SJT 63(1): 41–53 (2010)
doi:10.1017/S0036930609990214
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Why we need apocalyptic

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Abstract

The thesis of this article is that an appropriate apocalyptic is remarkably pertinent, perhaps essential, in addressing certain theological challenges of our time. What an appropriate understanding of apocalyptic might be will, I trust, emerge with discussion; clarifying the contemporary challenges will be the first concern. Once that is done, the argument will proceed through two steps or concepts: first, the issue of concreteness and second, a concept I will call 'contextualisation'. These steps establish the connection between the challenges and apocalyptic. I conclude by sketching some implications. Throughout, the article is guided by an ongoing conversation with Karl Barth, especially II/1 of the *Church Dogmatics*.

Issues: experience and history

To assure a certain impartiality in the choice of issues, I begin with Paul Molnar's wide-ranging study *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*. Molnar's probing analysis of recent theology concludes by summarising four specific tendencies in recent theology that the author judges deleterious.[1]

At the head of the list stands 'a thread that runs through this book', namely an inclination among theologians to elevate experience above 'the Word of God revealed'.[2] The author readily affirms the importance of experience, but holds that 'while the doctrine of the Trinity begins with an experience of God in the economy, it nonetheless directs us away from our experience and toward God's Word and Spirit as the source of theological knowledge'.[3] In effect, experience, yes – but experience needs to be transitive. Experience may feel spontaneous, as if it were its own source, but in Christian theology experience needs to be transitive to 'God's Word and Spirit' as the true and ultimate source.[4] In a related passage, Molnar speaks specifically of 'a trend

[1] Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 311ff.
[2] Ibid., p. 311.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Cf. Bonhoeffer, 'Whether I do or not believe is something that no reflection on my religious acts can determine; it is equally impossible for me, in the process of believing, to focus on my faith (*Glaube*), so that I would have to believe in my faith.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609990214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to begin theology with experiences of *self-transcendence*'.[5] This sharpens the issue. One would think that an experience of self-transcendence is nothing if not transitive; but somehow in the modern context an 'experience of self-transcendence' is read as an experience of the self, specifically experience of the self in the act of 'transcending'. The weighted focus is on the self; the perspective is one of immanence.

How does this happen? An explanation is implicit in Molnar's second point of criticism. He discerns and indicts a contemporary trend 'toward making God, in some sense, dependent upon and indistinguishable from history'.[6] In modernity, history is commonly construed as an ongoing process of growth, understood as growth of the individual and/or growth of some larger reality. When this process is accorded theological significance, the effect is to postulate what one might call a realm of immanent self-transcendence.

The absolute incarnate: modernity and Hegel

Imagine a logic that runs somewhat as follows. God is infinite, we are finite. The infinite is limitless, including all things. And yet, on reflection, there is perhaps one thing the infinite does not include, namely the experience of being finite. A timeless Eternity excludes the concrete experience of time; it rebuffs the anguish of mortality. From the perspective of romantic existentialism, there is that in humanity which divinity cannot include, something a lonely infinite might even envy. Thinking our way into this reasoning helps us appreciate that it is not just a facile empiricism that makes experience so central to modern theology.

So let us pursue this logic of immanence somewhat further.[7] From the postulate of a deficit in the Infinite per se, an imperative follows. The Absolute must cease to be the Absolute 'per se' and become something more, namely

Faith is never directed towards itself but always towards Christ, towards that which comes from the outside', Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 93–4. (In a note, Bonhoeffer remarks that even Luther sometimes loses sight of this point.) One hopes that the book's appearance as vol. 2 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, freshly trans. by Hans-Richard Reuter and with a valuable Introduction by Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., will bring it the readership it deserves. In a postmodern context that stakes much on the notion of 'event', Bonhoeffer's patient exploration of 'act' and 'being' can be compelling.

[5] Ibid., p. 312; emphasis added.

[6] Ibid., p. 311.

[7] It is important to note that this logic of immanence points in a direction opposite to that of Molnar's (and Barth's) theology of the immanent Trinity. The latter phrase precisely does *not* refer (in the first instance) to the Trinity as immanent within this world.

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the Absolute united with the finite and temporal; or more exactly, united with the experience of being finite and mortal. Thus one arrives at an implicit formula – finite plus infinite is greater than the infinite alone. Stated theologically, God plus creation is greater than God alone.[8] This sheds light on the tendency just noted to regard God as 'in some sense, dependent upon and indistinguishable from history'. It is no accident that God should be conceived as dependent on a history that supplies what God lacks; or that God should become 'indistinguishable from history', when it is in and through history that God comes to a fuller and, as we shall see in a moment, more concrete self-realisation.

In a third criticism, Molnar takes contemporary theology to task for failing to clearly distinguish 'the Holy Spirit from the human spirit'.[9] With this, it becomes almost imperative to recall Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (originally translated *The Phenomenology of Mind*[10]), where 'spirit' announces itself as the very capacity for self-transcendence. This capacity is for Hegel the key to understanding life in the largest sense, the impetus and desire driving all of reality. Properly understood – namely understood conjointly – the operations of God and world reveal that self-transcendence is in truth self-realisation. To claim one's capacity for self-transcendence is to recognise and realise one's own true self as Spirit. The text is Hegel, but one need only recall the common contemporary statement 'I am not religious but I am very spiritual' to sense that, for better and for worse, his legacy continues today.

Recalling Hegel highlights an issue that connects the issues Molnar articulates. Hegel's project is driven by a determination to expose and call to account various forms of what Whitehead subsequently called 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. One has a natural, unreflective impulse to rap one's knuckles on the table when calling for something 'concrete'. The table is hard and palpable, but 'the concrete' as a term of reflection refers to the nexus where all things come (more or less) together. The concrete is that

[8] Here I draw (contrastively) upon Robert Sokolowski's insightful presentation of the classic Christian tradition in *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 8–9, 31–40, a useful text for teaching.

[9] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 311–12. For present purposes we will not treat a final criticism which targets 'the lack of precision in Christology which leads to the idea that Jesus, in his humanity as such, is the revealer' (p. 311). Cf. the discussion of the relation between primary and secondary objectivity in the last paragraph of the present article.

[10] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1910, 1931). The Miller translation is generally preferred.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609990214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

locus where the greatest intensity of being resides. For Hegel, world history is the truly concrete, from which even such powerful notions as infinity and eternity are, in truth, abstractions. The world process is in fact the Life apart from which the divine itself can only languish, spectral and unloved.

In his unduly neglected *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Barth asks, 'Why did Hegel not become for the Protestant world something similar to what Thomas Aquinas was for Roman Catholicism?'[11] For –

> We must not be led astray by the fact that modern man [sic] became unfaithful to Hegel. He meant and means what Hegel meant, even if he did, ungratefully enough, blushing, ashamed, and with a smile of embarrassment, turn away from Hegel . . . Self-confidence, qualified as confidence in God, confidence in God given concrete form as self-confidence – where is the man who, with the blood of this modern man in his veins, would not listen to this and hear the finest and deepest echo of his own voice?[12]

And where is the contemporary Christian who has not heard this same message –'self-confidence, qualified as confidence in God, confidence in God given concrete form as self-confidence' – breathlessly presented as the very essence of the gospel? Accordingly, the task of confronting squarely the notion of God plus creation or God plus history as being greater than God alone, rather than quietly buying into it, as a number of theologians seem to have done, surely counts as a major issue. It provides the sought-for challenge against which to measure the capacities of apocalyptic. Let us see, then, how the challenge is engaged by Barth himself.

The issue of the concrete

Barth's discussion of 'The Eternity and Glory of God' appears rather climactically at the end of *CD* II/1.[13] The relevance of the text for our concerns is illumined by George Hunsinger's essay '*Mysterium Trinitatis*: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity'.[14] Like Molnar, Hunsinger begins with a diagnosis of recent theology. He speaks critically of what he calls a 'processional view of eternity'. This view, shared by thinkers as diverse as Ogden, Tracy,

[11] Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972), p. 384.

[12] Ibid., p. 397. Cf. 'I am necessary to God. That is the basis of Hegel's confidence in God . . .' (p. 420).

[13] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1: *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), pp. 608–77.

[14] In George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 186–209.

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Pannenberg, Moltmann and Jenson, holds that 'eternity . . . requires time for its own self-actualization' and accordingly that 'God needs the world, or at least some world'.[15] Hunsinger even notes the role of Hegel.[16] What Hunsinger calls 'the processional view' is clearly related to the quasi-Hegelian logic I have sketched.

How does one counter the intoxicating notion that (to put the matter baldly, but no more so than Barth or Kierkegaard) God needs us in order to become (fully) incarnate – in and through our collective self-affirmation?[17] Barth's strategy is to beat the proposal at its own game, attacking its underlying logic. But what, precisely, is the name or nature of the game? To this question Barth shows the answer more than he tells it. The resultant difficulty of interpretation highlights the importance of Hunsinger's essay, the thrust of which is to identify a crucial thesis that guides Barth's thinking, even though Barth himself fails to state it clearly and consistently.[18] Barth's dense discussion of God's eternity begins to open up once we understand that 'Barth presupposes, but does not always make sufficiently clear, that God's Trinitarian life *includes a form of beginning, middle, and end*.'[19] However difficult it is to conceive (the title of the essay is, after all, '*Mysterium Trinitatis*') Barth postulates a form of time *within* God's eternity. This intra-Trinitarian time is entirely distinct from, but represents God's 'readiness' for, finite time as we know it. Viewing this conceptual move in light of the Hegelian challenge of which Barth was clearly so keenly aware, we begin to see where Barth is heading. The effect of locating time in eternity is precisely to give the lie to the notion that God – the Christian Trinitarian God – lacks something which must be sought elsewhere. In effect, it is part of the good news that God *has* – already *has*, always has had – God's own time.

This helps one appreciate the importance Molnar attaches throughout his book to the immanent Trinity. In effect the immanent Trinity, properly understood, is Barth's counter-proposal regarding the actual locus of the

[15] Ibid., p. 188.

[16] Ibid.

[17] 'If the individual is dialectically turned inward in self-assertion in such a way that the ultimate foundation does not in itself become dialectical, since the underlying self is used to surmount and assert itself, then we have the *ethical interpretation*.' . . . '*The* ethical finds contradiction but within self-assertion', Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, vol. 1, *Text*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 572. To note their concurrence on this point does not, of course, diminish the very real differences between the two theologians.

[18] Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, pp. 197, 200.

[19] Ibid., p. 200, emphasis added.

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authentically concrete. And the struggle over what is to be deemed the authentically concrete is, I wish to suggest, the tacit name of the game. For the concrete is, as noted, the nexus where all things come together, the locus where the greatest intensity of being is found. Hegel's achievement was to fuse nature and history in an all-inclusive process that contains, or brings to concrete realisation, the divine. Per contra, Barth holds that even time – even the process within which such a thing might happen – finds its truest, aboriginal locus and intensity *within* the God of scripture.

Finally, a word in anticipation of our other key concept, contextualisation. For the heirs of Hegel, to miss out on the march of history is not to have lived. It is to remain a wraithlike abstraction, a shadow of the real. For Barth in contrast, time and history as we know it, the rise and fall of empires, is quite real enough; but its reality is nevertheless that of an abstraction. In a crucial passage, Barth's extended reflection on natural theology in *CD* II/1 takes a decisive turn. He writes that human beings 'in and for themselves as independent bearers of an independent predicate, have, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, become an abstraction which can be destined only to disappear'.[20] To secure the point, Barth fuses abstraction and apocalyptic by remarking matter of factly that our vaunted self-confidence, not to mention our self-existence, is 'destined only to disappear'. For this reason he stipulates that 'we have always to take in blind seriousness the basic Pauline perception of Colossians 3:3 which is that of all Scripture – that our life is . . . hid with Christ in God'.[21] The ineluctable implication is that our life, that which is closest to us, is hidden from us. So much for premising theology on what we think, hope or imagine Life to be.

Did Barth abandon apocalyptic?

Tucked away in 'The Eternity and Glory of God' is an autobiographical footnote some seven pages long.[22] In it Barth portrays liberal theology as having fixed upon the presence of God as experienced in the temporal present, aspiring, in Schleiermacher's phrase, '[t]o be eternal in a single moment'.[23] The theology of crisis countered this exclusionary presentism by affirming what Barth describes as 'a pure and absolute futurity of God and Jesus Christ as the limit and fulfillment of all time'.[24] As example Barth cites his early declaration that '[a] Christianity that is not wholly and utterly

[20] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 149.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., pp. 631–8. The editors draw attention to this passage in their preface, p. viii.
[23] Ibid., p. 632; quoting from the end of Schleiermacher's second Address.
[24] Ibid., p. 634.

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and irreducibly eschatology has absolutely nothing to do with Christ'.[25] Undoubtedly the theology of crisis was apocalyptic in content, as in tone.

Now it is commonly assumed that Barth subsequently foreswore apocalypticism. However, the nuanced self-critique Barth gives in CD II/1 does not support this notion. The self-critique is of two parts, the first of which is unsurprising. Barth concedes that the theology of crisis may have gone overboard by failing to affirm and find place for the element of truth in the liberalism it opposed. Stressing futurity, it slighted the truth of God's abiding presence, appropriately understood.

But for Barth, acknowledging imbalance does not count against apocalyptic per se. This becomes apparent the moment we turn to the second aspect of the self-critique. Here Barth draws upon scripture to orientate his reflections, and the passage he selects is none other than Paul's exhortation, 'Now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand' (Rom. 13:11–12). With this astringent summons as guide, Barth concludes not that his theology was too apocalyptic, but that in truth it was not apocalyptic enough! For asserting a 'pure and absolute futurity' effectively undercuts the actual lived specificity of time; and in so doing it undercuts Paul's uncompromising insistence upon an hour that is nearer now than it formerly was. The clarion call, 'the day is at hand', is stifled. The criterion by which pure futurity is judged lacking is that it fails to do what Barth implies apocalyptic must do: it does not press in upon us.[26]

In the course of his reflections Barth affirms that in the light of historical critical scholarship it has become 'quite impossible to overlook or deny the fact that Jesus and the apostles themselves had . . . a very different conception of time determined by a direct looking for the coming of a new age'.[27] Despite the attendant difficulties – and no doubt they are

[25] Ibid.

[26] In this connection Kierkegaard speculates that one reason the crowds turned upon Jesus was that 'he unremittingly kept the people in tension. . . . [I]t was precisely this which precipitated his downfall, the fact that it took such a short time, and yet the people at no time were permitted, as it were, to exhale. The whole thing is like one breath', *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 138. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes of the rich young man, 'But Jesus is not interested in the young man's problems; he is interested in the young man himself' (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 80. On the apocalyptic and discipleship in Mark, see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 101–4 and *passim*.

[27] Barth, CD II/1, p. 633.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609990214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

manifold – still, nevertheless, Barth's clear implication is to affirm an utterly radical occurrence that is nearer now than when we first believed.[28]

The need for apocalyptic

Every so often Barth's text turns upon the reader. We find ourselves named, confronted or, as my Baptist students might say, 'convicted'. Rebutting natural theology, he says of the long-sought answer to the human enigma, 'we do not press forward to it'. There is no processionalist advance. Entirely to the contrary, it is the answer that 'presses forward *to us*'.[29] Similarly, regarding the futurity or 'post-temporality' of God, Barth cautions that 'it is not something that can be seized and handled by us as an instrument or weapon. On the contrary, it seizes and handles us.'[30] (Upon returning to this passage, I was surprised to find the sentence bore no exclamation point. I knew I had experienced one.) The accustomed business of the mind is to place or contextualise things, to label and handle them. But occasionally it happens that we ourselves are contextualised – placed in an unfamiliar setting that exceeds and relativises *us*. It is this event that I propose to call contextualisation.[31]

Ultimately the event of contextualisation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Theology just tries to reflect that event. The *Römerbrief* did this by unbridgeable intensity. The *Church Dogmatics* does it by Mozartian comprehensiveness. For the academic theologian the latter is in many ways more satisfying; but as it happened, the early theology had a marked advantage over the later in achieving or reflecting contextualisation. It had the advantage that it came bundled with existentialism. In Germany, the *Römerbrief* arrived about the same time as translations of Kierkegaard. In the English-speaking world, Barth arrived in conjunction with another war, along with Heidegger and Bultmann. Subsequently, the necessary distinctions were made, confessional theology and existentialism were disentangled. But as they were, a problem

[28] J.-B. Metz makes the point with appropriate firmness: 'The Christian idea of imitation and the apocalyptical idea of imminent expectation belong together. It is not possible to imitate Jesus radically, that is, at the level of the roots of life, if "the time is not shortened." Jesus' call: "Follow me!" and the call of Christians: "Come, Lord Jesus!" are inseparable' (Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 176. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, p. 142.

[29] Ibid., p. 149, emphasis added.

[30] Ibid., p. 637.

[31] For more on contextualisation, see Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 19–22, 138–9. Regarding what is herein called, somewhat awkwardly, 'processionalism', cf. 'the idealist diamond' (ibid., pp. 23–7, 120–6).

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mounted. It was voiced by one of my teachers, who mused that theologically he stood firmly with Barth, but every time he arose to preach he sounded like Tillich. How indeed to convey the existential bite of the gospel without buying into existentialism?

Here again, the answer may be to beat philosophy at its own game. With its determination to face mortality, our being-for-death, existentialism means to describe unflinchingly the concrete reality of human existence.[32] But to really confront one's being-for-death – what is this but a sort of personal, quasi-internal apocalypse? And by what reckoning is a quasi-internal 'moment' more concrete than a world-encompassing, time-consummating public event, however counterintuitive it may be? After all, existentialism owes much to Kierkegaard, whose own context is Christian contradiction and urgency; and it is highly likely that Heidegger read the *Römerbrief* while working on *Sein und Zeit*. What if demythologising, which claims the mantle of realism, is in truth an act of abstraction? Is it not possible to propose 'apocalyptic' as a fitting name for existentialism's bite – cf. J. B. Metz's call for Christianity 'with an apocalyptic sting'?[33] Is it not plausible that impending apocalypse might trump philosophic phenomenology in power to contextualise?[34]

To summarise the argument thus far, apocalyptic is one of the key ways the gospel contextualises us; and contextualisation is a principal means of responding to some pressing issues of our time. With this, we may claim to have achieved our purpose of making a case for apocalyptic. It remains to sketch some implications.

Being contextualised

A passage in *CD* II/1 captures what it means to be contextualised. Of faith, Barth writes that it 'is not . . . a standing, but a being suspended and a hanging without ground under our feet'.[35] This, one must emphasise, is a description not of doubt but of faith. Much may turn on the unsettling notion that we do not 'stand on faith' so much as hang suspended within it.

The problem with many who use the language of apocalyptic is that they seem all too certain of the ground under their feet. Theology along the lines

[32] See in this regard John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[33] Metz, *Faith in History*, pp. 73–4.

[34] In a different context I have tried to make clear the positive importance of the tradition of Hegel and Heidegger for contemporary Christian theology. See Lowe, 'Postmodern Theology', in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain R. Torrance (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 617–33.

[35] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 159.

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of the *Left Behind* series appears to be marked by two things, triumphalism and an emphatically articulated timeline. The two go together, the timeline providing the ground on which triumphalism stands. In such theologies futurity is used, as Barth came to realise it should not be, 'as an instrument or weapon'. For my part, I reckon that apocalyptic so conscripted might better be described not as apocalyptic, but as a form of gnostic dispensationalism. That apocalyptic reduced to prognostication should envision being 'raptured' is all too logical. For the notion of being 'raptured' guarantees exemption. It is close to being a doctrinal expression of the complacent assumption that one is not, oneself, contextualised by the message one proclaims.[36]

In the *Church Dogmatics*, the situation is just the reverse. There the language of apocalyptic is seldom in evidence: in the comprehensive index of the *Dogmatics* the word does not appear. Yet the theology of the *Dogmatics* seeks constantly, strenuously, to recognise itself as contextualised by the reality of which it ventures to speak. Is this not likely to be the more fitting form of attestation?

There is, however, one passage in II/1 where the classical language of apocalyptic does flash forth. It comes at the very end of Barth's long discussion of natural theology. In the course of the discussion Barth has been relatively patient, but at the end he declares – 'Over man [sic] as such there is indeed suspended somewhere, as yet invisible to him, the sword of the great and frightful assault of the divine judgment in the exposure of the whole perversity of his appropriated likeness to God . . .'[37] Hearing the words 'the

[36] In Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tynsdale House, 2004), the climactic volume of the *Left Behind* series, a spokesperson provides a summation: 'the whole theme through my teaching of the events of the end times has been the mercy of God. To many of you this seemed inconsistent with what was prophesied and what came to pass. But . . . all of this, all twenty-one judgments that have come from heaven in three sets of seven, have been God's desperate last attempts to get man's [*sic*] attention' (p. 103). Note the implication that what is crucial in order to apprehend the mercy and to know the name of the true God/saviour (which is of course crucial), one must understand not just 'what was prophesied' and 'what came to pass', but the fit between the two. A convert from Islam, reflecting upon the reason for his 'towering leap of faith' (p. 144), recalls that what had been 'most persuasive . . . were the almost daily fulfillments of prophecy' (p. 145, cf. p. 146; in contrast, pp. 178–9). But this means that (for the unraptured, at least) access to the truth of Christianity is inextricably linked to having the right basic timeline, which is the key to seeing the fit. Thus, in an important if not decisive sense, the timeline does become the ground on which one stands. It triggers religious conversion – which in turn assures that one can regard Christ's coming in judgement as the greatest 'show' (the notion runs throughout the book) of all time. Cf. Kierkegaard on revelation and the aesthetic mode.

[37] Ibid., p. 171.

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whole perversity of his appropriated likeness to God', one thinks of the failure Molnar laments 'to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit'. Or one thinks of the hankering apparent throughout all of theology – liberal, conservative, yours, mine – for an authenticating moment of immediacy or presence, some direct contact with the divine. Natural theology is not some other, out there, over against us. The first reason we need apocalyptic is to counter our own triumphalism, to keep us appropriately off balance.[38]

And this Barth does. He goes on to say that, even if our precious wish were granted, even if we found some point of contact – even that would not avail. 'Even if it were true, which it is not, we shall certainly not stand in this judgment because we were originally united to God in such a way that we knew [God] immediately. This will be no comfort to us in the unimaginable assault of the divine judgment.'[39]

Apocalyptic renders insurmountable the chastening wisdom that '[t]he fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). It rescues the theological truth of existentialism, which was earlier conveyed by the classic, now neglected concept of existing *coram Deo*, 'before God'.[40] Yet at the same time, apocalyptic underwrites the Yes of the gospel as well. In his commentary on *Galatians* in the Anchor Bible series, J. Louis Martyn observes that in several crucial passages having to do with revelation, 'Paul uses the noun *apokalypsis* and the verb *apokalyptô*'.[41] Could this etymology be significant? With a sort of second naïveté, Martyn reads Paul as saying that 'his gospel came into being when God *apocalypsed* Christ to him'.[42] The RSV translation of Gal. 3:23 is 'Now before faith came, we were confined under

[38] Douglas Farrow says of Christ that 'God has put him as a question for everyone simply by withdrawing him into the sanctuary of his own house [by the ascension]. Does Jesus' incomprehensible absence not confront us with the anomalous character of our alienated place and time? But who understands the divine irony? Who is really aware of this absence? As an absence without parallel it is little noticed, much less identified for what it is, even where talk about absence (in the abstract) may be all the rage.' Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 271.

[39] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 177.

[40] Cf. '*timor filialis*: filial fear; namely a fear of God characteristic of true children who both fear God's anger and stand in loving awe of his [*sic*] righteousness . . ., to be distinguished from *timor servilis*, servile fear, characteristic of those who merely fear divine punishment', *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids. MI: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 305. The distinction may be useful in discussing various treatments of apocalyptic.

[41] J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 99.

[42] Ibid., emphasis added.

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the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed'. Of the verse Martyn writes,

> There Paul speaks of 'the apocalypse of faith', using that expression interchangeably with 'the coming of faith' (3:25) and with the coming of Christ (3:24). Paul thus explicates the verb *apokalyptô* with the verbs *erchomai*, 'to come [on the scene]', and *exapostellô*, 'to send [into the scene]' (4:4,6).

Suddenly theology, which speaks so readily of revelation, stands exposed – exposed to an utterly strange event of God's *apocalypsing* Christ. Suddenly there is a return of the repressed; the entire vocabulary that theology tends to keep at arm's length – invasion, conflict, powers, triumph – the vocabulary of *Christus victor*,[43] presses upon us. What matters, as Paul says, 'is the new creation', which is not just a new social order, though that too is importantly implied. It is more nearly as if Paul were saying, 'Remember the original event of creation? Well, there's been a new one'.[44] This in turn means, as Martyn affirms, that in some very real sense the longed-for transformation has already occurred; in a real sense the apocalypse has already happened! It lies 'behind' us as it were. No doubt this is a difficult proposition that needs further reflection; Martyn speaks of seeing 'bifocally'.[45] But one must acknowledge that, even as a hypothesis, there could hardly be a counter-thesis more devastating to the pretensions of modern quasi-Hegelianism. In the words of Douglas Farrow, Barth 'could even claim that our present age has its final term *behind* it, in the cross of Christ. So much for the cult of progress!'[46] Conversely, for those who hang suspended within the event that is Jesus Christ, news of apocalypse accomplished is good news indeed. It means that their hope is firmly grounded, even though they themselves are not. Otherwise put, it means that being suspended, if suspended in Christ, is all the grounding one could need.[47]

[43] See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1965); and Lowe, 'Christ and Salvation', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 235–51, esp. pp. 242ff.

[44] 'In short, the standard is not a "should" but rather an "is", a cosmic announcement couched in the indicative mood in order to *describe* the real world . . .' (Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 567.)

[45] Ibid., p. 104.

[46] Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 231, emphasis Farrow's. Note the unreservedly apocalyptic character of Farrow's concluding pages (pp. 270–3); and his extensive critique of processional theology, particularly as represented by Teilhard de Chardin (pp. 198–220).

[47] For further reflection along these lines, see Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), pp. 67–103 and *passim*.

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I conclude by recalling two theological gestures that are fundamental to Barth's mature thought. Traditionally, apocalyptic visions have had the effect of situating time and history within the context of eternity, represented perhaps by a heavenly court, or indeed a divine plan. In effect, by locating time itself within the all-nourishing eternity of the immanent Trinity, Barth accomplishes an analogous gesture. But then there is a second moment. Having gathered time and eternity into the Trinitarian nexus, Barth proceeds in a second gesture to insist that it is this very nexus – that which is most concrete, the immanent reality of God Godself – that invades a captive world in Jesus Christ.[48]

We are familiar with Barth's distinction in the early pages of *CD* II/1 between primary objectivity and secondary objectivity in revelation.[49] The distinction secures the crucial point that, even where scripture does not explicitly say so, revelation is mediated and indirect.[50] But once this safeguard has been secured, Barth immediately stipulates that the secondary 'is distinguished from the primary objectivity, *not by a lesser degree of truth*, but by its particular form, suitable for us, the creature'.[51] The secondary, worldly, finite objectivity bears no less a degree of truth than does the primary. And by 'truth' Barth means nothing less than God's own self-knowing as it occurs within the immanent Trinity.[52] Thus, what stands forth in and through the secondary objectivity is God's ownmost reality – without loss, without diminution. For such an event, 'apocalypse' would seem an appropriate term.[53,54]

[48] Barth's apocalypticism as delineated here bears close comparison to what Ingolf U. Dalferth calls 'Karl Barth's eschatological realism'. See his essay by that name in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 14–45.

[49] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 16.

[50] Ibid., p. 19.

[51] Ibid., p. 16, emphasis added. Cf. the fact that knowledge of God is revealed 'without any prejudice to its certainty, but in this very certainty, it is mediated knowledge' (p. 9); which does not diminish the fact that the God thus known 'becomes, is and remains' to the human knower 'Another' (ibid.).

[52] Ibid., pp. 67–8.

[53] I am grateful to the Henry Luce foundation for supporting a research leave without which this article would not have been possible.

[54] An earlier version of this article was presented to the Karl Barth Society of North America at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 2006.

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