

Chapter 4

APOCALYPSE AND SALVATION: *THE LIFE HEREAFTER*

O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort (O Eternity, thou voice of thunder)

Cantata no. 60 J.S.Bach

‘Spirit is known through revelation. It leads to freedom. It leads to power.
Revelation is the conquest of death.’

Kena Upanishad,

Put into English by Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats

Eschatology is the study of last things. It is where myth and history intersect. At a mythical level the tension is between cosmic order and chaos. Chaos has come to be interpreted by us as disorder but, as “the primeval void”, it is thought to be the very ground of being, the formlessness out of which form emerges, the primordial source of order rather than its opposite. At an historical level the mythical processes of death and rebirth are located in particular events, whether geological or human - geological as the various mass extinctions that have punctuated the Earth’s four billion-year history, human as the collapse and rebirth of civilisations.

As a branch of theology eschatology deals with the issues of death, judgement, heaven and hell. Historically, distinctions can be made in the Judaeo-Christian tradition between messianism, apocalypticism, and millennialism. Messianic hopes are directed towards a king, or political figure, who will lead his suffering and oppressed people into a better historical future. In so doing, he is believed to bring justice to his people and vengeance to their oppressors.

Apocalyptic beliefs hold the view that God will intervene in history on the side of his faithful followers and that his intervention will be accompanied by sudden,

cataclysmic events. When the world becomes corrupt and degenerate it must suffer God's correction and then a new world, or heaven, will be reborn which the faithful minority will inherit. Millenarianism is the particular Christian belief that Christ will return and establish a thousand-year kingdom in which his followers will rule over their enemies.

We have come to associate Apocalypse with death and destruction but it is first and foremost about revelation. As individuals, people often have special insight into life in the time preceding the end of their own lives. Death can bring understanding which makes consolation and reconciliation possible. Historically, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE was felt to be cataclysmic for the Jews, but out of it came one of the central pillars of Rabbinic Judaism, namely that the new temple would be the Jewish people themselves rather than any building of stone. Again the sack of Rome by Alaric in 470 CE may have been felt to be the end of the world but the Catholic and Orthodox Churches continued the spirit of the Empire within Europe. Apocalypse is also prophetic and visionary since, through numbers and mysterious symbols, it predicts future and transforming events. Many of the figures and signs in the Book of Revelation - the Beast and the Lamb, the Four Horses of the Apocalypse, the opening of the seven seals, the woman clothed in the sun etc. - are symbols of transformation.

Compared with mythical realities historical endings are relative, not absolute, though we may struggle to discern what may be emerging, especially when the destruction would seem to be total as in the event of a nuclear holocaust or systemic ecological collapse. However, it is in the nature of eschatological revelation that, even in adversity of apocalyptic proportions, we may learn things about ourselves which help us to face and meet the immense difficulties of the times. Modernity may yet understand itself.

The Sense of an Ending

Frank Kermode, the eminent literary critic, wrote, perhaps prophetically, his memorable account of apocalyptic thinking in the history of literature ⁱ just

before the 1970's and returned to the theme in an introductory chapter to a book accompanying an exhibition at the British Museum at the turn of the century. ⁱⁱ In *The Sense of An Ending* he wrote of the "naïve apocalypticism" of earlier historical times, naïve because of the actual dates that were predicted by religious groups for an end of the world that did not happen. As Kermode points out this did not discourage groups - or "disconfirm" their belief in an end - as they merely rescheduled their dates.

The world did not end in 1000 CE as many thought it would but this did not stop them from rearranging the chronology. Kermode makes sense of this by suggesting that we all need "fictions" of beginnings and endings with which to make sense of our individual and collective lives. Literature lives by these fictions but so do we in "real life". We might also call them myths, though myths that convey a truth beyond the temporal. Kermode suggests that the notion of an apocalyptic end persisted because it was less about time as *chronos* - passing time - and more about *kairos* - seasonal, or waiting, time, that "point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end". ⁱⁱⁱ

The "fictions" - or myths - of endings and beginnings are what connect us to eternal values. Time and timelessness are interdependent. You can't have one without the other and apocalyptic visions are where they meet. "The artifice of eternity" - Yeats' phrase - needs dates to make it real but these can be taken from anywhere in the calendar, whether in the five billion years of deep time or the five thousand of human history. Beginnings and endings are happening all the time. The particular date is less important than the opportunity it provides for invoking what is outside, or beyond, time.

These themes are revisited by Kermode in his millennial essay. Whereas we might seem to be living in the two orders of time and timelessness they really form a continuum. In the Middle Ages a third term between time and eternity existed, known as the *aevum*, or the order of the angels. Though celestial hierarchies are foreign to a modern sensibility it can be said that we enjoy a sort of quasi-immortality in our identity with the social, political and cultural forms we

participate in.

As individuals we live on, for example, in the hearts and minds of our families. This may not be eternal life as traditionally conceived but it is quite different from the merely biological time the individual human body inhabits. In this sense nature is both mutable and eternal. The family - human and animal - constitutes, in Kermode's phrase, a kind of "genetic perpetuity", but that perpetuity could be seen to extend into the whole realm of culture and beyond. Indeed, if "family" connotes connection, then we could think of ourselves as family with the whole ecology of nature, culture, and the universe itself.

Ends and beginnings have always played a large part in humanity's experience of itself throughout history, but particularly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Apocalypse - as revelation, prophecy, and vision - has fascinated Jews and their Christian offspring for the last two millennia. Yet while Apocalyptic and millennial notions of the Second Coming have historically been part of the fabric of the medieval European imagination, there has been a change in modern times.

According to the historian, Eugene Weber, "the passion and controversy for this (Apocalypse) began to seep out of educated consciousness after the seventeenth century", corresponding, interestingly, to an increased attention to chronological time. As the sense of mythical, or timeless, time diminished, the significance of "the century" - the hundred-year unit - and its end began to seem more important, culminating in the theme of *fin de siècle* at the end of the nineteenth century. ^{iv} Chronological time now took precedence over the timeless time of the apocalyptic imagination. Beginnings and endings became more real and their "fictional" quality more fictional in the modern sense.

It is ironic that the true spirit of apocalypse is neglected at a time when our natural scientists are now warning of a real end to our world. The "naive apocalypticism" that Kermode remarked on might not seem so naive today. At the same time the danger seems to go unregistered by our human sciences, as if they are asleep to this elephant in the room or no longer possess the conceptual means,

or imaginative practice, with which to understand or meet the challenge. Ask many natural scientists about the emotional, psychological, or metaphysical meaning of their current doomsday predictions and they find it difficult to answer. But so do the human scientists. In their centuries-long retreat from the power of rational, empirical, technological science, it would seem our human discourses have lost touch with greater mythic, perennial, or ultimate, values. Western metaphysics, as I have discussed, has long since failed to convince - as have the monotheistic religions - and our ethics and aesthetics struggle to be adequate to the challenge.

This silence of the human sciences is a resounding one. The political writer, John Gray, drawing on a perspective from outside our culture - ancient Chinese Taoism - has argued with some force that, while our Western liberal Enlightenment tradition thinks it has freed itself from the metaphysical dogmas of earlier religious times, it is still unconsciously in thrall to the anthropocentric myths of orthodox Christianity, though minus the consolation that conscious acceptance of them as authentic myths brings. ^v

We may have killed God off but not lost the mindset which created him in the first place. Secularism and atheism still have to believe in God in order to disbelieve in Him, yet this is a contradiction which leaves us elevating ourselves - and the human ego - into the place God used to occupy, with the consequences we now see for the present and future condition of mother Earth. The human race has undergone an inflation of near fatal proportions in respect of its fellow species on this planet. While our science offers us knowledge of an amazing, unbelievably magical and beautiful universe we are trapped in a cultural narcissism that leaves us disconnected to it and oblivious to the dangers that now threaten. Narcissism - or self-love - as Freud analysed, is the cause of the neurosis at the heart of modernity. It blinds us to our essential interdependency with the rest of nature.

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Twentieth Century Apocalypse

Yet, ironically, despite all the efforts of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the apocalyptic vision is still with us in the twentieth century. It takes various forms but two are especially contrasting. The last century, with its total wars and genocidal oppressions, was experienced by many as the very enactment of apocalypse,^{vii} the final decline of Western civilisation. As Frances Carey writes:

The events of the twentieth century have conspired to ensure the survival of apocalyptic metaphor in all media as a vehicle for visions of destruction and regeneration, of nihilistic despair and futuristic fantasy; the real meaning of Apocalypse as “unveiling” has been virtually extinguished by its contemporary usage as a synonym for catastrophe.’^{viii}

Reason leads us to be sceptical of fundamental chiliastic beliefs that insist on the literal return of a Messiah who will reign for a thousand years and thereby console and reward those in history who suffer from despair, oppression and misery, yet the Twentieth century has found it difficult, as Carey says, to discern any spirit of revelation emerging from its sense of apocalypse, and this has left a vacuum into which the religious fundamentalists can spring.

While our scientists are providing more and more compelling evidence of our very uncertain future, the beginning of the twenty-first century experienced an administration in the White House who represented a large constituency of literal and fundamental Christian “end-timers”, and who, for all we know, believed, and hoped, that the end of the world was near and that only the elect - presumably, the moral majority in Washington and throughout the United States - would be saved through their prayer, even as they crusade, and make war, against the Anti-Christ in the form of Islamic “terrorist” regimes in the Middle East.

As they did so, of course, they seemed unaware that the end of the world might indeed come as a result of their failure of policy on issues they seem to be ignorant, or in denial, of, blinded as some might think they were by their own

vested interests, which they clothed in fundamental religious beliefs that have their origin, for the most part, in Old Testament prophecies. Such, to the cost of all of us, were the deluded notions of the modern day “rapturists”. The election of Barack Obama made the administrations of Bush and the neo-conservatives seem as if the latter belonged to a different order of history. This, of course, leaves the question of how we interpret the Trump presidency which followed Obama.

Apocalyptic thinking takes different forms in different cultures. *Revelation*, the final book of the Bible, echoing the fire and brimstone imagery of some of the Old Testament prophets, such as *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, and *Zachariah*, provides a gruesome vision of “things which must shortly come to pass” before the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth. *Revelation* is not an easy book to understand, or read, and there have been many interpretations of it down through the centuries. ix

Many of its images do in fact resonate with what the climate-change writer, Mark Lynas, predicts in his prospective “hellish vision of life on a hotter planet” - plagues, lightening, thunderings, earthquakes, fire, blood, hail, black sun and bloody moon, to say nothing of floods, droughts, starvation, water wars, social and political dislocation and death on unprecedented scales etc. The imagery of the book of *Revelation* would, as Weber, points out, inspire the future even to the present day: “Its bizarre but powerful evocations were to provide generations to come with metaphors, allegories, and figures of speech, with warnings, guideposts, and inspiration.” x

Pursuing the Millennium

The discussion of apocalyptic ideas in the later twentieth century originated from a book which first appeared in 1957, whose reception has always surprised its author. He had directed the work, as he thought, to “a small scholarly readership”. Norman Cohn’s main concern was “to show how again and again, from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, some freelance prophet would

proclaim that, in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, the Jews, the clergy, or else all the property owners must be exterminated: and to describe what happened then”. He also wondered “what bearing that story might have on the terrible fanaticism which ravaged Europe in the first half of the twentieth century”.^{xi}

Cohn described how powerfully the apocalyptic tradition, that the Middle Ages had inherited from Antiquity, affected the medieval mind. It foretold a Millennium in which humanity could look forward to a new paradise on earth, free of suffering and sin - a “Kingdom of the Saints”. Hence generation after generation came to anticipate some sudden, miraculous event in which the world would be utterly transformed. And these expectations invariably became caught up with social unrest, generating tremors throughout the structure of medieval society. They were, arguably, a galvanizing force in the evolution of European society and civilization.

The Book of *Revelation* claimed to usher in a thousand years of blessedness, “one thousand” presumably representing a period of indefinite duration. As Eugene Weber describes the belief:

The millennium forms a sort of antechamber of the new heaven and new earth in which God wipes away all tears from men’s eyes, “and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things are passed away” and all things are made new.^{xii}

This was a powerful and irresistible claim for the poor and oppressed of medieval Europe.

In the twentieth century there have been, as Cohn pointed out, spectacular attempts to create this utopian heaven materially on earth which have in turn resulted in dystopian regimes whose crimes have been more destructive than anything witnessed before in our history. The historian, Michael Burleigh, argued that these totalitarian regimes, particularly the National Socialism of Hitler’s

Germany and the Bolshevik communism of Stalin's Soviet Union, took their power from offering themselves as 'pseudo- or substitute religions with eclectic liturgies, ersatz theologies, vices and virtues' ^{xiii}. (De Tocqueville had earlier compared the French Revolution to "a religious revival", calling it "a species of religion", which, 'like Islam (has) overrun the whole world with its apostles, militants and martyrs'.)

Burleigh draws attention to the comparisons between Hitler and Anabaptist sectarians of the sixteenth century. In particular Hitler has been likened to the Anabaptist leader and millenarianist, Jan Bockelson, otherwise known as John of Layden, who was responsible for a reign of terror in sixteenth century Munster and who, also like Hitler, along with his followers, met a violent and humiliating end. Hitler's notion of "the thousand-year Reich" also echoes the chiliastic belief of *Revelation*. ^{xiv}

These ideas are also taken up by John Gray in his recent book about apocalyptic religion and the death of utopia. There are many economic, social, and political reasons for the emergence of the modern totalitarian states, but, as Gray hypothesises, the "secular" ideologies of modern times were also a form of repressed religion, versions of the myth of Apocalypse, a belief that conflict in history could be brought to an end by a violent and world-changing event and it was this dimension that gave them especial power. Religion had returned, Gray suggests, in perverted form: "a 'black mass' of political myth". ^{xv} History and myth had become fused in a gruesome modern narrative.

It was St Augustine who suggested in *The City of God* that "heaven" could not be created on earth but was to be experienced in the separate realm of the spiritual, thus consigning European history through the centuries to a split between the material and the spiritual - between Church and State, pope and monarch and, arguably, to the fundamental dualism between mind and body that has characterised and fixated European culture ever since. The decline of religion in the Enlightenment, it could be argued, left a spiritual vacuum which the likes of the Jacobins, Marxist ideologues, Bolsheviks, German Nazis, and Maoist communists could fill with their materialist dystopias, leading to the monstrous

atrocities we know.

Cohn had, perhaps, underestimated how controversial and fundamental the idea of the establishment of a “new heaven and new earth” were to be in our imaginations. According to Cohn the original meaning of millenarianism was narrow and precise. Christianity has always had an eschatology, or doctrine concerning “the final state of the world”. The chiliastic belief - that of the Second coming when Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and reign over it for a thousand years before the last judgment - could be interpreted literally or liberally.

The literal interpretations were those already referred to above and led to the dystopias that have received so much attention since Cohn’s book. These apocalyptic attempts to realise heaven on earth in material and historical terms were considered, as Gray argues, to be “scientific”. In fact, insofar as science itself aims at a material solution to the problems of humankind, it could be said to lend itself to progressive and unrealisable utopianisms.

Salvationism

Come up hither and I will show thee things that must be hereafter. Revelation 4.1

‘Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme’ (Awake, the voice is calling us)

Cantata no. 140 J.S. Bach

The liberal interpretation aimed more at addressing the suffering faithful. Millenarianism in this sense was, according to Cohn, “simply a convenient label for a particular kind of ‘salvationism’”, not addressed at a material heaven on earth, but suggesting, perhaps, a more subtle response to suffering and despair.

Apocalypse was less about a material, or earthly, empire and more about a different understanding of life and ourselves within it. Christianity has tended to

believe in a literal heaven to be enjoyed in the life hereafter, seen as coming in the “time” after life, but heaven, or the Garden of Eden, may be thought of within, as well as beyond, this world - “the Kingdom of heaven is within”. The Buddhist notion of *nirvana*, for instance, is not a utopia in the sense of having a specific location, but is conceived of as a state of mind, and it is a state of mind that exists within *samsara* - the earthly cycle of birth and death. *Nirvana* is the cessation of suffering, not as its abolition but as an acceptance and a way of living with it. In this sense heaven and earth are not separate. “The City of God” and man reflect each other.

Cohn identified, in the introduction to his book, how millenarian sects or movements picture salvation which he itemized as follows:

- a) Collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity;
- b) Terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven;
- c) Imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;
- d) Total, in that it is utterly to transform life on earth so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself;
- e) Miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of supernatural agencies. ^{xvi}

But, as he remarks, “within these limits there is of course room for infinite variety: there are countless ways of imagining the millennium and the route to it... from the most violent aggressiveness to the mildest pacifism and from the most ethereal spirituality to the most earthbound materialism”. If, in our apocalyptic times, there is to be a revelatory vision it must, surely, be one that neither attempts to found the new heaven, or nirvana, in a purely material realm nor locate it in an essentially ethereal one. While, historically, the “City of God” has separated itself off from the city of man, the twentieth century dystopian experiments to establish “heaven” on earth have been hellish. At the same time,

given our current climatic predicament, it is true to say that the liberal humanist secular project has not brought success or salvation either.

If we were to rewrite Cohn's Salvationist items in the cause of a new apocalypse, perhaps it might look like this:

- a) Collective in the sense of humanity as a whole and not based on tribalism or nationalism. It must be planetary.
- b) Terrestrial in that it makes a difference to our life here and now and does not merely promise salvation in the life hereafter, which is not to say it shouldn't be spiritual but a spirit that includes all levels of life, material and subtle. It must be both immanent and transcendental.
- c) Imminent in that it is to come soon and suddenly, given the urgency of the times - it must be an awareness that we experience within decades and is linked to understandings that accompany the knowledge of the present threat to our existence.
- d) Total and transforming in the sense that we perceive our life very differently. The transformation will initially be in our perception rather than in a transformation of our material circumstances. Alongside our sense of ourselves as flawed and imperfect we may also sense a resilience and resourcefulness within ourselves over and above anything we have experienced before.
- e) Miraculous in that "the supernatural agencies" will be qualities within ourselves and our relationship with the life about us that we have neglected until now. This may be about emerging from the anthropocentric and narcissistic state of individual and social mind we have occupied in the last five hundred years.

NOTES

ⁱ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 1966

ii Frank Kermode, 'Millenium and Apocalypse' in *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* Frances Cary (Editor) . London: British Museum Press, 1999.

iii Kermode, 1966 op. Cit. P 47

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iv Eugene Weber, *Apocalypses. Phrophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs Throughout the Ages*. London: Pimlico, 2000. P 1. Weber suggested that centuries, in the modern calendric sense, appear to be 'an esoteric sixteenth-century invention'.

v John Gray, *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. London: Granta, 2002.

vi Narcissus , in Ovid's story, fell in love with his own image which he mistook for another person and was blind and deaf to all around him. This is a myth which applies as much to the human race, entranced as we are by the appearance of the world - and ourselves in it - which we mistakenly see as a permanent, objective reality rather than the fleeting bubble - or evanescent 'water moon' - that all phenomena are.

vii Many of the features of the world wars could have come out of the Book of Revelation - blitzkrieg as the Four Horses of the Apocalypse, bombers as Angels of Death, the atom bomb as the Woman clothed in the Sun conquering the Red Dragon, etc.

viii Frances Carey (Ed.) 'Preface' in *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* London: British Museum Press, 1999. Pp 8-9. See also Carey's chapter on 'The Apocalyptic Imagination: between Tradition and Modernity'.

ix For an account of these see Bernard McGinn's overview, 'Revelation' in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, London: Fontana Press, 1989, 1997. For a personal and moving account of the difficulties in reading this last book of the New Testament, see Will Self's 'Introduction' to the pocket canon *Revelation* from the Authorised King James Version, Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 1998

x Weber, *Apocalypses* 2000 op cit p 30

xi Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. London: Pimlico, 2004, 1957. From the Foreword.

xii Weber op.cit. p 30

xiii Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich. A New History*. London: Pan, 2001. P 6 and see Introduction.

^{xiv} The perverse religious roots of German National Socialism were also explored in a scholarly book in 1985. In *The Occult Roots of Nazism. Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology* by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 1985, 1992, 2004) the author gives an account of the way in which Nazism was moulded by powerful occult and millenarian sects that thrived in Germany and Austria at the turn of the century. They were active in Vienna at the time when Hitler was living there and Goodrick-Clarke provided evidence of Hitler's interest in them. These sects advocated the promotion of popular nationalism, 'Aryan' racism, and occultism in the cause of German world-rule and their doctrinal fantasies, Goodrick-Clarke argues, were played out with terrifying consequences in the history of the Third Reich:

'The Nazi crusade was indeed essentially religious in its adoption of apocalyptic beliefs and fantasies including a New Jerusalem (cf. Hitler's plans for a magnificent new capital at Berlin) and the destruction of the Satanic hosts in a lake of fire. Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Treblinka are the terrible museums of twentieth-century Nazi apocalyptic.' Pp 203-204.

^{xv} John Gray, *Black Mass. Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*. London: Allen Lane, 2007

^{xvi} Cohn op.cit p 13