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Are the Only True Atheists Actually Theologians?¹

COLBY DICKINSON

I Introduction

Contemporary continental European philosophy circulates around particular apocalyptic themes, offering new insights and suggestive proposals for theology to think through the implications of this often most difficult of religious subjects. As such philosophies manoeuvre to define apocalyptic through its return to questions of antinomian thought, of the 'interruption' of normative religious imagery, and of the negation of our most cherished theological representations (including our representations of God and the Law), we constantly find these philosophers engaged with the most basic foundations of Western religious history.

From its inception, apocalyptic has been a genre of literature, and more generally of religious thought, concerned with unveiling what was previously hidden. Yet what exactly it has sought to disclose has not always been so clear. An apocalyptic message is certainly being sent through many religious channels about the 'normal' manner of doing things this side of heaven, but we humans have not always been able to receive that message 'in full'. In many ways, apocalyptic thought tells us to listen closely, for something important is going to be revealed to us, although we are not always sure what the revelation that is taking place is. Nevertheless, a conversation between humanity and a higher truth (or deity) is staged and tries to provide us with a glimpse of what (new) relations are possible between humanity and God.

No doubt true dialogue will take place only when we are stripped of our arrogant presumptions concerning the nature of humanity's relationship to truth: quite simply, we are not God. In many ways, the humility within this realization propels apocalyptic thinking to relativize the many human truths we surround ourselves with for security, and loosens the normative boundaries that ceaselessly divide yet constitute our (highly symbolic) world.²

II Radical openness

Perhaps admitting such an eschatological horizon for Christian identity means embracing something like Jürgen Moltmann's vision of apocalyptic literature as a radical form of openness: that is, the 'theology of hope' which he insists is centrally manifest within the Christian proclamation. In many ways, such an idea also brings us to contemplate the radical incompleteness of Christian identity, and to reformulate it anew whenever we stop to examine it. In this sense, we might say that apocalyptic images and the disruptions they cause us lead us to confront the paradoxes which are immanent to human existence and are exposed through apocalyptic writings.³ An increased focus along these lines (and their implications for religious *and* 'secular' thought) has been apparent in continental European philosophical and theological thought for some time now (and I shall elaborate this statement in what follows).

In this context, one might suggest that apocalyptic thought is uniquely descriptive of our era, as it is characterized by an 'epistemic undecidability' that embraces contradictions as the progress towards which we have been heading.⁴ Rather than label any such sought-after horizon 'utopian', Malcolm Bull, for one, sees progress of this kind as decidedly 'apocalyptic' in that it acknowledges the simultaneous co-existence of contradiction and paradox, rather than smooth out such realities in favour of a more uniform (but perhaps for that reason also more totalitarian) utopian existence.

Writers today do indeed seem smitten with notions of 'undecidability', 'hybridity', the 'post-human' and 'multiple belonging', to name only a few suggestive terms that have yet to find a proper home within theological discourse, but which resonate deeply with the essence of apocalyptic thought. Each of these theory-laden and paradox-embracing concepts adheres to what we might consider characteristic of apocalyptic thought, insofar as each of them is trying to ascertain the multiple identities and reclassifications of selves that would seem to bring an end to certain on-going political oppressions. As we see time and again in biblical texts, apocalyptic thinking undoes our binary codes of representation, and offers new models by which we can relate to one another and hope to develop more just forms of being together.

The often startlingly direct way in which contemporary continental philosophy engages with the theme of apocalypticism is both highly interesting and highly relevant for theology today.

III Taubes and apocalyptic

One important starting-point for the conversation between theology and philosophy on apocalypticism is the work of the Jewish philosopher, Jacob Taubes. He not only sought to illuminate the most significant trends in apocalyptic thought in the twentieth century (including the many paradoxes of antinomian thought within religious tradition), but routinely questioned the border between Judaism and Christianity, as yet another representative frontier to be examined and challenged from his point of view. For Taubes, the apocalyptic was merely another way of trying to describe the revolutionary forces of history, the forces within history, and how at times they could leap across centuries to become a means of delegitimizing certain political powers, and offering an oppressed group of humans a certain sacred counterforce to lift up those weighed down by history.⁵

Taubes examined the Pauline corpus as a form of political theology infused with a certain apocalyptic tone, something which has been taken up by several continental European philosophers, including Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. His conclusion was that Christianity was an internal impulse for renewal within Judaism that tried to maintain its antinomian appearance, but was ultimately unable to do so.⁶ Christianity tried to break free of the Law, of all Law in fact, and to live in this suspension of law as a form of 'pure' love. This theme featured prominently in Taubes' final lectures on *The Political Theology of Paul*, one of the most insightful studies of Pauline thought in relation to modern philosophical and psychological theories to emerge in the last half century.⁷ As Taubes' work makes explicitly clear, there is a link between the apocalyptic and what seems 'antinomian' that must be inspected more carefully to reveal the real (normative) source behind what appears to be simply a transgression of the norm by way of its apocalyptic imagery (that is, what Taubes represents as the Law as 'source' given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai).

In this context it is especially intriguing for theologians that Taubes' rereading of the origins of Christianity as a philosophical effort to deal with the nature of law and its Jewish heritage has been picked up indirectly by some contemporary philosophers who share similar readings of this particular theological legacy. Focusing on the Pauline notion of living in the 'apocalyptic time' remaining to us before the 'end', Slavoj Žižek

reiterates Jesus' words on not making any specific historical event part of the 'end times' (Mark 13.1–23), and notes how 'Far from luring us into such a self-destructive, perverse rapture, adopting the properly apocalyptic stance is, today more than ever, the only way to keep a cool head'.⁸ Perhaps as a constituent part of his often paradoxical philosophy, by stating that 'we must assume the catastrophe as our destiny',⁹ in his work he tries to keep a certain openness to the future continuously possible. He seeks to keep it open so that it refuses to foreclose on a singular political or religious movement. This is what it means, for him at least, to continue 'tarrying with the negative', as one of his other book titles puts it, including the ('apocalyptic') negation of our normative representations of God.

The explicit recognition here, and it is one that Žižek would fully identify with the 'messianic' projects taken up by others, is that only a form of apocalyptic (or paradoxical) thought will 'save us'. As he quips, 'What we should do ... is fully assume the identity of the two opposed moments – which is precisely what an apocalyptic "Christian materialism" does do, in bringing together both the rejection of a divine Otherness and the element of unconditional commitment'.¹⁰ Again, and as paradoxical as it might sound to the theologically trained ear, we are left to contemplate how the negation of our representations of God may actually be the only thing that sustains faith in a God who ultimately lives beyond all of our depictions of this God, and who is paradoxically faithfully testified to through our apocalyptic images, thoughts and, perhaps, even prophetic lives. Although such radical theological thoughts are not necessarily what Žižek is after, we certainly need not dismiss the existence of God outright. Indeed, H. Richard Niebuhr's declaration of the sovereignty of God precisely insisted that God had nothing to do with our conceptualizations of sovereignty, for example.¹¹ At least such a logic forces us to admit the need to re-examine theology from the ground up, as it were, and in light of an ongoing apocalyptic upending of our typical, normative theological and religious representations.

Žižek is careful to link such thoughts on apocalyptic and the 'time that remains' to us in Pauline thought to the work of other thinkers who share his apocalyptic visions, such as Giorgio Agamben, who has tried to elucidate the concept of 'profanation' as perhaps the apocalypse that we have been waiting for. Agamben's notion that the sacred has been profaned, or retuned to its proper use, and bears little resemblance to the 'secular,

which functions more as a repression of the sacred, indirectly echoes the earliest apocalyptic literatures. Through their profane, hybrid creatures, they seemed to stress that even God could appear through what was once deemed to be ‘unclean’, ‘impure’ or ‘unholy’, as well as the thought that what we once took to be sacred often is not.¹² We need only contemplate the tearing of the curtain within the ‘Holy of Holies’ on Christ’s death, or how Peter was told to take and eat unclean (profane) animals in Acts, to glimpse something of the significance of these paradoxical images in the biblical tradition.

IV ‘Interruption’ and freedom

Of course such ideas are not new to theology, which has tried over the years to consider exactly what this kind of apocalyptic thinking might mean for theological praxis. In what might seem the simplest definition of an apocalyptic religion, and following Walter Benjamin, Johann Baptist Metz pronounced merely one word: ‘interruption’.¹³ We have to understand that any such ‘interruption’ is also concerned with upending our normative representations, including our most cherished political, social, cultural, economic and religious symbolic economies. This was also what ‘the Christ’ once was: an ‘interruption’ of the Hebrew Scripture’s normative depiction of God. Just as the prophets of Judaism had stood up at one time to criticize and ‘interrupt’ the rule of the prevailing powers that had governed and oppressed the people of Israel, so religion, true religion, must be seen as a perpetually interruptive force working in the lives of the faithful. From Benjamin to Taubes, and from Žižek and Agamben, this notion of religion as an interruptive force (even unto itself) is maintained within an apocalyptic context. Only now is continental European thought recovering it as a major theme.

If we examine this movement more closely, an entire ethics for the marginalized, an unveiling of relations between humanity and the divine, opens up on such a disclosure. That is the fruit of the apocalyptic texts. Metz has described it thus: ‘The apocalyptic traditions I am appealing to here protest a pragmatism of democratic freedom that has cut itself free from the memory of suffering and has thus gone more and more morally blind. Ultimately political freedom cannot simply be about the relationship between one discourse partner and another, but rather – more fundamentally and entirely in line with the way that apocalypticism looks upon human

history – about the relationship of one person to the endangered and overlooked other'.¹⁴

It would be easy to link Metz's comments, and his resistance to providing a positive theological or political programme, to Žižek's ongoing critique of capitalism in contemporary democratic nations. Both Metz and Žižek continue to share that (Christian) sense that there must be a prioritized focus on the 'weak' messianic moral force that resonates deeply within the Jewish and Christian traditions. This is why Žižek turns so resolutely to the Christian faith again and again, although he is a self-declared 'atheist-materialist'.

V Claims and cautions

We should take all of this into account along with the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructive caution concerning the 'apocalyptic tone' of thought in general (and especially 'Enlightenment thinking'), which seeks to 'reveal' the 'secret' once and for all, but which Derrida thought could never fully be known. He maintained that the truly apocalyptic tone could never be 'known' as such, but could only serve to deconstruct our various representations continually in a bid for the appearance of ever more just representations, even though they might never appear directly as such. All we would ever hope (though not be sure) to have were more increasingly just forms. This was the reality of the quest for justice, or for a democracy. A similarly Derridean notion of a justice 'always yet to come' might have been on Metz's mind.¹⁵

As John Caputo, one of Derrida's collaborators and theologically-inclined commentators, has put it, for Derrida, 'the apocalypse without apocalypse ... is one in which a certain apocalyptic tone is struck up even as a certain tone is struck out, an apocalyptic tone *without* being caught up in the cataclysmic tones of the determinable apocalyptic revelations'.¹⁶ Again, in order to avoid the snares of false claims to sovereign power, any claim to disclose the truth of reality must be met with a sharp rebuke: 'Those who declare the end of this or that have their own ends in view ...', ends that should be suspect from the start, and subject to much deconstructive work in the hope that justice might yet prevail.¹⁷

The gist of this critique of a demonstrable, historic 'apocalypse' would seem to be that our collective (theological) representations will always reform themselves anew in order to 're-veil' the mystery or paradox which

an 'apocalyptic moment' had undone.¹⁸ We are beginning to see in this broad survey of contemporary thinkers the space made available by apocalyptic thought for an ongoing 'pure critique' of the structures and representations that make up our symbolic worlds. Perhaps what is genuinely offered through these apocalyptic thoughts (and the ethical import of this insight is rather inviting and daunting) is the chance of radical openness and dialogue between people, though only if both parties are willing to be humbled and 'undone' by the stripping of their assumed representations of themselves and each other. Then apocalyptic thinking might achieve a transformation, not necessarily of the social conditions in which we live, but of our imagination, which is the necessary ethical 'first step' towards the other before us, and the essential step to achieve any subsequent social or political transformation. As the biblical scholar J. J. Collins once said about the significance of apocalyptic literature in general, new relationships between persons and even things come about through a revisioning of the field of relations, which itself arises from the undoing of our representations.¹⁹

VI Conclusion

When trying to decide why contemporary continental European philosophers have been so interested in theology recently, I am struck by the relevance of something which the 'apocalyptic' thinker Carl Schmitt once said, and which is as true today: 'Taubes is right: today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about...'. This is truly an apocalyptic statement worth considering today, for everything here is on its head, with theologians not really talking about theology, and non-theologians not able to miss it nearly anywhere they turn. Perhaps embodying this paradox much as Jacques Lacan had once warned that 'only theologians can be truly atheistic',²⁰ we are left to contemplate how the death of Jesus, like the 'death of God', might actually be a way forward for theology rather than its end; and how many theologians often do God a disservice by feigning to speak on his (or the Church's) behalf. In many ways, contemporary continental European philosophy holds up a mirror to theology that shows us not only our history but our present. It asks us if we are willing to take our own claims seriously once again, and if we are willing to be deconstructed. Theology, much like charity or poverty, has been practised by many outside the Church, but has often been lacking within it.

Are theologians committed to undoing their own most cherished representations of what theology, or sacraments, or doctrine, or Jesus Christ, or God might be? Or will the efforts of those committed to undoing these representations be spurned as heretical or antinomian challenges to the 'way things work' in the Church? Perhaps, in spite of our fears of losing what has been most normative to us, there is a way for apocalypticism to be seen as a space for genuinely 'antinomian' thought, but only insofar as it can provide a form of 'pure critique' of the structures and powers that be; and each of these different philosophers has been pointing us towards this aim. Perhaps, in the end, we might have a theology willing to criticize itself and admit its own poverty. John Caputo referred to this recently: 'What I call theology is possible only under the condition that it might not – perhaps – be theology, that it might be impossible for it to be theology, that it might be impossible, plain and simple.'²¹ This might not be the end of theology but the beginning of something humbler, more willing to be poor, and less inclined to dispense with ideas that seem, at first glance, to be wholly beyond its walls.

Notes

1. 'Taubes is right: today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about...'; Carl Schmitt in a letter to Armin Mohler, 14 August 1958. Quoted in Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York, 2013, p. 26.
2. William Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language*, Stanford, 2009, pp. 6–7.
3. Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
4. Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality*, London, 1999, p. 294.
5. See Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko, Stanford, 2009.
6. See, for example, Jacob Taubes, 'The Issue between Judaism and Christianity: Facing Up to the Unresolvable Difference', in *id.*, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments toward a Critique of Historical Reason*, Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert & Amir Engel (eds), Stanford, 2010, pp. 45–59.
7. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, Stanford, 2003.
8. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London, 2012, p. 983.
9. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, *op. cit.*, p. 984.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London, 2010, p. 352.
11. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, Louisville, KY, 2006.
12. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort, New York, 2007.
13. This definition was made famous in Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York, 2007.
14. Johann Baptist Metz, 'God: Against the Myth of the Eternity of Time', in Tiemo Rainer

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- Peters & Claus Urban (eds), *The End of Time? The Provocation of Talking about God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York, 2004, p. 39.
15. See Derek Simon, 'The New Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz: Confronting Schmitt's Decisionist Political Theology of Exclusion', *Horizons* 30:2 (2003), pp. 227-54.
 16. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Bloomington, IN, 1997, p. 100.
 17. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
 18. See Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
 19. See John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI, 1998.
 20. Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), trans. Bruce Fink, New York, 1998, p. 45.
 21. John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, Bloomington, IN, 2013, p. 17.