WORLDS IN DISCOURSE:
REALITIES OF OCCIDENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND IDEOLOGY

Eds. Ganakumaran Subramaniam, Shanthini Pillai and Hafriza Burhanudeen

This volume of essays will present various perceptions and conceptions of Occidental thought through a wide spectrum of understanding with one fundamental point of convergence: the desire for a comprehension of western thoughts, ideas, knowledge and practices. This will be carried out through explorations and engagements of Occidental thought on a multidisciplinary platform, a constellation of various worlds in discourse. It will offer various forms of discussions on literature, history, philosophy, sociology as well as theology. Through their various evocations and enunciations of their individual subject matters, each contributor to this volume traverses the path towards a deeper understanding of what is really entailed as Occidentalism and to disengage it from what has thus far been narrowly defined as the Other side of Orientalism, a platform of thought that merely vilifies the West as the East was vilified in colonial times. As such it is felt that such a publication will be timely in shedding new light on Occidental studies and offer new pathways to a world in discourse.

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Edited by
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Poetic Language, Apocalypse, and the Premises for Dialogue Between a Secular West and Radical Islam

William Franke

In this current millenial transition, the nature and legitimacy of holding beliefs about the end of the world, as well as the ends and means of expressing and exchanging them, very often come directly into question. Different theologies make their claims upon beliefs of this order. And secular points of view make theirs too, including sometimes the view that really it would be better to refrain from making any such claims at all. Judged from this vantage point, what lies beyond the horizon of the present world, if the thought of such a thing is even thinkable, should not be mythically distorted by totalising interpretations pretending to finality. 'apocalyptic' visions, such as the religions of the book, especially furnish in abundance. For such pretended vision beyond ordinary mortal limits is in any case unwarranted, and even worse, can become anti-social and be used to incite to violence. Yet this rejection, too, involves a claim, and it is not without pretenses of its own. It wishes to draw the bounds of legitimate representations and to circumscribe what ought and ought not to be brought to the table as lying within the compass of discussion. And to set the limits and establish the law for representation is in and of itself to assume a position beyond all representation. There is perhaps an apocalyptic theology (or its negation and inversion) buried even here, a belief about what ultimately is true or, at any rate, about what makes a difference or really matters in the end.

Rather than attempting to exorcise this residual, haunting presence of truth, or at least of a pretended disclosure of what is decisive in the end, I submit that we should accept it as belonging to the very dialogical nature

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[1] As Hegel pointed out, to draw the bounds of any realm, such as that of pure reason, is of itself already to assume a position outside of and beyond that boundary. "Einführung", Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807).

This means that we cannot lay down the rules of the game. We are already in a game in which the rules are irrevocably open to interpretation by all players, all of whom have their ways of thinking that are, in effect if not in intent, based on principles that are absolute for them, ab-solved from critical reflection, since their thinking is already in process prior to (or at least coevally with) every possible self-critical act of reflection. Paradoxically, precisely those nominally most closed to dialogue – for example, religious 'fanatics' of the apocalyptic sort – turn out to be key here for representing an all too easily overlooked aspect of dialogue among different ways of thinking, where any way of thinking cannot help but absolutise its own constitutive criteria and unconscious presuppositions.

To exit from this deadlock of conflicting and even incommensurable interpretations, only something on the order of a revelation will do, the convergence of an authority that is able to claim us all beyond any party's ability to rationally account for or codify it. Of course, it is not any authoritatively dictated, positive protocols that I am invoking here but simply the openness to a higher authority than our own. The relative irrationality of extremists may be the most efficacious challenge for reminding us that nothing but total openness from human participants, together with what can perhaps be called the desire for love, can be conducive to initiating the type of dialogue that does not only reinforce the implicit consensus of the like-minded but surrenders itself to the discovery of the unknown through genuinely open, shared exploration together with other participants whom we cannot predict or control.

Precisely what is objected to about theologies is their claim to an absolute knowledge that is not subject to critique by any standards that others outside the belief system can also accept as binding. But the fact is that we all have different criteria, even when it is just "reason itself" (however, we happen to understand this 'universal' endowment) that may not be binding for others at all, and that therefore, are our 'theologies'. They are that for others, even though intending them as such may be the furthest thing from our minds. By accepting that our belief, too, shares a common structure with other 'theologies', in so far as we interpret others from a certain matrix inevitably centered in our own beliefs and culture, we may for the first time be ready to enter into dialogue with them. Another way of putting this would be to say that critique cannot take for itself a position outside of or over and above ideology, including religious ideology, but must rather begin in dialogue with it. To dialogue with Islam,

for example, Western democracies will have to relinquish the presumed superiority of their own secular, liberal standards. They must become open, through dialogue with Islamic societies, to seeing these standards exposed from otherwise inaccessible angles, which can show up some of the hypocrisies they may be based on in practice.[5] This need not meant fully relinquishing what we may take to be inviolable moral certainties, but simply acknowledging the ambiguities of all our own realisations of such ideals. We need to admit the possibility that other ways of life, even despite apparent ideological repugnance, may have much to reveal to us about ideals such as truth and justice, as well as about the blindness and repression of our own ways of pursuing such principles.

I believe the only solution to impasses of understanding is to learn to accept the absolute truths that others live by and die for, that is, their theologies, as authentic and possibly true, at least in some sense-metaphorically or morally, in part or in principle. We may, of course, sense that this is not how these beliefs are intended and propounded, indeed that they are forced coercively upon others as literal and absolute truth – the whole truth and nothing but – with no respect at all for those others' personal or at any rate alternative points of view and convictions. Undoubtedly, this is all too often the case. It testifies to the regrettably all-too-human will to dominate and prevail over other, weaker parties. Indeed safeguarding the rights of individuals and protesting against their violation are surely among the most important contributions to world dialogue of highly individualistic Western societies. But there is also more to theologically grounded, revealed truths than manipulation and exploitation of weaker members of society. The excessively absolute mode of expression of religious truths derives also in good part from the nature of religious experience itself as absolute, as demanding total and uncompromising response or 'surrender'.

There is a paradox here for human finitude in its disproportion with the Infinite that proves more often than not to be too much for human logic to deal with. The experience of the absolute seems logically to demand a corresponding absoluteness in its expression, but really it can be served only by the exact opposite. The experience of the absolute unfortunately.

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[5] Instructive on this head is Kevin Dwyer, "Dialogical Anthropology," in Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

of our common pursuit. For, to the extent that we gather to talk and exchange views with one another and argue over them, we are seeking some generally valid and communicable understanding. And yet the dialogue can have no pre-established framework that would not be biased, the work of some and an imposition on others. Any delimitation of a framework for dialogue that is not itself open to all potential parties to dialogue, unless they have previously accepted conditions that are not of their own making, does presuppose what is in crucial respects indistinguishable from an absolute, 'theological' type of authority, a sort of positively given 'revelation'.

To this extent, the dialogical process itself is based in practice on what amounts in essence to a theological revelation: parameters of dialogue must simply be 'given', be recognised as self-evident and thus as binding for all. It is paramount that this 'revelation' be able to be recognised as such by all parties in common, so as not to seem simply an imposition by some human beings upon others. Any general framework – necessarily an obligatory, coercive order– which is not so given will be experienced by some as oppression. Even a purely secular order, if it is beyond discussion, not open to dialogue – which means open dialogue that does not already itself necessarily presuppose a secular framework – is not neutral but, in effect, a theological or counter – theological type of authority; for it is beyond the range of question and critique. It is absolutely centralised – for no position is allowed to be outside it – and transcendent with respect to the actions and evaluations of all who have to simply accept it. Such a purportedly secular framework for dialogue must be based at some level on uncritical belief, since the whole ground and basis for any belief can never be totally objectified and evaluated, without presuppositions, all at once.[note]

This acknowledgment of the way in which even secularising, anti-theological discourse may itself be considered, in this sense, theological after all is invoked here for the value it may have in bringing out common ground for dialogue, where previously only mutual intolerance could be descried. For we live in a world plagued by religious intolerance and by

intolerance of religion. Not infrequently, we hear the wish expressed that all religions should simply disappear from the face of the earth. But one would not be likely to eliminate the problem that way. The impulse from which religious belief springs, and that can easily lead to strife and war to the death, would be far from eradicated. All the same motivations that irrepressibly produce religions and their theologies would remain inherent within the very communicative mechanisms on which we rely. The very possibility of human society as a communicative system is to this extent inextricably bound up with some evidently positive, in effect 'revealed', basis (even if it is innocuously called 'self-evident') for distinguishing communications that are ultimately valid from those that are not.

The apocalyptic pronouncements of various religions arrogating to themselves the right to judge all the inhabitants of the earth epitomise the self-enclosure and repression of others that seem to be lurking in religious dogmatisms and fundamentalisms. Yet to repress this expression is not to root out the repression but rather to ignore its rootedness in us and to respond in kind with violence against violence. This violence can take the form simply of exclusion from dialogue, even when this be perpetrated by no more than a supercilious or dismissive attitude, making an implicit appeal to the common sense of rational – or right-thinking-individuals. For there is still a violence in exclusion, even when the excluded party itself violates the rules for dialogue as we define them. This is the violence of any imposition of order by some human beings for – but therefore also upon – others.

On any humanly constructed model of dialogue, in order not to build in exclusions from the dialogue, we must begin with one another's theological or atheological beliefs as they exist and not presume to have any superior ground that shows the fallaciousness of them all or in any way affords a better standard for judgment. Dialogue begins here from its own impossibility – from the existence of incompatible absolutes and the negation of any common basis-rather than with the imposition of a general framework and code to which all must conform. The hypothetical original setting up of the premises for dialogue must itself be dialogical and cannot but be dialogically negotiated, even in the absence of an acknowledged common basis for dialogue. Thus the first moment of dialogue can be determined only as the openness to dialogue. Any more definite determination of the parameters for dialogue would pre-empt it.

[note] Compare Jürgen Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in Hermeneutik und Dialektik I, Festschrift für H. G. Gadamer (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970), ed. Rüdiger Bubner, pp. 73-104, translated as "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," in Contemporary Hermeneutics, ed. Josef Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1980).

all too often induces human beings to adopt absolute forms of expression, whereas it is for this experience above all that poetic expression alone, the indirection and self-negation characteristic of metaphor, for example, is appropriate. This is the crux of the strategy discovered by negative theology to be necessary for expressing the inexpressible. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, accordingly, deemed the best analogies for God to be the elements of the universe that are evidently the furthest removed from the nature of divinity — we may think of mud or worms or demonic beasts — because they create the least illusion of adequacy as representations (*De caelesti hierarchia*, chapter 2).

Unfortunately, given the inflexibility of human logic, unless it is employed together with supple poetic understanding, the experience of a revelation of religious truth, such as apocalyptic disclosure envisages, tends inevitably to express itself in absolute terms, even though these terms are not themselves the Absolute and, in fact, are infinitely separated from what they attempt to express and from what has been authentically experienced in the great moments of revelation on which religions are founded and revivified or reformed. There is an enormous, ironic incongruity here, one to which whatever other merits they may have – aggressive, assertive forms of religion are blind. Paradoxically, the most absolute experience and revelation of truth can be most accurately expressed only by the most indirect and tentative, that is, interpretively open, forms of expression. Indeed every revelation in apocalyptic representations is, of course, also at the same time necessarily a covering over of the unnameable that has been revealed. For apocalypse, by definition beyond the horizon of this world, is what cannot properly be disclosed within the world, and consequently, every pretended or attempted disclosure of it is metaphor, every revealing a re-veiling representing it as something it is not. The very nature of metaphor is to acknowledge the concealment of what it reveals, presenting it only under the aspect or mask of something else.

Such theoretical acceptance of the paradoxes of representation of the absolute may seem to make important practical questions unanswerable. How, for instance, can we defend ourselves against apocalyptic sorts of claims, claims to the revelation of a superior truth that are to us morally repugnant and potentially deleterious, sometimes on a monstrous scale? By the law of non-contradiction, having just rejected the assuming of postures of superiority vis-à-vis apocalyptic thinking and preaching, it would seem reasonable and fair then not to tolerate this sort of attitude from those

apocalyptic groups who are themselves protected by its being repudiated. Yet precisely this logical implication does not necessarily follow, given the asymmetries of the relation between self and other. There is no objective truth here of who has what right but only the certainty that it is other than all that we can grasp and define, and hence, the unconditional obligation to the other.[4] Whenever we make recourse to unconditional truths or rights that we ourselves define, we are abstracting from the concrete human context out of which all such definitions (though not necessarily the truths and rights themselves) necessarily arise.

Where fundamentalism may be blind on one side, it may have much to teach me on another side, where I am blind: all my dialectical meditations may stand to be critiqued by its strength of conviction and simplicity of heart. Even with conceptual errors – and is not all conceptualising errant? – in some ways fundamentalists may be closer than the most subtly negative theologians to accepting concretely into their lives the awkward, incommensurable, apocalyptic otherness of divinity. Our differences can always help us learn from one another: for we may be weak where another is strong, encumbered where they are clairvoyant. I submit, therefore, that even radical expressions ought never to be forcibly suppressed. And surely many apparent differences would dissolve of their own accord, if there were no more need to assert and defend them by fighting against others who appear to be intolerant of them and of us. Of course, there is a fine line where 'expression' crosses over into an act of incitement to violence, and this cannot be accepted, but then it is no longer a matter of judging and condemning others' reasons but of restraining violent acts by appropriate sanctions.

We will have less need to attack – and in the end will not need to attack at all – the apocalyptic claims of others if we learn to be secure in our own openness to truth[5] – which means not possessing it – by virtue of the

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[4] This infinite, unconditional obligation to the other has been pursued in ethical terms influentially by Emmanuel Levinas, for example, in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991). I would, however, insist equally on an ethically heuristic and healthy self in the image of, and dependent on, a self-sustaining God, beyond all deconstruction of such metaphysical concepts, as a necessary basis even for settling or sharing oneself with others.

[5] Compare Gandhi's satyagraha, that is, "firmness in adhering to truth." See particularly Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj; or, Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946), chapter xvi.

creatures. And learning to live with this fact is virtually as necessary to us as life itself. It is precisely in its teaching of how to live this condition of radical risk and contingency, of being potentially a pawn and plaything for powers beyond our control, powers sometimes apparently reckless and unscrupulous and even totally ruthless, that the apocalyptic tradition broadly considered (and understood from the admittedly oblique angle that I am advocating here) has an indispensable contribution to make.

'Apocalyptic' in the proper sense is a biblical or apocryphal literary genre that develops, especially in the inter-testamental period, but it must also be understood more broadly as a mode of vision that views life as destined to convert into something utterly strange and other: it envisions life as radically relational and as dependent ultimately on an absolute Other. This is the vision of the Bible and of the plethora of disparate religious ways of life and outlooks, even entire cultures, that it has spawned." It raises the issue of the ultimate groundlessness of all our own judgments through opening up beneath them the abyss of a judgment by which they are all to be judged, their partial perspective to be measured against a whole vision and absolute standard. We need to leave open a place for the possibility of such an absolute standard and last judgment in order to avoid assuming the role of God and the prerogatives of revelation ourselves, thereby setting dialogue into a frame not itself open to dialogue and negotiation.

But is there any judgment beyond our human judgments? This question is a stumbling block for discussions of apocalypse or other religious themes in an academic context. If there is such judgment, none of us who are taking part in the discussion is going to be able to represent it, certainly not in any definitive or even remotely adequate way. Yet only its indefinable possibility and potential presence can keep us truly open to dialogue. Otherwise, we will decide ourselves what the final truth is, convincing ourselves of one belief or another because it is of the kind that tends to engender consensus from types of individuals such as ourselves with the kind of interest in and indifference to the subject at hand that

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[6] One particularly luminous representative of the type of vision in question is Franz Rosenzweig, Der Stern der Erlösung (Frankfurt A.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988; originally 1921, translated by William W. Hallo as *The Star of Redemption* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985].

"negative capability" of being able to remain in suspense, of not needing to decide definitely one way or the other, on the truth claims of others concerning ultimate truth. Only so will we be able to remain genuinely open to truth's occurrence in all forms. Thus, we will be in a position to recognise what in vital ways succeeds in ringing true for us, even while allowing others to judge for themselves what is true for them and accepting the opportunity to learn from them something about an aspect of what is true or believable to which we perhaps have been less open than they.

A crucial step to recognising and accepting a plurality of belief systems or theologies is recognising one's own beliefs as not superior to others, as perhaps sharing in the inherent blindness of belief that is most evident in full-blown theological systems. We need to accept other parties' theologies as valid for them, and as in any case, the other human being's prerogative, so as to be able to discuss pragmatically our common interests and conflicts of interest. It may be that theologies would to a large extent collapse and deflate, or at least make themselves invisible, if this degree of reciprocal tolerance were reached. In any event, this need for learning how to allow and seek out mutual understanding across differences in fundamental beliefs can be heard screaming aloud in events, including catastrophic conflicts, all over the world every day.

It must be granted that apocalyptic discourse seems to want to put a stop to the free play of unending discourse by closural declarations of the end. But, in reality, in the complex dynamics of a discourse in which people's hopes and anxieties live and express themselves, the situation is much more nearly just the reverse, and apocalyptic discourse too belongs, even most essentially, to the dialogue. For it is above all in apocalyptic discourse that we are asked to confront our condition of being at the mercy of others. And learning to accept and live with this predicament is presently the greatest challenge for humanity in its attempt to get along on this planet.

The unwillingness to be at the mercy of others is fully understandable, one would even want to say 'justified', were it not that any institution of right that begins from oneself and one's own needs and interests is presumptuous and reflects the chronically self-centred, anthropocentric posture of our own culture. Yet being at the mercy of others is also totally unavoidable: it belongs to our very condition as social and even as biological

we share.[7] Even if it only takes the form of deciding what the framework for legitimate discussion is, this means setting the ultimate law ourselves rather than being open to the ordering (or disordering) event beyond all laws that we can conceive and institute.

The meaning of all we do and say is ultimately very different from all that we mean and intend. We are not in control of the effects and ends of our own statements and activities. It all depends far too much on others. Thus, at least in principle, is what the apocalyptic preacher, perhaps unwittingly, teaches. Apocalypse—the kind that we cannot avoid, no matter how much we try; but that also has the potential to save rather than only to destroy – is what is unveiled by what actually happens and by what this reveals beyond all the meanings that we wish to assign it: it is the judgment that judges our judgments. Religious search, and the apocalyptic expression that it takes on in different forms in various phases of the development of a religion such as that of the *Bible*, is a way of cultivating an openness and readiness to respond, in the service of others, to this other, to this 'last' judgment, negatively defined as beyond every judgment of our own.

Apocalypse *prima facie* refuses and makes an end of dialogue: it thunders down invincibly from above. But for this very reason the greatest test of our dialogical capacity is whether we can dialogue with the corresponding attitude or must resort to exclusionary maneuvers and force. What is called for here, is a capacity on the part of dialogue not to defend itself but to let itself happen in interaction with what apparently is intolerant of dialogue. Letting this possibility be coming into contact with it, with the threat to dialogue itself, may seem to be courting disaster for dialogue. It is indeed a letting down of all defences. Can dialogue survive such a surrendering of itself in utter vulnerability to the enemy of dialogue? Or perhaps we should ask, can it rise up again, after this self-surrender, in new power for bringing together a scattered, defeated humanity to share

[7] Such a theory of intersubjective consensus as the last court of appeal is advanced by Richard Rorty, *"Solidarity or Objectivity,"* in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Although Rorty, self-identified as a modern, Western, secular intellectual, resists being treated as a 'relativist,' his thought has strong affinities with the relativism to "interpretive communities" advocated by Stanley Fish, for example, in "Interpreting the Variorum," Critical Inquiry 2/3 (1976).

in an open but commonly sought and unanimously beckoned Logos of mutual comprehension and communication? May this, after all, be the true and authentic 'end' of dialogue?

For what it is worth, my apocalyptic counsel is that we must attempt the openness to dialogue even in this absolute vulnerability and risk. The world is certainly not a safe place, and it will surely continue not to be such, short of something ... apocalyptic. Needed ever again, is something on the order of an apocalypse, not just a new attitude or a new anything that we can ourselves simply produce. Philosophy itself, thought through to its own end, can hardly resist concluding that "only a god can save us".[8] But can our attitude not make a difference, perhaps make possible the advent of apocalypse beyond all our powers, even those of our own imaginations?

I will wager an answer to this question only in the optative mood. May we bring a voice speaking up for mutual understanding onto the horizon of discourse in our times, a time marked by the terrifying sign of apocalyptic discourse. May we do this not by judging apocalyptic discourse but by accepting that our condition as humans is as much to be judged as to judge, and that all our relatively justified judgments are such to the extent that they offer themselves to be judged, rather than standing on their own ground as absolute. In other words, may our discussions remain open to apocalypse, open to what we cannot represent or prescribe but can nevertheless undergo in a process of transformation that can be shared with others – and which may be genuinely dialogue.

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[8] Martin Heidegger, in an interview in Der Spiegel, May 31, 1976, shortly before his death.

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Religion After Religion in Literary Modernism

Gauri Viswanathan

This chapter probes the complex role of occultism in loosening boundaries between closed social networks. I argue that in late 19th and early 20th century colonial culture, occultism offered the means for mobility between different personae and worldviews otherwise denied or at least circumscribed by the restrictive relations between coloniser and colonised. If the stratified class structure of British life offered little room for broad social interactions (as witnessed in the awkward Bridge Party in Forster's *A Passage to India*), occult practices like seances and spirit communication permitted colonial relations to be imagined outside a hierarchical framework, just as occult doctrines of the cyclical evolution of life forms from asexuality and hermaphroditism to sexual differentiation challenged normative conceptions of sexuality. Forster's novel is a useful reference point, in that it focused on the alienation of a small group of Englishmen from the racial exclusivism practised by the colonial bureaucracy. As teachers, missionaries, doctors, and other professionals, they could not but be involved with Indians at a level of intimacy forbidden by colonial logic. Such contact, necessitated by the nature of their work as service professionals, did not necessarily mean they were all anticolonial activists, but it did put them in positions where their day-to-day transactions with colonised Indians gave them a more complex perspective on racialised encounters, resulting in far deeper questioning of the structure and style of existing bureaucratic relationships. Aziz's sharing of the photograph of his dead wife to Fielding opens a field of interaction that would be impossible under the normal protocols of colonial relationships. "We can't build up India except on what we feel," says Aziz to Fielding, who in a quick and fleeting moment is given access to a dead woman's presence materialised in a photograph ["he wished that he too could be carried away on waves of emotion"](117).

The distance of people like Fielding from the exclusivist practices of the colonial administration dovetailed with an interest in new ways of conceiving relations to various unseen powers, which constituted an