges on the individual but as a cosmic-social force, a threat to cosmopolis.¹² History—political and cosmic—is perceived as a field of growing tension between God and evil, between Christ and Antichrist. The pessimism and conviction of imminent crisis are, however, expressed in a broader context of hope in the imminence of God's decisive intervention. While for some apocalyptic figures this leads to a call to retire from society in expectation of God's supernatural intervention, this is by no means the only, or even the most common outcome. More commonly, one is urged to put oneself "on God's side," to adopt (or persevere in) that social praxis—in society and history—demanded by God, so as to be vindicated in the hour of God's *coup de grâce*.

The second observation suggests the fruitfulness of a rhetorical analysis of apocalypticism for showing that and how it is often a successful strategy for generating and maintaining social consensus and action in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Applying a

¹⁰McGinn refers to these two options as the "a priori" and "a posteriori" use of apocalypticism. The Book of Revelation is primarily of the former type; the legend of the Last World Emperor in the Middle Ages is an instance of the latter. See *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 8-11.

¹¹McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 10

¹²I use this in the sense suggested by Stephen Toulmin, in his magisterial work *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990). Drawing from the Greek roots of *cosmos* and *polis*, Toulmin describes it as the idea (or ideal) of a single order which integrates the order of the natural world (*cosmos*) and the order of the human community (*polis*) in one overarching order: cosmopolis (see 67-9).

rhetorical analysis has at least two other virtues. It underscores the fact that the sense of crisis must be evoked in a given audience. After all, one person's crisis causes someone else simply to change the channel. Part of the apocalyptic rhetor's job is to get his or her audience to wake up, to realize that the situation has become critical. This is the job for which primordial symbols of divine combat or hypostasized evil can be correlated to concrete social realities and historical events, with potent effect. Finally, a rhetorical analysis allows one to take apocalypticism seriously, bracketing for the time being the question of its truth ("Is God's decisive intervention *really* going to happen tomorrow?"), even if that issue will have to be considered eventually (here, in the concluding section).

In his analysis of the rhetoric of apocalypticism Stephen O'Leary contends that "apocalyptic functions as a symbolic theodicy, a mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil, and . . . its approach to this problem is accomplished through a discursive construction of temporality."¹³ Using a broad range of historical examples he shows us that this rhetoric revolves around the topoi of evil and time. Furthermore, since it operates as *apokalypsis* it must address the issue of authority. This will be particularly true of the second use of apocalypticism noted above, which presses for an addition to or serious emendation of the received understanding of God's ways. Why should a reader (or hearer) allow him or herself to be led beyond this received understanding to consider a new one? What authority could legitimate and urge such a move? In classical apocalypses this rhetorical task was done by means of pseudonymous authorship, *vaticinia ex eventu*, or the description of heavenly journeys and visions. Since the closing of the canon it has been done exegetically, whether by the complex symbolic interpretation of a Joachim of Fiore or Hal Lindsey's "common sense" reading of Scripture.¹⁴ The rhetorical work that the appeal to authority does is not so much to prove the truth of the assertions being made as it is the work of making a claim on the reader's attention, particularly given the audacity of some of the assertions that in fact will be made, thereby drawing him or her into the "discursive construction of temporality" that the apocalyptic rhetor is proposing as a solution to the problem of historical evil. As in all rhetoric, the deployment of a particular topic like authority is not to *prove* but to *persuade*. Once the reader has been persuaded to "inhabit" the apocalyptic world, the suggestive and persuasive power of the apocalyptic narrative takes over. For apocalypticism this power is in large measure dramatic.

¹³Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14.

¹⁴On Lindsey's "common sense" reading, with its roots in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, see O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 143-47.

Thus, finally, apocalyptic texts are often dramatic in form. That is, they are most effectively presented when they are enacted, and when the audience participates cathartically. Writing on the Book of Revelation, Adela Yarbro Collins, displays this element clearly:

The task of Revelation was to overcome the unbearable tension perceived by the author between what was and what ought to have been. His purpose was to create that tension for readers unaware of it, to heighten it for those who already felt it, and then to overcome it in an act of literary imagination.¹⁵

This implies that apocalyptic texts are “validated,” not so much by proving accurate in predicting the future, but by enabling those who enter into and participate in the dramas they present to continue living faithfully and creatively in a world which appears to render such a life futile and absurd. A recognition that the primary value of apocalyptic texts lies in empowering lives of faith can help explain why some people continue to embrace them even when their specific historical predictions (if they risk making them) are disproved.

In summary, then, apocalyptic discourse can be recognized by its willingness to posit strong connections between historical events and God’s saving action, and by the distinctive pattern (crisis, divine intervention, and judgment) it uses to elaborate this connection. It can be further analyzed by probing how it deploys and exploits the three topoi of evil, time, and authority in order to generate and sustain social consensus and action. The question that remains is how it is to be evaluated. Its presence in Scripture, and its persistence through the history of Christian theology and spirituality—despite the potent opposition of figures like Augustine of Hippo¹⁶— should warn us against simply dismissing it. Yet recent events also show its tendency to devolve into dualistic demonizations of others, and even into violence.¹⁷ Even here, though, we must remember that not all apocalyptic movements follow this path.¹⁸ Moreover, the frequent apathy of nonapocalyptic Christian churches when confronted with historical evil must

¹⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 141.

¹⁶ See Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Michael Barkun, “Millenarians and Violence: The Case of the Christian Identity Movement” in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, 247-60.

¹⁸ The early history of the Anabaptists is a case in point. See Timothy George, “The Spirituality of the Radical Reformation” in *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 356-66.

be put in the balance before condemning apocalypticism *tout court*.¹⁹ How should one evaluate this complex, multivalent phenomenon?

The suggestion that apocalyptic texts are validated by their ability to empower faithful life in troubled times gives one criterion. What is it about this genre that enables it to do this? Turning to apocalyptic classics like the Book of Revelation, it is evident that they exercise their unique impact to the extent that they fully embrace the genre's characteristic claims: transparency of historical events to the action of God, the radical socio-historical character of the confrontation between God and the "powers and principalities" of this world, the necessity for a similarly radical choice on the part of believers, and the certain expectation of vindication by God's own intervention. A particular instance of apocalypticism, can thus be judged by how well it draws on these key features. In other words, one should ask how radical the apocalyptic presentation is on its own terms.

A second criterion, somewhat in tension with the first, places the text, with its focus on eschatology, in relation to the larger constellation of Christian beliefs and practices. One must ask how well the discourse integrates its conception of God's agency in history with the understanding of God's agency entailed by other classic loci of Christian doctrine, particularly christology. Does the apocalyptic rhetoric "take over" and instrumentalize God and Christ for its own purposes, or do the gospels as a whole (and not just through their "little apocalypses" like Mt 24) exercise a critical power to call into question the ways we spontaneously envision God's historical victory and the vindication of the faithful? At stake here is the fidelity of the apocalyptic discourse to Christian faith and discourse about God in general.²⁰

II. *Apocalyptic Rhetoric and Political and Liberation Theology*

This framework provides the structure for evaluating the use of apocalyptic motifs in political and liberation theology, represented by Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino. Metz is one of the few non-evangelical theologians who unselfconsciously characterizes his theology as apocalyptic. He has averred that "it is to a certain degree the hem of my theological approach, although I have not yet learned to

¹⁹It is often hard to avoid the suspicion that liberal and left-wing critics of religious apocalypticism favor nonapocalyptic communities because they are more "manageable" and less likely to stand in the way of liberal, progressive, or radical projects for engineering a "more human" (read, "less religious") world.

²⁰I am adopting here Roger Haight's proposal that any theological interpretation of the symbols of Christian Scripture and tradition be judged by its fidelity to the Christian tradition, its ability to energize and empower human freedom, and its intelligibility against a modern horizon of understanding. See Roger Haight, S.J., *Dynamics of Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 210-12. The criterion of intelligibility will be taken up in the last section.

speaking convincingly about it.”²¹ From the start of his career he has been adamantly opposed to theological strategies that approach biblical apocalypticism by “demythologizing it,” whether it be Rudolf Bultmann’s approach, or even, and most importantly for Metz’s own development, that of his own beloved teacher, Karl Rahner.²²

Sobrino does not appeal to apocalypticism as explicitly and as often, so treating him as an apocalyptic author requires some justification. The framework developed earlier suggests at least four reasons why his writing should be included in this genre. First, Sobrino contends that “every theology must confront suffering, determine the fundamental form of suffering, and ask what can be done about it.”²³ He goes on to argue that today this fundamental form is not individual but *historical*, particularly the issue of unjust suffering.²⁴ This is one of the most fundamental points of agreement between Sobrino and Metz.²⁵ More importantly for our purposes, it is the problem that defines the goal and form of apocalyptic rhetoric.²⁶

Second, for Sobrino, as well as for Metz, the “answer” to the problem of suffering cannot be sought purely outside or beyond history. As he writes, quoting from his slain friend and mentor, Ignacio Ellacuría, “salvation history entails salvation in history.”²⁷ Like all liberation and political theologians, Sobrino understands “reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel” to mean rendering historical reality transparent to the salvific activity of God. This insistence is reflected in his refusal to accept privatized interpretations of the meaning of the kingdom of God. Sobrino goes beyond urging a general notion of the inbreaking of the kingdom as the transformation of social and political

²¹Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. and ed. with an introduction by J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 47.

²²When asked to pinpoint the difference between his theology and Rahner’s, Metz once said “Some day Rahner will die, and he will be greeted by God the Father with this question: ‘My dear great Karl Rahner, what have you done to the apocalypics of my son.’” Rahner’s response: “You may be right, you may be right; *but*, how are you going to get this across [*durchsetzen*]?” (from Mary Maher, “Historicity and Christian Theology: Johannes Baptist Metz’s Critique of Karl Rahner’s Theology” [Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1988], 12, 110). See my discussion in *Interpretations: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 187-88.

²³Jon Sobrino, “Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*,” trans. José Pedrozo and Paul F. Knitter, in his *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 29.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 30

²⁵For Metz, see “Theology as Theodicy?” *Passion for God*, 54-71.

²⁶As Sobrino himself asserts: “[T]he message of apocalypticism is one of hope in the power of God to remake an unjust world and to do justice to its victims” (Jon Sobrino, *La Fe en Jesucristo Ensayo Desde las Víctimas* [Madrid: Trotta, 1999], 66 [my translation]).

²⁷Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 46.

structures. He identifies one social-historical location as the place where God's salvific activity—the inbreaking of the kingdom—is normatively revealed: the place of suffering, suffering unjustly inflicted or allowed, the suffering of entire peoples. As a consequence, he gives the plight of those who suffer from poverty and injustice the highest theological valence possible in describing them as “the crucified peoples,” “Christ's crucified body in history.”²⁸

Third, Sobrino insists that the only proper theological reading of history is one of mounting conflict and crisis. While he does not often retrieve the venerable apocalyptic symbol of Antichrist to speak about God's opponent in history, he does speak of the anti-kingdom—the constellation of historical realities that oppose the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The conflict between these two kingdoms is the most fundamental structure of historical reality.²⁹ One way that Sobrino presses this interpretation is by retrieving the biblical motif of idolatry:

[F]rom a Salvadoran perspective, it is clear that the true God is at war with other gods. These are the idols, the false divinities—although they are real enough—which Archbishop Romero has concretized for our time in speaking of the absolutization of exploitative capitalism and “national security.” Idols dehumanize their worshipers, but their ultimate evil lies in the fact that they demand victims in order to exist. If there is one single deep conviction I have acquired in El Salvador it is that such idols are real.³⁰

Fourth, Sobrino's theology is constructed with the purpose of making this crisis visible and eliciting a decisive choice on the part of his readers.³¹ Playing on one of Kant's famous metaphors for enlightenment, he argues that our challenge today is not awakening from a dogmatic slumber, but “waking from the sleep of humanity,” a slumber in which many do not notice or are unmoved by the suffering of so many

²⁸See Jon Sobrino, “The Crucified Peoples: Yahweh's Suffering Servant Today” in *1492-1992: The Voice of the Victims*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo, *Concilium* 1990/6 (London: SCM Press, 1991): 120-29. (Also *Jesus the Liberator*, 254-71). Sobrino freely acknowledges that he learned this concept from Ellacuría.

²⁹See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 93-95, 161-62. Sobrino argues for a hermeneutical principle of “historical discernment” that clearly draws from the central meditation on “the two standards” in Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. See, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. with a commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 65-67 (nos. 136-48).

³⁰Jon Sobrino, “Introduction: Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity,” trans. Dimas Planas, in *The Principle of Mercy*, 9.

³¹He tells us, e.g., that “the sole object of all this talk [about crucified peoples] must be to bring them down from the cross” (“The Crucified Peoples,” 120). Completing his two volumes on Jesus Christ, Sobrino declines to call what he is doing a “christology” in the traditional sense, but a presentation of Jesus as “an open parable” which calls upon us to take up a cognitive, evaluative, and finally active stance, not just toward Jesus but toward all reality (see *La Fe en Jesucristo*, 14).

others.³² Once the sense of crisis is evoked and commitment elicited, apocalyptic rhetoric has the purpose of sustaining that commitment, generating hope against hope. This is, in fact, how Sobrino describes liberation theology's goal vis-à-vis the poor:

If the mass of ordinary people today understand a little better that what they are suffering is the sin of the world, that God is a God of the poor, their God, that what Jesus proclaimed was a kingdom of life and justice for them, that it was for this that he suffered the fate of the poor and was murdered; if these poor people feel a little more encouraged to work and struggle generously and nobly for life to belong to all, then, even if they have not heard a word of liberation theology, it has still reached them.³³

After identification of these theologies as species of apocalyptic rhetoric, the next stage is to identify how they deploy and exploit the rhetorical topoi of evil, time and authority. On the theme of evil, we have already seen the central notion of Sobrino's portrayal of evil and crisis. What threatens us today is not atheism but idolatry: the absolutization of social and political realities that generate distorted perceptions of reality, dehumanize those who pay them homage, and most importantly, demand victims. Their continued existence requires death—specifically the deaths of the poor and marginalized, the widow, the orphan, the stranger.³⁴ This way of rendering the apocalyptic crisis is radical in its insistence that we look to the institutions and metastructures that create death, rather than accept modernity's tendency to privatize both religion, on the one hand, and what might count as a crisis on religious terms, on the other.³⁵ It also keeps apocalyptic rhetoric in touch with its biblical roots in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scripture.

Metz adds the insight that the crisis is compounded by our increasing inability to muster the strength and hope to respond effectively. Even as we are more and more informed about the catastrophic state of our world, we seem also to become more and more numb:

³²Sobrino, "Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity," *passim*.

³³Sobrino, "Companions of Jesus," trans. Dinah Livingstone, in Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría et al., *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 49. As the subtitle suggests, another increasingly prominent theme in Sobrino's thought which could be explored for its apocalyptic resonances is that of martyrdom.

³⁴Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 183-86.

³⁵This tendency is accepted by and large by evangelical premillennial dispensationalists, who evoke the sense of crisis by pointing to increasing personal immorality and godlessness. For all of its untimeliness, this marks their use of apocalypticism as ultimately a quite modern phenomenon.

Catastrophes are reported on the radio in between pieces of music. The music plays on, like the "course of time" rendered audible, a time which rolls on mercilessly and which nothing can interrupt. As Brecht said, "Today when atrocities happen it's like when the rain falls. No one yells 'stop it' anymore."³⁶

This paralysis is an ironic, indeed tragic end to the Enlightenment's great dream of a human subject come of age, who, having left behind his or her tutelage or immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*, as Kant expressed it), takes the helm of history and steers it into a truly humanized future. Metz asks:

Is there not a kind of weariness with being a subject; trained in fitting in, do we think in terms of little niches? Is there not a growing spectator mentality, with no obligation to perceive critically, a rather voyeuristic way of dealing with social and political crises? Are there not in our secularized and enlightened world signs of a new, as it were, second immaturity [*Unmündigkeit*], fed by the experience that more than ever before we are informed about everything, above all about what threatens us and about all the horrors in the world, but that the step from knowledge to action, from the consciousness of crisis to dealing with crisis, has never seemed so great and so unlikely as it does today?³⁷

This has brought us to the second issue: temporality. Political and liberation theologians portray our world as a world of crisis, a mounting and increasingly violent confrontation between the God of life and the idols of death. How can temporality be constructed and history understood in such a way that this sense of crisis can yet remain enfolded in a broader sense of hope? First, by the *deconstruction* of a fatalistic, evolutionary model of time, according to which we really have come to an end of history and utopian visions.³⁸ It is the preunderstanding of time as a closed continuum, in which the future can be nothing more than the extrapolation of past and present, that paralyzes our imaginative sense for the new bursting out among us, that leaves

³⁶J. B. Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 5th ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1992), 166 (my translation). See *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 170f. Metz follows this apophthegm with another that defines religion, and defines it apocalyptically: "The shortest definition of religion: interruption."

³⁷Metz, *Passion for God*, 105. Metz's play on the Kantian ideal of *Mündigkeit* (from Kant's essay, "An Answer to the Question, What is Enlightenment?") bears comparison to Sobrino's use of the other Kantian metaphor of awakening.

³⁸See Metz's powerful unveiling of this myth: "Hope as imminent expectation of the struggle for forgotten time: noncontemporaneous theses on the apocalyptic view" in *Faith in History and Society*, 169-79. See also *Followers of Christ: Perspectives on the Religious Life* (Mahwah: NJ: Paulist, 1978), 75-83.

us trapped in the failed ideologies and structures (be they liberal or conservative) of the past. The *apocalyptic* feeling for time, Metz contends, is one that hopes for, and thus is constantly on the look-out for, God's mighty deeds, breaking out in unexpected places and, like the resurrection, bringing life from death.

To elicit such a hope-filled perception of time positively, liberation theologians draw on those potent biblical theologians draw on those potent biblical symbols and narratives that render the astounding intervention and victory of God, in places and moments and by means that none of us, with our overly cautious, hopeless perceptions of time and the future, would have expected. Their use of the exodus in this regard is well known. Sobrino, however, also uses the potent symbol of the suffering servant from Isaiah. Speaking of the third world as "The Crucified Peoples: Yahweh's Suffering Servant Today"³⁹ not only connects the apocalyptic rhetoric with its roots in the prophetic tradition but also offers a hope-filled self-identification for the poor and those who labor with them, an alternative to the tendency to look at the poor as surplus population, as a "problem" to be ignored, where possible, and efficiently managed, where necessary.

Finally, what source of authority grounds the claim to attention that these texts make? What is it that authorizes, indeed requires a new reading of God's work in history? On this issue Metz and Sobrino break to some extent with the long apocalyptic tradition that grounds authority in a persuasive rereading of scriptural texts themselves. This may be because the two are unaware of the difficulties in asserting "the" meaning of any scriptural texts in an age of modern or even post-modern critical hermeneutics. To be sure, they do not fall back on pseudonymous authorship or claims to celestial journeys, much less on the claim to foretell the future, as ways of persuading readers to enter the historical reality they portray. Nonetheless, as in the first apocalypses, the claim to attention is grounded outside of or prior to the text itself. They appeal to the authoritative claim on theology as a whole exercised by those who suffer.

The traditions to which theology is accountable know of a universal responsibility born of the memory of suffering. This *memoria passionis* becomes the basis of a universal morality by the fact that it always takes into account the sufferings of others, the sufferings of strangers. Furthermore, this *memoria*, in strictly biblical terms, considers even the suffering of enemies, and does not forget about their suffering in assessing its own history of suffering.⁴⁰

³⁹Sobrino, "The Crucified Peoples."

⁴⁰Metz, *Passion for God*, 134.

It is neither the authority of enlightened self-interest nor the power of fear (“Join the company of the saved in order to avoid the horrors of the end time”) that buttresses the claim to attention that these texts make and urges one to read history in a particular way. Yet, what kind of authority can suffering exercise?

A suggestive clue is provided from the history of the vowed life. There, the proper stance for one under authority is “disponibility.” Obedience has to do with where one places oneself or allows oneself to be placed; to ask the question of authority is to ask how and why one places oneself in a particular way. Using the terminology of hermeneutics, it is the question how and why one takes up the prior field of view, perspective, and sense from which to read a text (for Heidegger, the *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff*). For Metz and Sobrino human reason should allow itself to be “placed” by the power of human compassion and the authority of God’s own compassionate love. Reason must attend to the world and to history as seen from the perspective of suffering because to do otherwise is to deny our humanity; to do otherwise is to deny God. Having “placed” oneself here, and attempting subsequently to understand what it means to believe in a God who is love in *this* place, or what it means to hope in *this* place, both requires and opens up a new understanding of God’s work in history. It is this understanding, thus authorized, that political and liberation theologians are trying to articulate.

Metz locates the source for his insight into this form of authority in his reflections on the neglected heritage of biblical Israel.⁴¹ Sobrino finds it in Ignatian spirituality. Speaking of the spirituality that nurtured him and his murdered Jesuit companions, he makes the following observation:

From St. Ignatius we used to recall the great moments in the *Exercises*: The contemplation of the incarnation, to enable us to see the real world with God’s own eyes—that is, a world going down to hell—and *to react with God’s own compassion*, that is, “to work redemption.” And it is important to remember this because, as for many other Salvadorans, it was not anger . . . or revenge, much less hatred that was the motive force in their [the Salvadoran martyrs] lives, but love: “working redemption,” as St. Ignatius called it.⁴²

The portrayal of a world crucified by evil is complemented by an Ignatian meditation before this crucified people: “What have we done to these crucified? What are we doing for them? What will we do for

⁴¹See, e.g., “The Church after Auschwitz” in Metz, *A Passion for God*, 121-32.

⁴²Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus*, 18 (emphasis added).

them?"⁴³ The authority of suffering is connected with the suffering of the crucified one.

The particular form that the appeal to authority takes in liberation and political theology is crucial for saving it from some of apocalypticism's most dangerous tendencies. Apocalypticism is saved from apathetic indifference to the victims of evil, or from a vengeful demonization of others, because it is connected to the christological mysteries of incarnation and cross, which in turn draw us into the central mystery of God's unconditional love. In the apocalyptic vision God's agency in history can bring the genuinely new into being, and can bring God's vindication of God's faithful ones, even in the darkest moments of crisis. Yet, this agency must correspond to, indeed recapitulate, the agency manifested in God's incarnation in a world of sin and death and loving, transformative activity in that world, even to the point of death on a cross. In deploying this kind of hopeful construction of temporality, a "salvation history that entails salvation in history," the response that this rhetoric seeks to elicit and nurture is one that corresponds to this agency of God. As Metz puts it: "Discipleship in imminent expectation: this is the apocalyptic consciousness which does not cause suffering, but takes suffering upon itself—withstanding both apathy and hatred."⁴⁴

To summarize, I have argued that even if they do not deploy elaborate "dispensationalist" timelines or use many of the most venerable symbols of the apocalyptic tradition, liberation and political theologies should nonetheless be analyzed as a species of apocalyptic rhetoric. Taking this approach discloses that the three topoi of apocalyptic argument—evil, time, and authority—are deployed in a characteristic way. On the topic of evil, we find a radical critique of modernity's privatization of religion and of what counts as a crisis on religious terms: it is not secularization or increasing personal immorality, but the existence of "crucified peoples," which stands as an ineluctable challenge to any attempt to imagine a new "cosmopolis," a new, just, and humane configuration of polis and cosmos. On the topic of time we find (most clearly and thoughtfully with Metz) a critique of modernity's "myth of evolutionary time," and, in Sobrino, a construction of time organized not around evolutionary development but the conflict between the God of life and the idols of death.⁴⁵ The authority that

⁴³*Ibid.*, 19. The meditation referred to is from the colloquy that closes the meditation on sin, early in the "First Week" of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* (pp. 42f., nos. 53-54). The earlier reference is to the meditation on the incarnation, with which the "Second Week" of the *Exercises* begins (56-58, nos. 102-9).

⁴⁴Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 156 (my translation; see *Faith in History and Society*, 176).

⁴⁵It could be argued that liberation theology's critique of "developmentalism" in

they call upon to authorize their *apokalypsis* is not that of a “common-sense,” “rational” reading of Scripture, as it is in evangelical apocalypticists like Lindsey, but the heart-rending claim to attention made by suffering, and the human exigency to respond with God’s own compassion.

The radicality of this apocalyptic attempt to “redeem the times” is matched by its insistence on interrelating apocalypticism (as eschatology) with christology. When liberation theology makes use of apocalyptic motifs and rhetorical strategies to mobilize social consensus and action, it does not lose sight of the rest of the gospel. The response that it seeks to elicit is *imitatio*. What the triangulation of Isaiah’s suffering servant songs, the gospels (particularly the passion narratives) and the stories of the crucified peoples today teach us is that sin is a death-dealing, social-political reality, and that we are called to eradicate it by bearing as the Servant did, as Jesus did: “bearing the sin’s historical effects: being ground down, crushed, put to death.”⁴⁶ On the one hand, this theological sobriety reins in the tendencies of apocalyptic rhetoric to lose sight of the God of life incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who, to use Sobrino’s phrase, lived his life according to the principle of mercy. It resists replacing this God with a violent and vengeful killer, who consigns the vast majority of the earth’s population to horrifying suffering and death. That this same theological sobriety makes the liberationist use of apocalypticism far more radical (in the original sense of that word), more able to generate a passionate, and passionately Christian response to the death-dealing realities of Latin America, has been attested by a long list of martyrs.

III. *Conclusions: Toward an Historical Docta Ignorantia*

I have devoted the bulk of my argument to showing that political and liberation theology’s use of apocalyptic rhetoric can be judged a success on the criteria of empowering Christian action and that of fidelity to the whole of the gospel. This is, I believe, already an important result. Nonetheless the question of its intelligibility in a modern scientific culture remains. To be sure, political and liberation theologians do not entangle themselves in calculations as to the exact day and hour, yet their claims that the kingdom of God is in fact irrupting in Latin America invite falsification.⁴⁷ Given the continuing, indeed

Latin American economic policy implies Metz’s critique.

⁴⁶Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 260.

⁴⁷Consider this from Rahner, a theologian who was by no means hostile to either political or liberation theology: “I have nothing against liberation theology or political theology. But didn’t Johann Baptist Metz let himself be taken in by Ernestor Cardenal? I was present in Frankfurt when Cardenal explained that the kingdom of God had begun in Nicaragua, that there were no prisons there anymore, that everyone loved one an-

mounting suffering there, these claims would seem to lead ineluctably to a disillusionment just as heart-wrenching as the one that William Miller's followers experienced when Jesus failed to appear in upstate New York in 1844. Peace, of a sort, has come to El Salvador, yet things arguably worse than they were before, or even during the terrible civil war. Has not the attempt to render the political and economic events in Latin America transparent to the saving work of God led into a blind alley? Should we not accept the more chastened view of an Augustine, who refused to claim to be able to see the work of God through the socio-historical events of his time—be it the Christianization of Rome or its imminent collapse?

Unlikely as it might seem, a detour into the realm of mystical theology provides the key to this problem. The premise is that we can best arrive at an understanding of the intelligibility proper to apocalyptic symbols and rhetoric by putting them in the context not just of Christian theology, narrowly conceived, but of *Christian life*, of Christian spirituality. This transposes the question of apocalypticism's intelligibility into a different key. I argued earlier that what is distinctive of apocalypticism is its willingness to assert a high degree of transparency of historical events to the saving will of God. In those terms the question is, how specific and concrete can our assertions be that God and God's saving love are to be found in history? If we think in terms of spirituality and mysticism, of the quest to come into the presence of God in and through various "spiritual exercises," the question becomes this: is there a "contemplation in historical action" in which socio-political action is the locus for a kind of mystical union with God, different from, but not inferior to, that offered by individual or liturgical prayer?⁴⁸ Liberation and political theologians make precisely this affirmation.⁴⁹ Furthermore, they specify the preeminent historical-political place where this is possible as a place of struggle with and on

other. . . I won't have anything to do with such nonsense!" (Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, trans. ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 51; see 146.

⁴⁸For a history of attempts to grapple with the issue of contemplation in action, culminating in the Rhineland mystics, see Dietmar Mieth, *Die Einheit von Vita Activa und Vita Contemplativa in den Deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1969).

⁴⁹See, e.g., Ignacio Ellacuría, "Fe y Justicia," *Christus* 42 (August 1977): 26-33; and 42 (October 1977): 19-34, esp. part 3, "La Contemplación en la Acción de la Justicia." 32-34. See also the transcription of Ellacuría's lectures on Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*: "Lectura Latinoamericana de los *Ejercicios Espirituales* de san Ignacio," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 1 (1991): 111-47. For a brief but provocative argument of this position on Metz's part (which shows strong affinities with Hans Urs von Balthasar's approach) see Metz, "The Theology of the World and Asceticism" in *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 101-4.

behalf of the poor. This defines the “apocalyptic spirituality” in liberation theology: God’s presence is to be found *here*.

Here, however, a lesson from mystical theology is extremely useful. Mystics attest to the fact that one *can* come to an immediate consciousness of God’s presence,⁵⁰ but, they also insist that darkness or absence will be an ineluctable part of that consciousness.⁵¹ Mystical theology insists that the moment of *kataphasis*, which asserts that the God found in all things is infinitely, qualitatively different from all things. This does not mean that cataphasis simply gives way to apophysis, since to rest in denial would be itself to end with an assertion: God is not-x. As Michael Sells puts it,

The term *apophysis* is commonly paired with *kataphasis*. Every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying. Apophysis can reach a point of intensity such that no single proposition concerning the transcendent can stand on its own. Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a correcting proposition, an unsaying. But that correcting proposition which unsays the previous proposition is in itself a “saying” that must be “unsaid” in turn. It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful. That tension is momentary. It must be continually re-earned by every new linguistic acts of saying.⁵²

Affirmation and denial, constructed in tension with one another, open up the space within which the mystery of God can be disclosed. What is needed is not the unqualified denial or reason and its namings of God, but a going beyond reason, precisely so that those namings, with their limited but real intelligibility, find their proper context within the absolute mystery of God. In the Neoplatonic apophatic mystics like Meister Eckhart, this happens within reason itself, as it negates itself for its own sake. For the Franciscan tradition, represented by Bonaventure, it is at the root of the cross that the coincidence of opposites occurs, at which point reason gives way to love, carrying the soul to the final stage of its mystical *itinerarium*.

What I am proposing is an isomorphism between the itinerary of the soul, as laid out by classical mystical theology, and the itinerary of the contemplative in action, who seeks the “immediate and direct

⁵⁰Using Bernard McGinn’s provisional definition of the mystical element in Christianity, as “that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (*The Foundations of Mysticism*, Vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), xvii).

⁵¹See McGinn’s remarks making precisely this emendation to the use of “presence” in his definition: *ibid.*, xviii-xix.

⁵²Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2f.

presence of God” in and through action in history. This isomorphism suggests that the apocalyptic “moment” of liberation and political theology is indeed incomplete. If taken by itself it is misleading, just as the cataphatic moment in Christian mystical discourse is incomplete. The *via positiva* taken by itself, without the *via negativa* is misleading. If we follow this suggestion, then, we must search for the apophatic corrective to apocalypticism. One possibility is the famous “eschatological proviso,” the claim that no particular economic or political configuration can be identified with the kingdom of God. However true this denial, this “unsaying” of the affirmation of God’s presence in history, liberation theologians reacted critically when it was urged on them by European and North American theologians. From the perspective I am offering here the critique can be specified. Taken by itself, as the corrective to “utopian” or “apocalyptic” statements about the kingdom of God, the eschatological proviso too is insufficient. To do nothing but state the eschatological proviso would be as dispiriting as stopping with the statement (true as it is!) that no experience, image or idea of ours corresponds to the mystery of God. Why start or continue the mystical itinerary (in this case, of the contemplative in action) if this is *all* that can be said?

We cannot define the task of finding that system of propositions which perfectly conceptualizes the presence of God in history, that active presence which the contemplative in action experiences and which energizes the apocalyptically tinged claims that the kingdom of God is irrupting in the church of the poor. That we will never find, any more than we will find in mystical theology a perfectly adequate set of propositions describing the presence of God that the mystic experiences in contemplative prayer. This does not mean that we may not, should not, say anything. It does mean that what we do say will make sense in the context of the broader mystical itinerary that these statements subserve. For mystical *theology* cataphasis and apophasis are discursive strategies that have their proper context, meaning, and purpose in the mystical *life*, defined by certain practices, such as *lectio divina*, meditation, contemplation, and so on. If we see apocalyptic discourse and the eschatological proviso as a similar pair of discursive strategies in political and liberation theology, then the isomorphism I am advocating here directs us to look for their context of meaning in certain practices, in a particular way of being engaged in history. We need to find that tensive moment, continually performed, whereby the openness to the mystery of God is cleared again and again, and the apocalyptic affirmation, in conjunction with the denial made in the eschatological proviso, finds their proper meaning.

I contend that in this liberation theology makes a unique contribution to a contemporary interpretation of the meaning of apocalyptic discourse, by locating that tensive moment in the practice of opting for the poor.⁵³ Typically (and legitimately) presented as an ethical or hermeneutical principle, this problematic discloses “the option for the poor” as a spiritual exercise for the contemplative in action. It is the all-important element that can prevent apocalypticism from devolving into fanaticism or collapsing into cynical disillusionment. We can find this tensive moment of transition in an early essay of Sobrino’s, in which he writes the following about the “experience” of God that is opened up in a church that has opened for the poor:

There is hope in the Church of the poor. It is not a naive kind of hope, since the Church itself is born out of a situation where one would expect only despair or resignation. The Church of the poor knows that the just do not fare well. . . . Indeed, it almost seems as if the oppressor has the last word in and concerning history. . . . [I]t is precisely in such situations that one finds a possible structural channel wherein the scandalous aspect of God may be truly grasped. The characteristic darkness of faith—that element of *sacrificium intellectus* that is always a part of faith—is mediated by the black darkness of hope.⁵⁴

Sobrino argues that we find access to the mystery of God only in history, through the risk of historical engagement from the vantage offered by a certain place: the place of the suffering world, the place of the poor. He builds his theology around the insistence on the presence of God in this particular socio-historical location. This is what makes his an apocalyptic theology, as I argued above. Yet when one begins one’s mystical itinerary here (opting for the poor), one is led into “the black darkness of hope.” God’s presence is still intensely felt, but as mystery:

It is clear that faith implies a *sacrificium intellectus*: although the Church has always proclaimed the mystery of God as comprehensible; it has also declared it to be incomprehensible. *It is impossible to relate to that mystery unless one is willing to abandon reason by an act of reason.* In order to have an adequate knowledge of God, one must be willing to give up knowledge, even though one may know the reason for the lack of knowledge. The Church of the poor

⁵³The parallel in Metz lies in his advocacy of solidarity with the vanquished of history, and the spirituality of “suffering unto God” that it entails. On this, see Metz, “Suffering Unto God,” *Critical Enquiry* 20/4 (Summer 1994): 611-22, as well as my discussion in *Interruptions*, 153-67.

⁵⁴Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 154.

interprets this *sacrificium* of the intellect in terms of a greater and more complete sacrifice, the *sacrificium vitae*. It is in the context of real life, of history, that we must give up an understanding of the ultimate mystery of life as well as the claim to have the final and absolute say concerning history.⁵⁵

“To abandon reason by an act of reason”: this notion is central to mystical theology. In one formulation, as *docta ignorantia*, learned ignorance, it has a long and rich history, stretching from Augustine, through Eriugena, William of St. Thierry, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. After all of reason’s necessary work, and as the indispensable ground of its further progress into the mystery of God, there comes a point where reason lets go and allows itself to be carried by something greater. In Bonaventure the necessary crossing over the limits of reason, for the sake of reason’s own *telos* happens at the very end of the mystical itinerary, at the very moment at which one,

turns his face fully to the Mercy Seat and . . . beholds Christ hanging upon the Cross. By the staff of the cross he passes over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where he will taste the *hidden manna*; and with Christ he rests in the tomb, as if dead to the outer world, but experiencing it as far as possible in this wayfarer’s state, what was said on the cross to the thief who adhered to Christ: *Today you shall be with me in paradise.*⁵⁶

As Bonaventure states in his prologue, “there is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified.”⁵⁷ This could very well stand as the motto of a spirituality of liberation. This is not, of course, to claim that Bonaventure was a “proto-liberation theologian.” I am arguing not for a substantial congruency of content but of *logic*. It is not just that for Bonaventure the crucial point for the soul’s mystical journey is the point at which he or she encounters the crucified one. Bonaventure also had, especially in the *Itinerarium*, a particular concrete place where he believed the crucified one could be found. The

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 157f. (emphasis added). It is worth noting that this essay was originally given at a conference honoring Karl Rahner, held in Milwaukee in 1974. See “Current Problems in Christology in Latin America” in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.*, ed. William Kelly (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 189–221. Sobrino’s article starts with explicit and laudatory reference to the centrality of Rahner’s view of the notion of the absolute mystery of God (189). This is, of course, the concept that Rahner used to elaborate a modern mystical theology, and one that Sobrino elsewhere acknowledges “continues to accompany me even today” (*Principle of Mercy*, 2). My argument here is that Sobrino is “transposing” this concept (and by association, the tradition of mystical theology it involves) into the “key” of liberation theology.

⁵⁶ *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 7.2. Translated in *Bonaventure*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins, preface by Igantius Brady, O.F.M. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978), 112.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

very setting for the piece is the mount on which Francis of Assisi received the stigmata. For Bonaventure the love of the crucified is encountered in the poor man of Assisi.

For Sobrino too, “there is no other way than through the burning love of the crucified,” now, however, with the qualification that the place to encounter the Crucified is in his crucified body in history: “the crucified people.”⁵⁸ Once again, the identification of the poor as “the crucified people” becomes the key for unlocking Sobrino’s use of the apocalyptic rhetoric, since it locates the point at which the apocalyptic affirmation is subsumed into a *docta ignorantia*, but now a “historical” *docta ignorantia*. All of the caveats that must accompany the traditional concept still obtain, *mutatis mutandis*. The “learned ignorance” of the contemplative mystic is not blissful ignorance; it is learned, given an arduous itinerary, one which finally is carried in, by, and toward “the burning love of the Crucified.” The *via negativa* does not replace the *via positiva* or render it superfluous but complements it. The two together combine to open up a space within which the mystery of God can be found for the one willing to risk the itinerary it proposes. And the axis around which the two “ways” turn, at least in the Franciscan tradition articulated by Bonaventure, is the cross.⁵⁹

For the contemplative in action, then, an historical *docta ignorantia* is not exhausted by the eschatological proviso, a statement of ignorance concerning God’s presence in history. Rather, it is the end result of a process that begins with an encounter with God in the *vita activa* focused on the option for the poor. The conviction that such an encounter is both possible and necessary finds expression of the use of apocalyptic symbols and rhetoric, as we saw above. Thus, apocalypticism stands in the place of the *via positiva*. As with its cognate in classical mystical theology, this *via positiva* too will lead one into a dark night, a desert of disillusionment, a “black darkness of hope,” a moment in which “all that remains is the conviction that one wants to do the Father’s will and serve the people, but . . . so filled with spiritual aridity that despite one’s conviction one’s tongue cleaves to the roof of

⁵⁸See n. 28, above. For a different approach to the same insight, see Gustavo Gutiérrez’s correlation of the struggle for liberation, the exodus narratives, and John of the Cross’ use of the symbol of the dark night: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell with a foreword by Henri Nouwen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 83-89, 129-31.

⁵⁹The isomorphism between the logic by which Bonaventure expresses the mystical itinerary and the work of Jon Sobrino, the Jesuit, is more than just coincidence, given the importance of Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition he decisively shaped for Ignatius of Loyola. See Ewert Cousins, “The Franciscan Roots of Ignatian Meditation” in *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age*, ed. George Schner (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 51-64.

one's mouth (Ps 137:6)."⁶⁰ A certain wisdom, a *docta ignorantia*, is found in this place, a wisdom that continues to make the struggle to make love a socially real, historical reality, and that continues to make the claim that God is found in a particular historical place, by committing oneself to a particular praxis that goes by the name of the "option for the poor." It continues this work and makes these claims even though it knows that all of this has to pass through the searing fire of the cross. This is the wisdom, Sobrino contends, that his companions, slain for their work on behalf of the poor of El Salvador, offer us:

They also leave us good news, a gospel. On this sinful and senseless earth, it is possible to live like human beings and like Christians. We can share in that current of history that Paul calls life in the Spirit and life in love, in that current of honesty, hope, and commitment that is always being threatened with suffocation but that time and time again bursts forth from the depths like a true miracle of God. Joining this current of history, which is that of the poor, has its price, but it encourages us to go on living, working and believing, it offers meaning and salvation. This is what I believe these new martyrs bequeath us. With it we can go on *walking through history*, humbly, as the prophet Micah says, *amid suffering and darkness, but with God*.⁶¹

Anchored in the option for the poor as a spiritual exercise, liberation theology's employment of apocalyptic rhetoric thus shows itself to be not only faithful to the apocalyptic tradition and to the broader spectrum of Christian faith, and not only a powerful spur to creative Christian action in our late-modern world. What is more, it evinces a particular, and particularly Christian, wisdom, an intelligibility that sets one on the way to an historical *docta ignorantia*.

⁶⁰Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 130. See also, "John of the Cross: A Latin American View," trans. James B. Nickloff, in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 137-46.

⁶¹Sobrino, "Companions of Jesus," 55 (emphasis added).