

Apocalyptic and the Peace Movement

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What relationship, if any, is there between contemporary apocalyptic and the contemporary Peace Movement?

Whatever it was in its original form, in its current form *apocalyptic* is the belief that God is moving in history to a violent climax in which he will defeat his enemies, both human and supernatural. The appearance of Christ will mark the end of this age and the beginning of a thousand-year reign of peace for the elect. We are now living in the End Times and it is possible to detect the signs of the End in natural disasters and political/military events. These signs are a warning to human beings. For those who have eyes to see, they have been clearly prophesied in the Scriptures. *Repentance and belief in Christ is required for a person to be saved from the great tribulation which is about to come.*

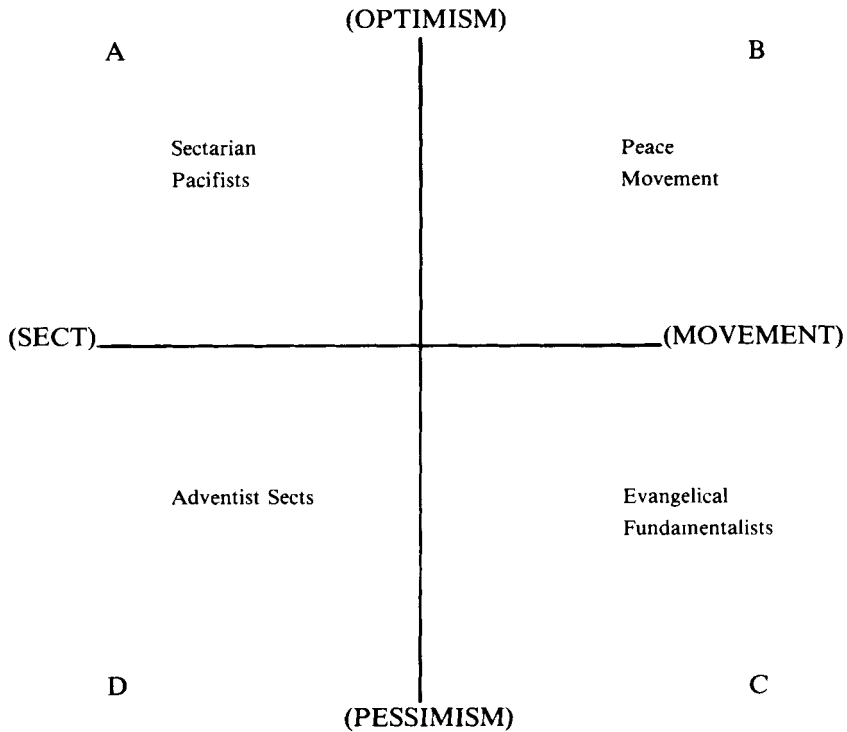
Such beliefs are shared by a range of contemporary Christian groups, though these differ in important ways amongst themselves, especially over the interpretation of historical events and the nature of the final war: for instance, whether or not it will be a nuclear war. Such beliefs appear to be on the increase in the United States and perhaps also in Britain, even among members of the main-stream churches. It is not difficult to see the increased fear of nuclear holocaust as a major factor in the new popularity of apocalyptic beliefs.

The contemporary *Peace Movement* is a coalition of people from widely different moral, political and religious traditions, dedicated to the abolition of weapons of mass destruction from the arsenals of the world. It is accurate to call it an 'anti-nuclear movement' in view of the fact that it was born (1958), flourished, almost died (1965) and revived (1980) as a direct response to thermo-nuclear weapons: their invention, testing, control and multiplication. I shall concentrate here mainly on Christian elements of the Peace Movement in Britain.

It is worth asking some questions about these two phenomena. Is there any apocalyptic element in the Peace Movement? If there is not, has the Peace Movement neglected an important area of symbolic meaning which the purveyors of apocalyptic are providing in their own way? Or is it simply the case that modes of thought specific to apocalyptic are incompatible with Peace Movement activity, Christian or

not? Answers to these questions may be approached by considering another: what is the attitude of the various groups to the possibility of a nuclear holocaust? Could such a thing be part of God's plan?

The following typology is a possible way of relating some of the groups I am discussing:



The vertical axis refers to opinions as to whether political action has any value in promoting good and defeating evil *in the long term*. Groups holding apocalyptic beliefs are fundamentally pessimistic about this, though some believe in vigorous political action in the short term. Such a group is the Moral Majority Inc., which is the most prominent example of category C. This is a new and somewhat contradictory position, which needs some discussion.

The horizontal axis refers to the way in which the group sees itself in relation to the political process *in the short term*. To the right, political, to the left, apolitical. The transition from sect to movement can occur to both long-term 'optimists' and long-term 'pessimists'. It involves a transition from apolitical isolation and exclusivism to political cooperation with other groups for common aims. Hence the term 'movement' as opposed to 'sect'.

Let us briefly look at each of the four categories—A, B, C and D—in turn.

A: I suggest that *sectarian pacifists* belong here. I refer to such Christian groups as Quakers and Mennonites at certain periods of their history and in certain political environments—in Britain and in the United States in the past rather than the present. Whether anyone occupies this category or not depends on the political regime at the time: whether it is repressive, and forces its pacifists into sectarian isolation with disapproval and persecution, or whether it is enlightened and tolerant and gives them space to operate in the broader society. In the latter case, they will be able to migrate into category B and become part of a movement in coalition with other, less rigorous groups, but at the same time lose some of their distinctive and exclusive characteristics. This has happened to both Quakers and Mennonites in liberal democratic countries since the early 19th century. It is still possible to describe sectarian pacifists, even in time of repression, as optimistic rather than pessimistic, in so far as they continue to believe in the reforming influence of moral example (in other words, of witness and martyrdom) even though the influence may take a very long time to have effect, with many reverses. Pacifist sects in Britain were very quick to take advantage of the climate of liberal reform and tolerance in the early 19th Century. In 1816 Quakers founded the International Peace Society, a year after a similar foundation in America. At first it relied on converting individuals to pacifism, but in the 1840s it became overtly political. This brings me to the next category.

B: This is the locus of a series of *Peace Movements* which have been a feature of British political life since the early 19th century. Three main Peace Movement periods are distinguishable: from the mid-19th Century to 1914; from 1918 to 1939; from 1958 to the present. They are all characterised by *internationalism*—the belief that human progress can only come about through international contacts, understanding and institutions, leading to the eventual abolition of war. However, while retaining a core of optimism in this regard, Peace Movements have become progressively less optimistic, largely because of the major reverses to human progress represented by the two World Wars. They embrace not only absolute pacifists, but also adherents of the Just War tradition, who are nevertheless united with pacifists in believing that most modern warfare can serve no just purpose.

The 19th Century Peace Movement was an alliance of pacifist sectarians, liberal Protestants and secular internationalists who believed that the path of human progress was the realisation by enlightened capitalist countries that war was inimical to their best interests, that it

was no longer a rational way of solving international disputes. It was *trade* which was henceforward the 'moral equivalent of war', as William James put it. This Peace Movement suffered a catastrophic, but temporary, collapse in 1914.

Although some Christians emerged from the Great War with renewed optimism about human brotherhood and progress, for many others the War produced a new pessimism about the human capacity for self-destruction, largely due to the horrors of trench warfare and the advent of civilian bombing. The Peace Movement flourished as never before because it was all the more evident that war was irrational and that international cooperation was an imperative. The mood of the late 1920s has been described by Martin Ceadal as one of 'despairing hope', which conveys well the character of the 20th Century Peace Movements. It was the classical period of 'political pacifism', nurtured on the one hand by the fear of total destruction which would accompany another war, and on the other hand by a belief that real, lasting results could be achieved by a more rational conduct of international affairs. This would be done either through direct intervention, in the style of Gandhi's non-violent resistance, or by mass movements of the electorate forcing political changes through support for appeasement, disarmament and the establishment of international institutions, especially Law. Among Christians, the predominant religious outlook was still that of liberal Protestantism. It was progressivist, moralistic, and believed that the churches could, through the transforming power of love, awaken world society to abolish war. As to theology, it was 'immanentist', believing that God's presence was everywhere within secular society, acting to bring mankind to spiritual maturity and harmony (see, for example, the writings of Charles Raven). During the inter-war years this optimistic view was strongly challenged by the far more sombre Neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, which had learned a different lesson from the Great War, but this made little impression on ordinary Christians until the great collapse of the inter-war Peace Movement in 1939.

The contemporary anti-nuclear movement differs in some important respects from its predecessors. Its beginnings lie in public reaction to the H-Bomb tests in the early fifties, leading in early 1958 to the Great Nuclear Debate in Britain and the founding of CND. Once again, fear of the end of civilized life—now expanded into fear of the end of the world—has played a great part in its development. The fluctuations of the Peace Movement during the past thirty years have had a lot to do with changing perceptions of the Soviet Threat. 1955 was the year of the H-bomb, when Britain's decision to make it was publicly announced after it was learned that the Soviet Union had found a way to make it cheaply. Unlike the atomic bomb, the H-bomb was a weapon of potentially unlimited power about which 'apocalyptic' language on the

lips of politicians did not seem to be out of place. For Britain not to have it would have meant demotion from the ranks of the Great Powers, and, more particularly, an inability to influence the United States in the conduct of a future war. In October 1957 the Soviet Union demonstrated with the launching of Sputnik that it had the ability to send bombs anywhere, and that there could be no defence against them. The 1957 and 1958 British Defence Statements abandoned, for the first time in history, the belief that Britain could be defended. Everything was placed on the deterrent effects of being able to destroy the centres of power in the Soviet Union with massive thermo-nuclear attack in the first stages of war.

CND reached a peak of membership around 1962, the time of the Cuban Missile crisis, when there was real, and justified, fear of nuclear war. The period of decline was from 1965 to 1979, which corresponds exactly with the period of Détente and arms control, when it seemed to many that the world was learning to live with nuclear weapons and to manage them in a process of international cooperation. The spur behind the sudden revival of CND in 1980 was not only the announcement of cruise missiles, but also the SS-20s and the realisation that the Soviet Union had spent the period of Détente modernising all its forces and achieving parity with the United States in most areas, and superiority in some. This coincided with a renewed political debate about the British deterrent force—the supposed need of a replacement for Polaris once again raised the possibility of abandoning it altogether. So the fear of nuclear holocaust which had been pushed to the back of the mind stepped forward again with renewed vigour. It was of course mixed with moral outrage: the realisation of what the Soviet weapons could do to us leads naturally to the thought of what we are prepared to do to innocent Soviet citizens.

The contemporary Peace Movement differs from its predecessors in that it is a single-issue campaign with relatively limited goals—not to abolish war, but to get rid of nuclear weapons. (It is now the Deterrent State that seeks to abolish war.) Absolute pacifism plays a smaller part—which probably accounts for the much greater participation of Roman Catholics and others from non-pacifist moral traditions. It is still possible to find liberal Protestant progressivists and optimistic utopians, but not many. In view of the failure of disarmament and arms control and the fantastic expansion of nuclear arsenals since the sixties, the hope is a great deal more desperate than before.

As for the language of apocalyptic, the Peace Movement for the most part studiously avoids it. It is left to the popular media to use such terms as ‘apocalypse’ and ‘Armageddon’. Even the Christians avoid it. Since 1980, the movement of thought among Christians in the Peace Movement has been in the direction of Alternative Defence, either

conventional or non-violent. This goes for Evangelicals as well as Catholics. Apocalyptic is avoided, not merely through lack of interest, but out of a fundamental distaste and antagonism, because it is seen to belong to the opposition. It implies that a nuclear war might be part of God's plan, and therefore that possessing and even using nuclear weapons might be doing the will of God. Very few theological writers associated with an anti-nuclear stance have used apocalyptic categories in a constructive way. Those who have (for example, Jim Garrison, who combines them with Jungian categories in *The Darkness of God: Theology after Hiroshima*, in which God is said to be returning as Anti-Christ in a nuclear holocaust) often present such bizarre ideas that they have very little influence on Christians in the Peace Movement.

C: In this category I have located the *Christian New Right* in the United States, exemplified by the Moral Majority (recently renamed the Liberty Foundation) led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. In the early seventies, against all expectations of the sociologists of religion, a large section of the Evangelical fundamentalists took to organised political campaigning and agitation. They declared themselves against the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights, welfare programmes, defence cuts, SALT II and government interference in the market. They were for prayers in schools, creationism, the Family Protection Act, the crusade against Communism in Central America, increased defence spending and other anti-liberal causes. A true movement developed, with specific political goals and support from a wide range of Christian traditions, including Roman Catholics. It is anti-internationalist: world politics is interpreted in a radically dualistic sense as a crusade of Good against Evil, the latter being embodied in world Communism abroad and soft liberalism at home. It is opposed to the Peace Movement for obvious reasons.

Hitherto, the fundamentalist churches had considered morality to be a matter for private life—between the individual and God. Now it is a matter for political action. The causes of this change are many—among them the national traumas of Vietnam and Watergate and the Supreme Court Abortion ruling, the rise of gay rights and feminism. It was part of the general resurgence of the Right in American life, which welcomed the arrival of a born-again Christian in the White House—first Carter (a failure) and then Reagan, who has shown himself in basic sympathy with the Christian New Right, including its apocalyptic views.

The apocalyptic beliefs of the Evangelical Right represent a resurgence, under the stimulus of certain key international events, of a very old Protestant tradition, which is more than a mere historical curiosity: *Christian Zionism*. This goes back to the early 17th-Century belief, shared by Puritans of millenarian tendencies, that the return of the Jews to Palestine would fulfil the Biblical prophecies and be a sign of

the End and the return of Christ. In the late 19th Century this tradition was revived in the fundamentalist Prophecy movement, which looked for signs in world events which would indicate the beginning of the End Times. Above all, it was the apocalyptic books of the Bible to which it turned for clues: Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation. The return of the Jews, which by then was becoming a real political possibility, was eagerly promoted. The contemporary Prophecy movement, which has its home in the United States, looks to the establishment of the Jewish State in 1948 and the re-unification of Jerusalem in 1967 as the key events in the 'countdown' to the End. The prophecies are now being fulfilled one by one. The next great event will be—according to the prophetic timetable—the invasion of Israel by the 'Kingdoms of the North', Gog and Magog, as foretold in Ezekiel 38 and 39. These are to be identified with Russia and her allies. It was the Yom Kippur War of 1973 which really gave a boost to the writers of popular 'prophecy': when the Soviet forces mobilised to help Egypt and Syria and the United States forces went on a high alert and we came nearer to nuclear war than at any time since 1962. This was a rehearsal for the real thing. Much abbreviated, the 'countdown to Armageddon' goes like this:

The next great war will be caused by the invasion of Israel by the Soviet Union in alliance with Iran (sic) and various Moslem and Communist countries of Africa. These are seen as little short of atheist. These invaders will be defeated by a direct intervention of God. Nuclear weapons might be used. This will be the beginning of the period of the Great Tribulation spoken of in Scripture. Israel, miraculously saved from destruction, will spend the next seven years burying the dead and burning their weapons as Ezekiel 39 describes (in some accounts the weapons have to be made of wood!). But this conflict is not to be identified with Armageddon. It will lead to the rise to power of Antichrist, who will be head of a revived Roman Empire, a ten-nation confederacy based on the EEC. Antichrist will make an alliance with a somewhat gullible Israel and there will be three and a half years of bogus peace. There will also be total economic control: no one will be able to buy or sell without having been tattooed with a number (the number of the beast in Rev. 13. 16)—probably an electronic banking number which will identify them at the supermarket checkout. Antichrist will enter the Holy of Holies in the reconstructed third Temple in Jerusalem and declare himself to be God. At this, the Jews will wake up to the real situation and revolt against him. This will cause another war, in which Israel will be attacked by Europeans, more Arabs and an army of 200 million Chinese marching across Asia. The final battle is Armageddon, and it will take place at Megiddo, as prophesied in Revelation 16.16. On the battle-field there will be a miracle of conversion—the Jews will suddenly return to God by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and he will

210

lead them to victory over all the nations of the earth who have attacked them.

The United States, as such, has no role in this drama. It will probably be destroyed by 'global thermo-nuclear effects'. But born-again Christians have nothing to fear, since, somewhere near the beginning of the tribulation, before the real violence, they will be 'raptured': caught up to heaven to be with Jesus during the cataclysm (see 1 Thessalonians, 4.17 and Mat. 24. 40—41). They will return with him to rule the millennial kingdom which follows Armageddon. This will be a theocracy of perfect peace which will last for a thousand years. It will start with a judgement of the Gentiles, that is, of those who have not already perished. Advice to believers: relax, look eagerly for the signs of the end, including a war in the Middle East, and wait for the rapture. Advice to non-believers: build a bomb-shelter, but better still, believe in Jesus.

The appeal of this account of history to large numbers of anxious Americans is clear: it promises to rescue them from the evils of nuclear war, the Russians, world Communism, the Arabs, atheists, the EEC and other threats to Freedom. And it promises also to sweep away the tide of moral corruption and social chaos inherited from the disastrous decade of the sixties. The destruction of these evils—but especially of Soviet power—is part of God's timetable for the End Times. Consequently, the anti-nuclear movement is futile and contrary to God's intentions. All attempts at arms control are doomed. There can be no peace until God destroys his enemies in the Soviet-Israeli war and in the final battle of Armageddon. Despite the ambivalent role of the United States, because of its very close connection with the State of Israel and its willingness to supply arms and mobilise in its defence (demonstrated in the Yom Kippur War), there is more than a hint that American nuclear weapons are part of God's equipment for destroying his enemies. Hence the fundamentalists' opposition to arms control. International politics is not for the purpose of bringing peace but is a crusade of Good against Evil. There are no common interests with Satan. Those who are destroyed in a nuclear war will be those who deserve to be destroyed. Those who are trying to achieve peace before the final war are compromising with evil.

Although this view might sound unhinged to liberals, it is said that at least eight million Americans accept it. The preachers of the Christian New Right claim to reach between ten and fifteen million every week, though this figure is disputed. It is well known that President Reagan and others of his administration have used the language of the new apocalyptic when speaking of international events. It fits well with the dualistic view of world politics now in vogue in Washington and with the new popularity of protracted nuclear war in which the United States might expect to 'prevail', while Soviet military power is destroyed. On

28 October 1983, Reagan told Tom Dine of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee that the Bible prophecies concerning Armageddon might be coming true. 'You know', he said, 'I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're not the generation that's going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through'. There are several other recorded instances of Reagan's use of 'Armageddon theology'. His belief in it predates his tactical alliance with the Christian New Right, and can be traced back to 1968, when he was Governor of California. His views are apparently shared by Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger: 'I have read the Book of Revelation', he once declared in an interview, 'and yes, I believe the world is going to end—by an act of God I hope—but every day I think that time is running out'. (Sources: *New York Review of Books*, 19 Jan. 1984, p 26; *National Catholic Reporter*, 2 Nov. 1984, *Guardian*, 21 April 1984.)

However, quite a number of other American Evangelicals do not accept this picture and believe in internationalist solutions and arms control, notably Billy Graham. The Evangelical preacher and peace activist, Jim Wallis, believes that the idea that nuclear war could be God's instrument is a 'heresy'. On the other hand, there appear to be a considerable number of Catholics who are willing to accept the apocalyptic views of the Christian New Right.

As to theology, the movement may be called 'interventionist'. God intervenes at certain key moments in the course of history to bring about political/military results as steps towards a pre-determined end. To the eyes of faith, these events are already described in the Scriptures in thinly-veiled terms. However, human beings are not totally impotent to help things along and may be God's instruments in bringing about the events which are leading to the end.

D: The Watchtower Society and the Jehovah's Witnesses constitute, in numbers and influence, the most important contemporary example of the adventist sect. They differ from the groups of the Christian New Right—whom they contemptuously refer to as 'the fundamentalists'—in being radically non-cooperative with the political life of the State. They refuse military service and also any cooperation with the Peace Movement, since they believe this world order is run by Satan and is irredeemable. They believe that the 'close of the age' (not the end of the world) is about to come, when this present 'wicked system' will be brought to an end by God. Present catastrophic world events are certainly signs of the end, but Jehovah's Witnesses are far less willing than 'the fundamentalists' to interpret them as the detailed fulfillment of

212

prophecies. On the other hand, all political solutions (such as those proposed by the American Catholic bishops in their Pastoral Letter on peace) are futile. Since existing states will never renounce their sovereignty, they will never subject themselves to God's will and mankind can never put an end to war. Internationalism actually gets in God's way. Thus the UN is seen as the 'abomination of desolation set up in the holy place' (Mat. 24.15; Dan. 9.27, 11.31), since it tries to unite the human race under one authority which is not God, and before the proper time. The Witnesses refuse to undertake military duties, on the grounds that fighting for Jehovah would be the only situation in which the Scriptures could justify their enlistment—a different starting point from that of ordinary Christian pacifism. As for nuclear war: God will not let it happen, since it would destroy the Earth created for the elect. It is not the same as Armageddon, which is God's war against the sovereign states, not man's war, which can never be righteous. It is not a battle in the Middle East, but a 'world situation' in which the powers of this world will suddenly be overcome by God. Since this will involve a catastrophic collapse of the present world order, there will be a great deal of distress, which the Witnesses will survive unharmed. They will become the rulers of a 'this-worldly' paradise in which there will be no more suffering or death. Instead of allowing the Earth which he created to be destroyed, God will destroy 'the destroyers of the Earth' (cf. Rev. 11.18). There is no longer any special role for the Jews or Israel in God's plan. Their place is now taken by the Witnesses of Jehovah.

We may summarize the various attitudes to nuclear war: the Peace Movement sees it as both possible and as an unmitigated disaster, fundamentally against God's will. The only possible response is to try to stop it, *and* to try to make sure that one's own country does not take an active part in it, or prepare for it. Christians in the Peace Movement do not, in general, speculate about what part a nuclear war could have in God's plan, though many would probably admit that it might be 'allowed' by God as a self-induced punishment for sin. Working—through regular or irregular political means—to prevent nuclear war will not guarantee that it will not happen, but active opposition is the only way of giving back value to lives which would otherwise have none. Christians in the Peace Movement prefer to speak of their actions as *witness* rather than as a protest, since they understand their opposition to weapons of mass destruction to be religious as well as moral: hence their readiness to use Christian symbols, prayer and certain holy days (such as Ash Wednesday, Pentecost and Holy Innocents Day) as the 'language' of opposition.

The Moral Majority and its allies sees nuclear war as not merely possible, but as certain. It will be God's instrument for the punishment

of sinners and the destruction of evil. Believers—whether the Israeli Army or born-again Christians—will be saved from it miraculously.

Jehovah's Witnesses see nuclear war as a man-made disaster, destroying the Earth which God created for the human race. They believe God will not let it happen. However, it is no use working against it, since human efforts to bring peace are always under the control of Satan.

We are now in a better position to answer some of the questions. Contemporary apocalyptic reflects a dualistic attitude to world politics which is basically at odds with the view of the Peace Movement. This is manifested either in the radical abstentionism and passive opposition to the Peace Movement which one finds in adventist sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses, or else in the open hostility of the Christian New Right, whose short-term political activity is directly counter to Peace Movement objectives. Moreover, the willingness of the Christian New Right to see nuclear preparations against international enemies as in some way cooperating with God's plan of salvation, and its near identification of nuclear holocaust with Armageddon, is one reason why the Christians of the Peace Movement studiously avoid all apocalyptic speculation and language. It is seen to belong to the enemy.

The fact that the most symbolically-rich eschatological language of the Bible, from Isaiah to Revelation, has been captured by abstentionist sects or by a politically hostile movement means that it is virtually unavailable to Christians who do not share those views about politics and God's action in the world. Thus an important—perhaps indispensable—source of language about God and human destiny has been taken away from them. Systematic neglect by the mainstream churches has meant that there is no sober, orthodox tradition of interpreting the apocalyptic books of the Bible in such a way that they can support Christian understanding and hope.

Nevertheless, if, as I suspect, both the Fundamentalists and the Witnesses have quite wrongly interpreted Biblical apocalyptic, it is highly desirable that other Christians should put some effort into interpreting it right. It is likely that the attempt to see the details of the End Time in world events is a radical error based on a misreading of New Testament teaching. If the authentic teaching can be recovered, it should help us to replace liberal progressivist Christianity on the one hand and illiberal dualistic Christianity on the other.

Every variety of Christianity has its characteristic eschatology, in other words its views about God's action in the world and the significance of historical events in relation to the fulfilment of God's promises and threats. These views are more or less theologically coherent and more or less morally supportable. Apocalyptic categories, because of their high imaginative and emotional content, may push their users into rather primitive 'interventionist' views about God's action in the world

and into violent attitudes to other people who inhabit the globe. While taking the human propensity for evil seriously—as progressivist Christians frequently have not—the users of apocalyptic are ever ready to identify whole nations with the enemies of God, especially when, like the Christian New Right of America, they feel they have some access to political power. However, it is not certain that such dire results must follow from the use of apocalyptic categories. The use of the Book of revelation should probably be controlled by the teaching of Mark 13, cautious and sceptical as it is of ‘signs’ and messianic leaders, even while accepting the basic apocalyptic framework of thought which was shared by Jesus and most of the New Testament writers. The purpose there seems to be to assure the Christian disciples that, despite actual and potential catastrophes, God’s salvation is assured for those who ‘watch’. That this watching is an active, this-worldly living for justice and peace is demonstrated by the great parables of Matthew 25, especially that of the Judgment of the Nations (verses 31 to 46).

Christians in the Peace Movement should find this part of the New Testament more in tune with their world-view than the Book of Revelation. But despite the cautious, sober approach to the End which we find in the Synoptic apocalyptic passages, Christians will not for long be able to prevent themselves asking questions about the meaning of historical events and possible catastrophes. It is then that the more spectacular language of the Revelation tradition will offer itself. But to make good use of it we need to have a sound, critical theory of God’s action in history which takes Christian interpretational blunders of the past into account.

SOURCES

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