

Salutary Crises: When Hope and History Rhyme

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Prairie Group 2011

Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, Baby Suggs let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. “Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet. Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine.

Beloved Toni Morrison
Alfred A. Knopf 1987

The title of this paper is taken from Karl Barth who, in Church Dogmatics 4, writes that hope is not bound to optimism or pessimism, since even in desperate situations one “may still dare to hope for indications of the ultimate.” ”Hope takes place in the act of taking the next step. Hope is action and as such it is genuine hope.” And, “the Christian does not think or act as a private individual” but rather “hopes in and with the community, and in and for the world, that there will not be lacking to the world, even in all its needs and perplexities, provisional lights, concrete aids and deliverances and preservations and advancements, but also salutary crises.”¹

Barth, whose neo-orthodoxy paralleled and critiqued the social gospel movement of the early 20th century, is not often quoted in our circles. That said, our subject demands a clear-eyed reconsideration of the basic assumptions of religious liberalism. It makes good sense, therefore to enshrine the words of its most articulate opponent.

My purpose is neither to argue that the plethora of dire predictions, which now and always surround us, are true nor to ridicule the Rapture. My task is rather to trace a history of apocalyptic thinking from early Christianity; through the disintegration of the Roman Empire and on to the key role it has played in the development of theologies of liberation.

The literal meaning of the word apocalypse is “unveiling.” In early texts the word refers to the unveiling of a virgin bride immediately prior to first intercourse. The word initially referred to a literary form by which, early Christian theologians attempted to describe the end times and the emergence of God’s Kingdom. The best-known example of the form is the Book of Revelation. What began as a literary form has evolved into a widely held expression of the popular imagination. The Rapture, a 19th century apocalyptic construct, which understands the Book of Revelation to predict a series of events leading to the bodily resurrection of believers and Michael Rupert’s Collapse, a equally apocalyptic, closely reasoned tract based on signs of cultural, economic and environmental degradation can both be read as ornate projections based on individual fear of death. Religious liberals dismiss the Rapture as a dangerous, foolish fiction. But we cannot so easily dismiss the dire warnings and convincing signs relative to climate change, the nuclear threat and terrorism fueled by fundamentalism. The question becomes, will the crises we perceive be salutary? Will the threats inspire creativity and hope? Or will we be incapacitated by hopelessness?

Feminist theologian, Catherine Keller, in her magnificent book Apocalypse Now and Then, writes “...warnings of social, economic, ecological, or nuclear disaster

have become so numbingly normal that they do not have the desired effect on most of us, who retreat all the more frantically into private pursuits. Apocalyptic discourse, even or especially in the forms of various “anti-apocalypses,” has been coming at us, and we flee inside ourselves... To the extent that we become uncritically hooked on apocalypse—not merely the situation but the habit—we contribute to it. We wish for messianic solutions and end up doing nothing, for we get locked into a particularly either/or logic—if we can’t save the world, then to hell with it. Either salvation or damnation.”²

Religious liberalism is predicated upon the assumption that, working together, people of good will, can build a better world. From the Renaissance, through the Enlightenment, with the rise of science ushering in the Industrial Age, human progress has seemed to be literally, Manifest Destiny. But Keller writes, “With multiple fundamentalisms blossoming globally in response to modernity’s betrayal of its promises, the late-modern confidence in the March of Progress seems almost as old-fashioned in its arrogance as the theisms it thought to supersede.”³

In Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew, David M. Olster, sheds light on a pivotal shift in Christian identity. In the 4th century of the Common Era, Christianity became the state religion of Imperial

Rome. From the 4th until the 7th century Christian theologians could argue the efficacy of Christian faith by pointing to Rome's military supremacy, they saw God's power at work in a seemingly endless string of Roman victories. God was obviously on their side. Olster writes: "Not only did Christ evolve into the patron of Roman victory, but the Christian community of martyrs itself evolved. The marriage of Roman and Christian universalism merged "every race into one unity and concord," to create the Christian Roman race whose divine patron was Christ, god of battles." ⁴ But by the 7th century the old Roman Empire has devolved, shrinking in response to inner-rot and aggression by Arabs from the south and Germans from the North. Military victory could no longer serve as an indication of God's favor. Christianity needed a new theology.

In 638 Jerusalem fell out of Roman Christian control for the second time in a generation. This time the Patriarch Sophronius who had witnessed the previous Persian victory surrendered the city on terms avoiding a siege and sack. "The man who surrendered Jerusalem did not offer hope in an imperial restoration that he did not have. Instead, he offered hope by disassociating the empire from the Christian community and creating a new Christian identity that was Roman no longer." ⁵

Sophronius is writing to a Christian community, which will have to learn to live in a heterogeneous world. The monocultural universalizing of the Roman Christian period is coming to an end. The so-called “Dark Ages” are beginning. He works to replace imperial military victory with the mystical union of the experience of the Eucharist. Union with Christ is the ultimate victory. Thus the church is the sole necessary institution responding to the reality that imperial institutions on which they had been able to rely for centuries were crumbling around them.

Anti-Semitism had been woven into Christian life from early on but the disintegration of the Roman Empire left now disenfranchised Christians searching for the cause of their diminishment. The seemingly inherent, almost familial tendency to see the Jews as the embodiment of all that sought to undermine the faith took hold in what Olster calls “the literary construction of the Jew.” He writes: “I suggest that Byzantine authors constructed an image of the Jew to meet contemporary social needs, and that these needs were not inspired by Jewish-Christian theological debate or social relations. The “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” or Nazi images of the Jews are not mere exaggerations of Jews. The Jew was a rhetorical tool to express gentile social and political obsessions, and we must ask how such fictions fit into the crises that produced these images.”⁶

Prejudice, then as now, was based not on actual experience, but on social realities coupled with the psychological dynamic of repression and projection, the tendency to see those aspects of ourselves with which we are least comfortable writ large in others. Shakespeare whose, Shylock in Merchant of Venice has remained a definitive caricature of a Jew for over five centuries, could not possibly have known a Jew. It was Edward the 1st, who in 1290, after his return from the Crusades, expelled the Jews from England. Shakespeare's first folio, which included Merchant of Venice, was published in 1600. Jews were not allowed to return to England until 1656.

Though anti-Semitism in forms both literary and literal has played its part in American history, here at home the primary literary and literal construction based on the psychological dynamic of repression and projection has been racism.

At the close of Roman Defeat, Olster asserts that the dynamics of 7th century Europe are much like the dynamic of today. Consider right wing claims about the religion of the Founders as though the triumph of the American Revolution was a sure sign of God's favor in response to Christian hegemony. Or the romantic appraisal of Jefferson's thought among those on the left despite his deft maneuver to insert the 3/5th rule into the Constitution. Such revisionist fantasies reflect the

same ways of thought by which 7th century Christians were consoled, reassured and misguided. “Acutely aware of the disaster around them, they sought refuge in the glories of their past and the hope of their return.”⁷

So far I’ve focused on the eschatological thinking of those who are or once were powerful. Their hope is for the continuation or else the restoration of God’s favor. Now I want to turn to the ways in which apocalyptic thought has helped to inform the liberation movements of today.

The Book of Revelation, the final book of the Biblical canon and also the last to be included, is unique among canonical scripture. Biblical scholar David Blumenthal writes “The text is a fabric, woven (Latin *texere/textus*) from many threads. The text-fabric is never finished. It is a cloth with loose ends; a tissue which varies in transparency, color and tex-ture. Hence, all texts are plurisignificative; they mean more than one thing.”⁸ The Book of Revelation has been used to justify the Rapture. It has been read as a detailed prediction of the literal apocalypse, the end of the world not only as we know but the actual end of it all. But it has also been read as an encoded map that leads oppressed people to the grace they can imagine. Like coded quilts that hung on the porch-rails of stops along the Underground

Railroad, the Book of Revelation also tells the story of a liberating journey, a journey to the Promised Land.

South African liberation theologian, Allen Boesak, points out in his book Comfort and Protest, that Patmos was a Roman prison island on which, John, the author of the Book of Revelation was imprisoned for his Christian faith. The prophet was a prisoner and so he speaks with particular power to those who yearn for freedom.

Boesak writes: “Those who do not know this suffering through oppression, who do not struggle together with God’s people for the sake of the gospel, and who do not feel in their own bodies the meaning of oppression and the meaning and the joy of fighting against it shall have grave difficulty understanding this letter from Patmos...It is the struggling and suffering and hoping together with God’s oppressed people that open new perspectives for the proclamation of the Word of God as found in the Apocalypse.”⁹

Pablo Richard, a Latin American liberation theologian writes in Apocalypse: a People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation, “Revelation arises in a time of persecution—and particularly amid situations of chaos, exclusion and ongoing oppression. In such situations, Revelation allows the Christian community to

rebuild its hope and its awareness. Revelations transmits a spirituality of resistance and offers guidance for organizing an alternative world.”¹⁰

Consider apocalyptic thinking as the methodology of the prophethood of all believers who together envision an alternative world, not the end of the world, not a literal firestorm but an unveiling, a new way of seeing that is so powerful, so vivid, that it enlists those who experience it in bringing it about, in living into a new heaven and a new earth. It is not so much a destination as it is a new way of being. Keller writes: ...”To stand in some particular fragility of place and time, with one’s fragments of community and materialities of gender, and to love life; that is perhaps the only real basis of action against the end of the world...To theorize a counter-apocalyptic theology of relations is simply one among many possible strategies for stabilizing the unsentimental conditions of a life lived in the mutuality difference affords, a way of conceiving a sustainable, just, and loving future by living it already. There is no way there but here and now.”¹¹

The theological challenge is not to undergird the creation of a new, more powerful, more centralized political movement. Our challenge, instead, is to move beyond both disdain and despair by learning that “the only grace we can have is the grace we can imagine.” We need to find new ways to be together. We need to move

beyond our messianic expectations, to stop looking for singular prophets and to learn instead to become prophetic communities. The new way begins with confessing the fact that we, and by we I mean, religious liberals, have little if any idea how best to move forward. The old politics, the politics of left and right, of win and lose, of the hope that change comes in response to the impact of a progressive centralized authority is spiritually bankrupt. I strongly suggest we set aside our collective pride and invent or evolve ritual opportunities by which we might learn to confess both our complicity and our ignorance. Confession is not only good for the soul it also makes room in our hearts and in our lives for establishing respectful, creative relationships even and especially across lines of presumed difference.

Writing in partnership, bell hooks and Cornell West tell us that: “It is important to note the degree to which Black people in particular and progressive people in general, are alienated and estranged from the communities that would sustain and support us. We are often homeless. Our struggles against a sense of nothingness and attempts to reduce us to nothing are ongoing...that sense of home can only be found in our construction of those communities of resistance bell talks about and the solidarity we can experience within them. Renewal comes through participating in community. In community one can feel that we are moving

forward and that struggle can be sustained. As we go forward as Black progressives (and the following holds for other groups as well) we must remember that community is not about homogeneity.”¹²

John Cobb, a process theologian whose work is informed both by Whitehead and by Rauschenbusch, after many years of progressive social activism was asked to offer a reflection on the “cutting edges” in his thinking. The title is interesting in itself. Though the word eschatology is most often understood to refer to the study of the end times, a more literal meaning has to do with coming to the edge or to the turning point. Cobb recalls that as awareness of the crises deepened in the seventies there were also hopeful signs. “From time to time,” he writes” we were warned it was too late, that we should face the fact we were headed into catastrophes. My response was that despair was as harmful as complacency...It is on this point that my stance has recently changed. I have joined those who say we should face the fact that we are heading into catastrophe.”¹³

Bill McKibben in, Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet (Henry Holt & Co. 2010), provides powerful evidence that we can no longer, as Cobb’s also believes, afford the luxury of optimism. Cobb writes: “I have often emphasized the difference between optimism and the theological virtue of hope. We must not

abandon hope. But if we can no longer hope to avoid catastrophe, hope must be redirected. Perhaps we can hope that in the ruins of our present global civilization new societies will emerge that are sustainable.” He goes on to claim that progressive congregations are likely to be useful partners as “bearers of hope for the larger community.”¹⁴

In the fourth chapter of Apocalypse Now and Then entitled, “De/Colon/izing/Spaces” Catherine Keller offers a story. “In a Hopi creation story, Spider Grandmother spirals down (as is her want) from outer space to the still sterile earth ball, and creates two handsome young men by taking two handfuls of dirt and spitting into them. The three meditate together. Then one man goes to each pole: from the crystalline north, Poquanghoya works the magic of form, creating the patterns of life; from the south, Palonghoya, in a trance, picks up the heartbeat of Tiowa, the Great Spirit, and begins to drum out the same rhythm. Thus a vibratory field is generated between the two poles and finally rushes up from a crystal at the center of the earth. As energy breaks through the earth’s surface, the planet bursts into life. But at some points, due to Poquanghoya’s patterns, the power became more concentrated. These are the “spots on the fawn,” luminous places of healing energy. They are, according to Hopi elders, the sacred places—places sometimes fabulously beautiful, sometimes undistinguished but by marks of

prior pilgrimages. Without these places and ceremonial access to them, the world would fall apart.”¹⁵

I want our congregations to be “spots on the fawn,” to be “luminous places of healing energy.” But I fear that far more often we have been guardians and beneficiaries of the status quo. That said, I do have some hesitant confidence that living where we live, in what Parker Palmer calls “the tragic gap” between our aspirations and our social realities, we may we may yet laugh and dance and cry our way along until utterly depleted we reach the edge of all we know and somehow find the strength “to take heart, and to cross over.”¹⁵

Notes:

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/3 (second half)*, pp. 938-939.
2. Catherine Keller, *Apolcalypse Now and Then*, (Fortress Press 2005) pp.14
3. Ibid, pp 6
4. David M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, (University of Pennsylvania Press 1994) Chapter 2, pp.32
5. Ibid, Chapter 5, pp.99

6. Ibid, Chapter 1, pp.19
7. Ibid, Conclusion, pp.180
8. David Blumenthal, Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) pp.60
9. Allen Boesak, Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective, (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1987) pp.38
10. Pablo Richard, Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation, (Maryknoll, N.Y.; Orbis 1995), pp3.
11. Catherine Keller, Apocalypse Now and Then, (Fortress Press 2005) Chapter 1, pp.30
12. Ibid, Chapter 5, pp.217
13. John Cobb, "Cutting Edges in My Thinking and Activity."
14. Ibid
15. Archibald MacLeish, "Geography of This Time."

