



## **Apocalypse and the breaking-open of Dialogue: A negatively theological perspective**

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### **I**

In this current millennial transition, frequently there are dialogues that put into play our basic beliefs about the world, about what it is all for, if anything, and where it is going, if anywhere. Particularly striking about such dialogue is the extent to which apocalyptic thinking puts to the test our ability and willingness to listen to and understand each other. The possibility of mutual understanding and acceptance, which includes also the responsibilities to respond and criticize, emerges as the most difficult and important thing needing to be learned in our not just academic world for the future: in fact, that there be a future at all may depend to a sobering degree upon it. For in the world at large we still do not know how to manage the clashes between our divergent beliefs so as to avoid war and terrorism against one another. I think it is no accident that the impasses to understanding inherent in any exchange among different individuals with diverse interests, ideals, and ideologies become starkly evident on precisely this topic, that of apocalypse, concerned with claims to the unveiling of an ultimate, absolute truth and a transcendent destiny or dimension of existence. Perhaps all fundamental impasses to understanding – beyond those arising from inevitable conflicts of interest, which can in principle be reasonably negotiated and fairly resolved – devolve, at least indirectly, from beliefs of this rationally intractable type.

There is a temptation, especially appealing to articulate, dialectically skillful academicians, perhaps particularly in the postmodern climate, where ‘deconstruction’ has become as much a common denominator as a radical challenge, to say that every party to the discussion must simply avoid assertions presuming to any final disclosure of truth, or, in other words, that we must all learn to avoid ‘apocalyptic’ discourse.<sup>1</sup> But the viability of precisely this solution seems to me to have been belied by discussions even in purely academic contexts such as an interdisciplinary seminar among humanities

scholars.<sup>2</sup> For this solution draws the boundaries of acceptable discourse in a tendentious and exclusionary way: it in effect makes a rational, pragmatic, relativistic approach normative for all. And to that extent, so far from overcoming the arbitrary and dogmatic method of absolutistic religious belief, it risks becoming just one further manifestation and application of it, the imposition of one's own apocalypse, however liberal, enlightened, and philosophical it may be, on others. Indeed any drawing of boundaries by us – that is, by certain of us, however the claim to representationality may itself be drawn – cannot but be tendentious and exclusionary. That is why we have no right to shut out the final judgment from above or beyond us – though, of course, also not to appropriate this judgment in order to use it, in the name of God or truth or the facts or the future, in our own biased way against others.

The problem here is that an 'anti-apocalyptic' position belongs to a system of oppositions with apocalypticist positions themselves and so can do no more than turn their violence in the opposite direction. The bracketing or banning of apocalyptic discourse, even when only by ostracizing it, does not solve the problem posed by this form of communication so difficult to accommodate alongside others in an open, neutral forum of debate. It shifts the imposition of an absolute from the level of the expressed, the propositions affirmed, to the unending, free, unjudged and unjudgeable status of the conversation itself: anything may be said, but nothing must be said that would call into question this activity of unrestricted discourse itself and mark its limits against something that could perhaps reduce it to vanity and, in effect, end it. This would be a threat to the dialogue's own unimpeachable power of self-validation. Higher powers, such as those revealed, at least purportedly, by apocalypse, must be levelled in the interest of this power of our own human *logos* that we feel ourselves to be in charge of or that is at any rate relatively within our control. Of course, the 'we' here depends on who is the most dialectically powerful, and it is established not without struggle and conflict.

Learning to really relativize one's own position and conviction – not to impose it on all as if it were a final truth 'apocalyptically' revealed – requires something else besides renouncing assertions of a certain too extreme and final type that offend the decorum of rational self-conscious and self-ironic reflection. It involves the frightening experience of actually being at the mercy of others. Ultimately, this is what is at stake in apocalyptic thinking and what is refused in the refusal of apocalyptic modes of expression. As long as we are unwilling to accept being at the mercy of others, of one another and potentially of an absolutely Other, we will be predestined by our own choice, with its logic and consequences, to arm and defend ourselves to the bitter end. In other words, this means war, even if the strategy used is no more (and no less) than that of marshaling arguments and mustering a common

consensus against a discourse that is evidently recalcitrant and threatening to our dialogue.

Admittedly, this unwillingness to be at the mercy of others is also exactly what is being expressed, in another way, by the prophets of hell fire and damnation who dilate prodigiously upon the awesome chastisements being prepared for others, those who do not heed the truth the prophet himself is revealing and preaching. But we are quicker to perceive this and to align ourselves against the other person, the 'prophet' who is telling us how it will all end, and whose presumption is all too patent to us, than to see to what an extent we ourselves – despite all intentions to the contrary – are in fundamentally the same position, grasping for an oracle or a formula to rationalize all others in a dispensation based on our own *logos*, where our values and virtues are the decisive ones on the basis of which all others ought to be judged.

Apocalypse, as the act of God that levels all human distinctions and justifications on the principle that no one is justified before God ("There is none righteous, no, not one" – Romans 3.10–18; cf. Psalm 13), stands in principle – though, admittedly, very often not in practice – for the denial of precisely this arrogation of being in the right to oneself, of the prerogative of having the final judgment over at least oneself and perhaps others too. It relativizes every form and instance of our relativistic *logos* – 'our' rules for discourse and dialogue. In the face of apocalypse, it is not even 'being right' in any human terms that decides what is right in the end, but something else entirely, something that cannot be judged definitively by any standard of our own. It is a disclosure that transcends our own comprehension but involves all who are living to the same absolute degree of deciding their life and death. Paradoxically, it is precisely apocalyptic discourse, by a logic or *illogic* of the *pharmakon*, that has the potential – and is indeed highly necessary – to inoculate us against an otherwise all too inescapable appropriation of a pseudo-apocalyptic pretension to possessing a truth with final validity ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Such a final truth could be one that even in accentuating its own infinite revisionability nevertheless refuses to be subject to any standard of an altogether other, higher sort than itself, an altogether new truth, that could undermine the very basis of its validity.

To live with this sense of not being God, of not having within one's own power the final judgment of the world, or of anything or anyone belonging to it, has proved itself throughout history, as well as to my mind in the course of current academic discussions of apocalypse, to be a necessary premise for genuine dialogue. This is what apocalyptic thinking should serve to teach and remind us. This may not be the lesson readily to be gathered from the phenomenon of apocalyptic preaching as it assaults us in the mass media.

but I propose it as the deeper meaning of the apocalyptic strain so pervasive throughout Western culture, an element that needs to be understood and appropriated (and so creatively transformed), if we are going to understand ourselves and accept our human condition as it is indeed disclosed to us by our history, as well as by our own contemporary experience of the conflicts engendered by a multiplicity of cultures. It is necessary above all to learn how to dialogue with discourses of apocalypse – in spite of, and in fact just because of, their own apparent refusal of dialogue – and first then will we achieve genuine dialogical capability ourselves, even though this means being drawn irrevocably beyond all powers and capacities that can be called ‘ours’.<sup>4</sup>

I emphasize that the merits of and motivations for apocalyptic vision and discourse must not be judged narrowly on the basis of television preaching and scare-tactic pamphlets that probably reveal more about the unreflective immediacy of these media than about the nature of apocalyptic thought and reflection as it has developed over many centuries, indeed more than two millenia, in confessional contexts and communities and their literary traditions. There is something extreme about the apocalyptic viewpoint, but precisely for that reason it cannot bear, without grievous distortion, to be too baldly exposed and positively handled in the various arenas of representation. We need to return behind the immediate and aggressive images to sources, in the first instance biblical and then literary – the quasi-religious tradition of prophetic poetry – in order to make out the drift of apocalyptic as a perennial moment and, I contend, indispensable impetus of the dialogue in which Western cultural tradition distinctively consists.

## II

Apocalypse, in biblical tradition, involves the end of the world, yet not simply an end but rather a finale, a consummation and – not to be forgotten – a fulfillment. Not just death and destruction but salvation and everlasting life belong essentially to the concept and imagination of apocalypse that originally grew out of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Isaiah 24–27, together with chapters 34–35, sometimes called the ‘great’ and ‘little’ apocalypses of Isaiah, as well as Ezekiel 38–39, mark transitions from prophetic visions and oracles – essentially interpretations of contemporary history and tradition animated by a call to turn back to God and by denunciations of the evil social powers that have led a people astray – into apocalyptic based specifically on revelations of the end-time at the furthest limits of, and even beyond, history. The ‘new heavens and a new earth’ evoked by the book of Isaiah (65.17; cf. 66. 22) become a keynote of St. John the Divine’s vision of apocalypse: “And

I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Revelation 21.1).

The essential matter of apocalypse is the revelation of the end of the world and the advent of eternity. This is tantamount to a glimpse of the divine vision, since the prophet assumes a supra-human viewpoint and in effect 'speaks for' God – 'prophetes' from *fateor* (confess, bear witness to, acknowledge, reveal) plus *pro* (for, on behalf of, instead of). Revelation, that is, *ἡ ἀποκάλυψις* in Greek, is literally an unveiling. 'Apocalypse', then, as a result of both Greek and Latin, classical and biblical, traditions means an unveiling of the end of human life and history from the point of view of God. The full disclosure of true values and their morally necessary final consequences is naturally represented in images of judgment and reward or punishment. Still within the Old Testament canon, though rather late, the book of Daniel (2nd century BC) most explicitly represents a Last Judgment with separation of the damned, condemned to everlasting contempt, from the good, who are destined to shine like the brightness of the firmament for ever and ever (12.2–3). Zechariah, chapters 9–14, and Joel are also prophetic works turning apocalyptic by climaxing in descriptions of a day of final reckoning, 'the day of the Lord'.

It is the intertestamental period that sees the rise of the so-called 'apocalypses', the apocryphal works dedicated integrally to theological visions of the end that, together with the canonical books just mentioned, belong properly to the apocalyptic genre. They flourish from 200 BC to 100 AD, an age in which Jewish prophecy as such was practically extinguished. During this period of domination of the Jews by foreign powers, Hellenistic and later Roman, a more despairing and dogmatic tone sets in, and the vision of history turns deterministic. IV Ezra (II Esdras) and the Apocalypse of Baruch, among the most notable of the apocalypses, are written in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Emperor Titus in 70 AD.<sup>5</sup> Filtered through this contemporary catastrophe, the 587 BC destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent deportation to Babylon is remuginated. Such works constitute apocalyptic literature in the strict sense, but they do not necessarily represent the high-water mark of apocalyptic as a vision and faith focused on a revelation of the end. It is often rather the spontaneous eruptions of the apocalyptic mode in the prophetic books, together with its applications in New Testament writings, that demonstrate the purport and religious significance of apocalyptic as a genre at its strongest. Indeed the intertestamental apocalyptic writers themselves are oftentimes ruefully self-conscious about having fallen away from their own originally prophetic inspiration.

The prophetic books invite to a change of heart; rather than implacably dealing out unconditional destruction, they are animated by appeals for repentance and conversion. Their chief concern is not simply foretelling

events in a mode of fully objectified representation, but rather shaping the future and, above all, seeking to reestablish and renew the relationship with God. Prophetic visions, with their appeals for repentance, adumbrate projects to be realized by action anchored in the present, rather than just giving previews of a fate to be passively awaited. The prophet himself is typically an integral part of, indeed a pivotal factor in, the drama he represents. The apocalypses, on the other hand, have a tendency to represent a series of objective and absolutely inevitable events as acts of a God who does not condescend to dialogue with human beings, while the apocalyptic seer himself has in many cases become just a passive spectator.

This sort of contrast between prophecy and apocalyptic oftentimes informs a generally negative judgment against apocalyptic. For example, Martin Buber writes: "Prophecy originates in the hour of the highest strength and fruitfulness of the Eastern spirit, the apocalyptic out of the decadence of its cultures and religions. But wherever a living historical dialogue of divine and human actions breaks through, there persists, visible or invisible, a bond with the prophecy of Israel. And wherever man shudders before the menace of his own work and longs to flee from the radically demanding historical hour, there he finds himself near to the apocalyptic vision of a process that cannot be arrested."<sup>6</sup> To these indictments is often added the charge that a jingoistic nationalism expressed in bitter vindictiveness against all gentiles, rather than anything more akin to the universally emancipatory vision of the later prophets, all too often governs the apocalyptic scenario.<sup>7</sup>

Paralleling the negative evaluations of their content, the style of the intertestamental apocalypses is frequently assessed as being highly conventional and artificial, and, at the same time, esoteric and obscure. Indeed they have abandoned the orality of the prophetic oracle announced in a public forum for what is clearly a scriptural and often predominantly hermetic mode. They are not infrequently taxed with being to a large extent compilations and even congeries and pastiches, gathering together indiscriminately materials from legend, allegorical exegesis, myth and popular preaching and forcing external interpretations upon them in disparate, incongruous styles. Yet the charge of their lacking any unifying aesthetic sense perhaps expresses more the narrowness and prejudices of many modern readers. The apocalypses can certainly be engaging reading. Nevertheless, the poetic power of the prophets is often severely attenuated if not outright supplanted by a more factual, objectifying mode. To this extent, the apocalypses seem to entirely miss the sense of the mystery of dialogue with the absolutely Other. And their oftentimes crudely detailed and direct representation of the future can tend to discredit their attempt to express a truth in reality transcending human conception and representation. Hence scholars speak of a loss in apocalyptic

of the productive, challenging tension between vision of a world to come and engagement with present realities that is the characteristic strength of Old Testament prophecy: "Prophecy became transformed into apocalyptic when the tension between vision and reality was relaxed and then broken, and the attempt to relate the cosmic vision to the realities of contemporary life was abandoned."<sup>8</sup>

The apocalyptic discourses of the synoptic gospels (Mark 13.1–31; Matthew 24.1–44; Luke 21.5–36) breathe generally a different atmosphere from that of the intertestamental, apocryphal apocalypses. The same can be said for the explicitly apocalyptic passages in I Thesalonians 4.13–18 and I Corinthians 15. In the gospel passages, Jesus describes the end of the world and the Last Judgment within the wider context of his entire message and ministry, while the epistolary descriptions are, in the first instance, Christological: they envisage a scenario of the end congruent with an unlimited relationship with Jesus. But it is especially in the Apocalypse of John, at the end of and closing the biblical canon, that the genre again reaches a peak of imaginative creativity and intensity worthy of its prophetic sources and forebears. It is not, as the apocalypses so often are, a collection of supposedly infallible predictions of events up to the end of history. It is rather, as its *incipit* states, "The revelation of Jesus Christ". All possible knowledge of the destiny God has prepared for the world is absorbed into the mystery of the person of Christ. It is this relational and moral knowledge, symbolically expressed, and not purported facts about the future, that lies at the core of the meaning of the Book of Revelation.<sup>9</sup>

It is, then, not only, nor even primarily, in representations of the end, the Last Judgment, Armageddon, etc., that the essential outlook of apocalypse is expressed. We must cast our nets far beyond the thematic material of apocalypse. For apocalypse is rather a moment pervading the whole of history as represented in the Bible and in particular, with a new urgency, in the New Testament's eschatological vision of history. In fact, Jesus is presented in the gospels as the eschatological prophet announcing the eruption of a new and definitive time of salvation. His essential message is, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4.17). Even in his human life on earth he seems to have been identified with the 'Son of man', the eschatological figure who comes at the end of time, according to the book of Daniel (7.13–14). That Jesus is the one who was and is to come belongs to his very identity as Messiah, the anointed one, *χριστός* (Mark 2.17; Luke 12.49; Matthew 15.24). His baptism and transfiguration are presented by the evangelists as further confirmation of his being sent on an eschatological mission (Luke 4.16–30; Mark 6.4; Matthew 13.57; Luke 4.24).

Indeed, in the Christian understanding of history, the end-time has already been reached and inaugurated by Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead that figures at the center of the events expected finally in the apocalypse (I Corinthians 15). The Resurrection sets into motion a movement that is to be consummated with the Second Coming. But what is revealed openly by the resurrection of Christ is in fact realized in every step of Jesus of Nazareth's earthly life as eschatological figure living the perfection of the end immanently in the midst of history. This anticipatory mode of living and acting then becomes what every Christian is called upon to realize through following Jesus. The Church, consequently, by following in Christ's footsteps, exists as an eschatological community. It is active and working in the world, yet it lives already the life to come as given from God through the Holy Spirit. By divine grace it is possible here and now to realize, at least in a preliminary, proleptic way, the life to which human beings are called in eternity. The implications of this existence projected upon the end of history are revolutionary. No longer need or ought one to live in a way conforming to this world, but rather in accordance with the new and fuller life to come.

Apocalypse, then, as revelation of the end of history, is achieved already in embryo, and in fact in its most crucial and revealing form, in the Christ event. This event is an apocalypse that has already occurred, and it becomes the basis for the Christian's life in history. To this extent, apocalypse does not simply stand outside of history, awaited beyond its furthest limit, at its end. The Christ event as apocalyptic model indicates that apocalypse comes about as the in-breaking into history of a radically other order of existence, the event of the divine, and therewith the revelation of the final truth and judgment that otherwise eludes humankind in history, throughout which we are confined within a succession of temporally fragmentary moments. This event can be conceived of as imminent in every moment and as immanent to human experience as such so far as it is turned towards its own ultimate possibilities. Precisely this conception is clearly intimated in the Bible and pervades particularly the New Testament, being expressed explicitly, for example, in such statements as, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, *and now is*, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (John 5.25), even to the point of the declaration that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.21).

Two views of the articulation between history and apocalypse, time and the end of time, may be distinguished within this generically Christian framework and be identified broadly as Protestant and Catholic (though complicated reversals and crossings-over come about in theological practice). In the one view apocalypse entails the annihilation of history and in the other



its fulfillment. Indeed in the Latin 'finis' and the Greek τὸ ἔσχατον – to think in terms of just these two sacred languages – both senses of 'end', that is, as 'finish' and as 'fulfillment', are simultaneously present. In one view the emphasis falls on how history and 'this present evil world' are going to be swept away by the advent of God, on the day of his coming: apocalypse reduces all that is human to nought and only the saving grace of God, with no merit of anyone else, will work to salvage some remnant from the destruction. The other view emphasizes the redemption of history already underway, even before the final, inevitable catastrophe, by virtue of the cooperation of the Church as eschatological community. It envisages a progressive realization of apocalypse as already decisively inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection.

Whichever view is taken, the point of apocalypse is to read history as a whole, to understand its meaning in the light of its final end. To this extent, apocalypse aims at or intends a higher degree of truth than is, and even can be, reached from a point of view within history. And yet, as modern theologies like Bultmann's particularly have emphasized, apocalyptic springs essentially out of history in the making. It is engaged with the history of its time and expresses a total vision of universal history, but always from a particular angle and on the basis of its interpretation of the times rooted in its own historically specific experience. Hence the ineluctable ambiguity of this 'final' vision of the end of history that is, however, still leveraged from within history.

Apocalyptic turns essentially on the application to – and from within – present historical reality of a revelation of the end. It is to this extent a hermeneutic phenomenon, an irreducibly contemporary interpretation of history in the light of a theological revelation specifically of 'the end', which supposedly means total revelation. This is a revelation of what remains always veiled from any perspective within the world and for so long as the world endures. This disclosure of truth is an event in history and yet also beyond history, closing it and giving it its final, 'true' sense. So far as it can be understood at all, apocalypse is, to this extent, an inextricably historical category; its essential content remains the interpretation of history and, moreover, as interpretation it is enmeshed in its own historical moment, even while straining to see beyond it, to see the final end revealed already within it.

Oftentimes apocalyptic seems to impose a procrustean plan of a transcendent God on all history. This is indeed a kind of representation it frequently offers. But in application apocalypse can and should work for the opening rather than the closure of the adventure and engagements of history. Its envisioning of the end ideally is deployed in the service of clearing away the actual impasses of the present, breaking out of the patterns of conflict and oppression in which history becomes entrapped, even when only by repre-

human history. It takes for granted a still far too sanguine anthropology. The deep pessimism about 'man' that is expressed so poignantly in apocalyptic in the broad sense that involves, for example, the religious view of a humanity needing to be redeemed from itself, forms the necessary basis for the hope of transcending the present state of things. This is a truly revolutionary hope, and it does not have to wait idly for its time to come, but rather can and must reach into the future and bring it closer by beginning to realize this future in the present.

Apocalypse stands for the contradiction of all that is human and every worldly order (Moltmann's "Widerspruch zur gegebenen Wirklichkeit") by the advent of a higher power and authority. This 'other' order is unspeakable within the present world order. It is what cannot be represented. But it operates as a limit to all that can be represented and as a boundary of discourse in general. Recognition of this boundary can prove highly necessary to all that is represented in language and to communication among different cultures or even just different individuals with their different mind-sets and the different world orders that they envision. As such, apocalyptic thinking is a serious and indispensable exercise in imagining possible worlds and even the possibility of no 'world' at all as we now know or represent it.

Indeed apocalyptic visions are a critical instance of representation precisely because they envisage the limits of every possibility of representing a world. Their expression of the consciousness of human and worldly limits includes, at least implicitly, a reminder of the limits of representation itself. By imagining the in-breaking of the absolutely Other, apocalyptic represents even its own impossibility, that is, its incapacity to grasp and to adequately represent what it is intent upon. To this extent, apocalyptic makes use of techniques of allegory: it tends to flag itself as imagery bearing a symbolic meaning not identical with its immediate sense and calling for a further effort and further levels of interpretation. This occurs, for example, in the modulation from an apparently historical reference to 'the king of Babylon' to the archetypal 'Lucifer, son of the morning' in Isaiah 14, 4, 12. In this way, apocalyptic tends by its very nature towards literary self-consciousness, and indeed it is literary apocalypses in the end that may be the most revealing as to the ultimate drift and significance of the genre.<sup>13</sup>

### III

In this current millennial 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 totalizing interpretations pretending to finality. For such pretended vision beyond ordinary mortal limits is in any case unwarranted and, even worse, can become antisocial 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. And to set the limits and establish the law for representation is in and of itself to assume a position beyond all representation.<sup>14</sup> 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 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 preestablished 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 on what amounts in essence to a theological revelation: parameters of dialogue must simply be 'given', and thus be recognized as binding. It is paramount that this 'revelation' be able to be recognized as such by all parties in common, so as not to seem simply an imposition by some human beings on 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 centralized – for no position can 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.<sup>15</sup>

Acknowledging the way in which even secularizing, anti-theological discourse may itself be considered, in this sense, theological after all is proposed here for the value it may have in bringing out common ground for dialogue, where previously only mutual intolerance could be described. For we live in a world plagued by religious intolerance. Not infrequently, we hear the wish expressed that all religions would disappear from the face of 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 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 epitomize the self-enclosure and repression of others that seem to be lurking in religious dogmatisms and fundamentalisms. But 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 an attitude of superiority or irony, 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 any 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.

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, absolute for them. 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 neglected aspect of dialogue among different ways of thinking, where any way of thinking cannot help but absolutize its own constitutive criteria and unconscious presuppositions.

To exit from this deadlock of evidently conflictual absolutes, only something on the order apparently of a revelation will do, the emergence of an authority that is able to claim us all beyond any party’s ability to rationally account for or to codify it. 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 genuine dialogue that does not only reinforce the implicit consensus of the like-minded but delivers itself to the discovery of the unknown through genuinely open dialogue with the other person.

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, 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 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 are based on in practice.<sup>16</sup> This does not mean fully relinquishing what we may take to be inviolable moral certainties, but simply acknowledging the ambiguities of our own realization of such ideas and the possibility that other ways of life, even despite apparent ideological repug-

nance, may have much to reveal to us about the blindness and repression of our own ways.

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 fact – the whole truth and nothing but – with no respect at all for those others' personal 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.

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 all too often induces human beings to 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 Aeropagite accordingly deemed the evidently least apt elements of the physical universe – we may think of mud or demonic beasts – to be the best analogies for God because they create the least illusion of adequacy as representations (*De caelestis hierarchia*, chapter 2).

Unfortunately, given the inflexibility of human logic as opposed to 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 revived 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 revealment in apocalyptic representations is, of course, also at the same time necessarily a covering over of the unnamable that has been revealed. For apocalypse, by definition beyond the horizon of this world, is what cannot properly be disclosed, and consequently every 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 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 at all against apocalyptic sorts of claims, claims to the revelation of a superior truth that are to us morally repugnant and potentially deleterious in the extreme? 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 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 we can grasp and define, and hence the unconditional obligation to the other.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, 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 conceptualizing 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 are weak where another is strong, and thus they need never be suppressed – although many differences would of their own accord simply disappear if there were no more need to assert and defend them by fighting against others.

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 – which means not possessing it – by virtue of the ‘negative capability’ of being able to remain in suspense, of not needing to decide definitely one way or the other, on the truth of claims of others concerning ultimate truth, but remaining genuinely open to its occurrence in all forms.

Thus we will be in a position to recognize 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 recognizing and accepting a plurality of belief systems or theologies is recognizing one's own beliefs as not superior to others, as perhaps sharing in the 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 common interests and conflicts of interest. It may be that theologies would to a large extent collapse and deflate or else make themselves invisible if this degree of 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 an end 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 contradictory, 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-centered, 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 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 reckless and unscrupulous and even totally ruthless, that the apocalyptic tradition broadly considered has an indispensable contribution to make.

Apocalyptic in the proper sense is a biblical or apocryphal literary genre developing especially in the inter-testamental period, but it must be understood more broadly as a mode of vision of life as destined to convert into



something other, as radically relational and as dependent ultimately on an absolute Other. This is the vision of the Bible and of the plethora of different religious ways of life and outlooks, even entire cultures, that it has spawned.<sup>18</sup> 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 around the discussion table is going to be able to represent it, certainly not in any definitive or even remotely adequate way. Yet only its indefinable possibility and presence can keep us really 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 and disinterest in the subject at hand that we share. 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 end of our own statements and activities. It all depends far too much on others. This, at least in one way, is what the apocalyptic preacher 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 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 in 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, seems to be a courting of 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 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 nor 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'.<sup>19</sup> 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 valid judgments are so 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.

## Notes

1. Such a counsel, together with the impossibility of following it, is in play in Jacques Derrida's *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), trans. by J. Leavey, Jr. as 'Of an apocalyptic tone newly adopted in philosophy' in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. H. Coward and T. Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).
2. My own most concentrated experience of such dialogue was in a seminar on the Millennium over the course of the 1995–96 academic year at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the humanities at Vanderbilt University. For the stimulation of their contributions I thank each of the other participating fellows: Kathryn Babayan, Myriam J. A. Chancy, Margaret A. Doody, Janet Schrank Ericksen, Jay Geller, Michael P. Hodges,

Ellen Konowitz, Frank W. Weislo, and David Wood. I also thank Gian Balsamo for a critical reading of this paper.

3. The notion of the *pharmakon* as a poison that is at the same time its own cure is developed by Derrida in 'La pharmacie de Platon', in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).
4. See, for example, the dialogical approach to study of the phenomena of apocalyptic beliefs among fundamentalist sects in the interview-based work of Charles B. Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): "I do feel that there is generally something unsteady about fundamentalists and there are some worrisome aspects of the apocalyptic within fundamentalism. But my larger purpose in this book is to argue that we are all unsteady in an age of ultimate threats to existence; fundamentalism is simply one form of response, and a more interesting one than has been appreciated, to what can only be understood as a kind of collective illness in our contemporary culture" (p. 3).
5. This was first established by E. Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909), 3: 23. Cited in introduction to *Fourth Ezra*, ed. Michael Edward Stone (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 10.
6. Martin Buber, 'Prophecy, apocalyptic, and the historical hour', in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum M. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 183. Buber does, however, include a redeeming note on apocalyptic: "Yet in a mysterious manner, its goal, too, is the perfection, even the salvation of the world" (p. 181).
7. Cf. Antonino Romeo, 'Apocalittica, letteratura' in *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (Florence: Sansoni, 1948).
8. David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 113–114, based on research of Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). A related view of the apocalyptic genre as a degeneration of prophecy, as well as of wisdom literature, was propounded by Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des alten Testaments*, trans. as *Old Testament Theology* by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1965), vol. 2.
9. It is also possible to find the worst, most oppressive features of apocalyptic expressed in the Apocalypse of John, as did D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
10. Cf. Ernesto Grassi, 'Apocalisse e storia', *Apocalisse e insicurezza* (Milan-Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1954).
11. Karl Barthes, *Der Römerbrief* (1922; Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1954), p. 298.
12. "Das Eschatologische ist nicht etwas *am* Christentum, sondern es ist schlechterdings das Medium des christlichen Glaubens, der Ton, auf den in ihm alles gestimmt ist, die Farbe der Morgenröte eines erwarteten neuen Tages, in die hier alles getaucht ist." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie* (München: Charles Kaiser, 1964), p. 12. Translations throughout the paper, when no English version is cited, are my own.
13. For readings of poetry precisely along these lines, see my article 'Poetry between apocalypse and negative theology: Dante to Celan and Stevens' in *Literature and Belief*, special issue on 'metaphysical poetry', forthcoming.
14. 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).

15. Compare Jürgen Habermas, 'Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik' (1970), in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. H. G. Gadamer, trans. as 'The hermeneutic claim to universality', in *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Josef Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1980).
16. Instructive on this head is Kevin Dwyer, 'Dialogical anthropology', in *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
17. 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* (The Hague – Paris: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). I would, however, insist equally on an ethically heuristic and healthy self-centeredness, in the image of, and dependent on, a self-sustaining God, beyond all deconstruction of such metaphysical concepts, as a necessary basis even for sacrificing oneself or sharing oneself with others.
18. One particularly luminous representative of the type of vision in question is F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, in *Gesammelte Schriften II* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).
19. Martin Heidegger, in an interview in *Der Spiegel*, 31 May 1976, shortly before his death.

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