

Apocalypse and Violence: The Evidence from the Reception History of the Book of Revelation

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The first part of this paper will juxtapose three struggles from different periods of history in which the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, had a part to play: one from the 1520's, one from 1534–5, and a third from the late twentieth century (there are other examples from fifteenth century Hussite movements where similar issues are raised).¹ These examples will be contrasted with the use made of the Apocalypse by two English writers from a century or so later whose use eschews violence and in which the Apocalypse is used to offer a critique of violence.

Despite its reputation as a violent book which in turn has stimulated violence, the Apocalypse has only rarely been directly linked with the promotion of violence (though there may be examples where biblical passages about the last days, more generally, have had their part to play, for example the Canudos community and the Contestado war in Brazil).² In some of the cases where there is evidence that it has had a role in promoting violence this arises from the actualizing of the text when readers either use the Apocalypse to illuminate their own circumstances or themselves identify with figures in the Apocalypse, and become actively engaged in enabling the fulfillment of its prophecies. While the examples considered in the first part of this essay suggest that 'acting out' apocalyptic images by those who believed themselves to be agents of the last days is a recurring feature in those situations where violence occurs, actualization did not always involve violent activity as there is also evidence pointing to peaceful forms of 'actualizing'.³

At the risk of simplifying a complex visionary text, the story line of the Apocalypse is the overcoming of the contrast between heaven, where there is acknowledgement of the divine creator by the heavenly host, and earth where there is rebellion and disorder. The climax of the vision is the merging of heaven and earth when the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven and the divine presence is with people. In this process the key is the vision of the slaughtered lamb, whose vindication provokes a violent crisis in the cosmos.⁴ The Apocalypse stresses the importance of resistance and witness to that 'better world' in the present. In the midst of the present chaos of a disordered world there is a necessary prophetic witness which is directed against the all-encompassing demands of empire and its social exemplification in Babylon and its culture.

Examples of 'apocalyptic' struggles:

Thomas Muentzer; Münster in 1535; & Waco in 1993

Thomas Muentzer

The ferment in early sixteenth century Europe caused by Luther's challenge to the church helped provoke a rash of uprisings, many of which Luther later vigorously denounced. In the mid 1520's peasants in central Europe agitated for better conditions which led to a variety of petitions of grievance.⁵ Involved in this struggle was the mystic and reformer, Thomas Muentzer, whose later writings evince an increasing hostility to the rulers of church, city and state and the injustices perpetrated against the peasants.⁶ Though Muentzer is regarded as the archetypal apocalyptic revolutionary, yet, perhaps surprisingly, there is very little explicit appeal to the Apocalypse itself in his writings. One example is the way in which Muentzer uses the words of Rev 14.14 ('Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come') as a way of describing his own activity of social purging. Other passages (such as the vision of the two witnesses in Rev 11) are alluded to in passing to support his prophetic conviction. He saw himself as coming 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' and as a new Daniel at the head of the Lord's army. His sense of vocation and determination to engage in violent activity is rooted in the Hebrew Bible and in Rom 13. He inveighed against what he called 'book religion' and so was sympathetic towards dreams and visions as an important means of knowing, experientially, the ways of God. Muentzer believed that true believers could have a clear understanding of the difference between the Elect and the Wicked by the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit and should act on this knowledge by purging those who were unrepentant. There was, however, a pragmatic side to Muentzer's actions, and his sensitive liturgical innovations show an ability to articulate a pattern of reform rather than revolution. Likewise his letters to the political authorities often reflect evidence of a more diplomatic tone, which contrasts markedly with some of his uninhibited, militant, invective found elsewhere. This bravado contrasts with the pathetic story of the end of his life. He led the peasants into a battle they could not win and persuaded his motley army outside Frankenhausen to hope for a miracle from God as they struggled with the overwhelming forces ranged against them. The appearance of a rainbow in the cloud seemed to offer a sign that divine deliverance was on its way. It was not to be. Many were slaughtered. Muentzer himself was eventually captured, tortured and hanged. The events of May 1525 manifest a conviction that the God who had delivered the people in the past would be bound to do so again.⁷ It is a similar kind of conviction which fifteen hundred years previously inspired an unknown prophet and his followers in the last hours of the siege of the city of Jerusalem in 66–70 CE, as described in Flavius Josephus' account of the First Jewish Revolt. While it now seems unlikely that the reasons for the Jewish revolt can be laid at the door of apocalyptic inspiration and messianism,⁸ in the last days of the siege the hope for a miraculous deliverance

fired those who, against all rational expectation, expected that God would intervene to fight alongside the rebels (Jewish War 6. 281ff and 301ff).

Münster

In the ten years after Muentzer's death, there emerged a radical Anabaptist movement whose founders had, in the last months of Muentzer's life, made overtures to him, and some of whose early leaders had been involved with Muentzer at Frankenhausen. It too was characterized by claims to prophetic inspiration as well as challenges to ecclesial practice and polity. The distinguished theologian and commentator on the Apocalypse, Melchior Hoffman, was a supporter of the Anabaptists.⁹ His interpretation of the Apocalypse suggested that figures and images in the Apocalypse were not just a matter of academic debate but could be linked with contemporary persons and movements. Thus, like many before him, Hoffman identified the two witnesses of Rev 11 with contemporaries. In parenthesis, it is worth comparing the way in which emerging Lutheranism interpreted the witnesses less specifically as types of true preaching.¹⁰ An opportunity to translate Melchior's exegesis into political reality came with the establishment of the New Jerusalem in Münster.

The city of Münster was taken over initially by conventional political means by Anabaptists who were supported by leading burghers who threw in their lot with the Anabaptists.¹¹ It then became a magnet for many Anabaptist sympathizers from the region. There was established a polity, initially egalitarian but which became increasingly monarchical. The practice of the leaders, often with autocratic tendencies, fuelled by convictions based on visions, was at odds with the participative emphasis found elsewhere in early Anabaptism. Some of the behaviour was by any standards bizarre and occasionally cruel and demeaning of women in particular. It was often linked with the ultimate authority bestowed on visionary experience. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the mystical conviction that drove one of the leaders to act on that inner prompting and become, literally, led like a lamb led to the slaughter as he went out to defeat the surrounding armies single-handedly, only to be slaughtered before the eyes of the horrified Münsterites.

The Münster experiment ended in a bloody suppression. It was a model of reformation which friends and foes alike subsequently viewed with horror and which contributed to the suspicion and persecution of Anabaptists for centuries. Eyewitnesses, admittedly unsympathetic to the aims of the Anabaptists, record the complexities of the siege prosecuted by the local bishop, and have tended to dominate judgements of Münster ever since. Recent research, however, suggests a degree of political calculation which is not always apparent in the eye witness accounts. It is easy to follow the drift of the eyewitness testimony and accept the judgement of the failure of the revolutionaries and find nothing but disaster written over the events in the city. That would be a mistake. There can be no doubt that there were some horrific events, unchecked by any responsible communal initiative, which helped make a complex situation catastrophic. All this was compounded by the horrors of the later stages of the siege, and, as has so often been the case, the fantastic is given more credence, as we saw was the case in the defeat of Muentzer at Frankenhausen.

Münster offers an unusual example of the use of the Apocalypse in the practice of politics which sought to bring heaven on earth. It is the best example of the intertwining of the Apocalypse and violence in Christian history. Like the actions of Thomas Muentzer a decade earlier, Münster was about the active implementation of hopes for the future and did not remain at the level of utopian idealism.¹² The Münster leaders not only identified with the figures in the Apocalypse and believed that the Last Things were being fulfilled in their midst, but they also allowed their vocations as prophets of the end time to free them to behave ruthlessly and capriciously. In this at least there seems to be little direct inspiration from the Apocalypse. Only Muentzer, who regarded his violence as licensed by the angelic instruction in Rev 14, found inspiration for his violent campaigns in the Apocalypse itself.

A very different form of Anabaptism emerged in the wake of the events surrounding the defeat at Muenster. After 1535 Menno Simons laid the foundations for an Anabaptism more suspicious of the Apocalypse and enabled the refugees of the persecution of the Anabaptists to maintain their identity and persist with an understanding of the radical implications of the left wing of the Reformation.¹³

Waco

The third example of a violent event in which we find influence of the Apocalypse comes from the twentieth century. It is the siege of the Branch Davidian commune at Mount Carmel, Waco, by federal agents in early 1993. This ended in disaster for the nearly hundred people killed in the storming of the complex. Vernon Howell, alias David Koresh, took control of the community after a dynastic power struggle some years before. He engaged in an elaborate exegesis of biblical prophecies similar to that we find in the footnotes of the Scofield Reference Bible. Some of his interpretations have been published posthumously. What follows is dependent on the outline of Ken Newport.¹⁴ Koresh found in the Apocalypse a summary of all the biblical prophecies and a key to its interpretation. Koresh seems to have believed that he was called to be an agent of the Last Days identifying himself with the mighty angel of Rev 10:7, whose mission it was to reveal the mystery of God when the seventh trumpet sounds.

On the whole, Koresh was not an innovator in his exegesis. He appears to interpret the first beast of Rev 13 which John saw in his vision rising out of the sea as the sequence of world empires starting with Babylon and ending with America. (I say 'appears' as there is some uncertainty about the transcription of some of his biblical studies which have been recorded). The second beast mentioned in this chapter he regards as America in its role in the end times as the supporter of an apostate religious system. This kind of interpretation is loosely related to his Adventist interpretative tradition. After the disappointment at the failure of their eschatological hope in the mid-nineteenth century a key doctrine of some Adventists, which has emerged in various guises, has been that the second beast of Rev 13 has been identified with the United States of America, its culture and religion.¹⁵ This contrasts with the very different sense of being an elect nation, with a peculiar destiny in the divine economy, which was deeply rooted in American public theology from the very early years of the colonization.¹⁶

What emerged in Adventism, however, was a very distinctive interpretation of the second beast of Rev 13, in which the beast was identified with the United States of America.¹⁷ While certainty in this matter is out of the question, America's eschatological role in Adventist exegesis may have prompted the Branch Davidians at Waco to regard the siege which was taking place as being a climactic moment in the divine purposes. The federal agents' behaviour might have seemed to prove that the prediction that the followers of the beast would persecute the followers of the lamb was being fulfilled in the catastrophic and fiery end to the community.¹⁸

The career of Thomas Muentzer, the Münster commonwealth in 1535 and the Branch Davidians in Waco in 1993 offer examples of the Apocalypse being directly linked with violence. The use of apocalyptic images in all these cases was part of a complex web of factors, however, social and economic as well as religious, none of which by itself offers an explanation of the events.

Using the Apocalypse to read the signs of the times: Winstanley & Wentworth

In late seventeenth century England we find many examples from both men and women of the Apocalypse being used to interpret the signs of the times and to inspire prophetic critique of princes, prelates and oppression of peasants similar to that which we find in the later writings of Thomas Muentzer.¹⁹ Although there are many examples of such prophets contemplating violence in pursuit of their political goals, the two examples which follow take a different approach and contrast with what we have already considered.

Anne Wentworth

The Baptist Anne Wentworth had been ejected from her home by her husband for what he considered to be her insubordination. He had subjected her to verbal and physical abuse. In writing of this she describes her oppression and hope for vindication in language derived from the Apocalypse. Indeed, she calls her visions (in which we find her own divinely inspired apology) a revelation of Jesus Christ in imitation of the opening word of the last book of the New Testament. She looked forward to a great day of judgement when her husband and his co-persecutors would be judged. What she looks for is an eschatological judgement on, and indeed redemption of, her persecutors, when 'the man of earth (presumably a reference to her husband) shall oppress me no more...unless he becomes a new man, a changed man, a man sensible of the wrong he has done me with his fierce looks, sharp tongue and cruel usage.'²⁰

Come all Saints, come sing and rejoice with me at Babylon's fall, and the glorious days, which ye shall see when the great Battle is fought, the day past, and all done, then all Honour, Glory and Praise to God must be sung. Rejoice, ye Heavens and Prophets, for God avengeth your cause that Babylon would have deprived you of by her unjust Laws. This is a great Mystery, who now can this read? And know it rightly, and in so narrow a path doth tread? Who is able to bear, to have whole Babylon come down? Who can endure to hear, that they are in Babylon? Who doth think, that in England is the painted Whore? Who did think, they should ever hear of me any more? When they sit as Queen, and say, they shall have no sorrow, I am raised up again, and freed from all their horror. When they thought, to put me in the Grave, and have me slain, I am raised up more strong, and brought to Life again.

I am reproached as a proud, wicked, deceived, deluded, lying Woman; a mad, melancholy, crack-brained, self-willed, conceited Fool, and black Sinner, led by whimsies, notions, and knif-knafs of my own head; one that speaks blasphemy, not fit to take the Name of God

in her mouth; an Heathen and Publican, a Fortune-teller, an Enthusiast, and the like much more, whereof I appeal to God, to judge: And then let all slanderers challenge their own words and as concerning my Husband's Behaviour towards me in this Case of the Lords, He the Lord will also judge betwixt Him and Me, and make known, whether I am an impudent Hussy, a disobedient Wife to him, one that run away from her Husband, and the like. Or whether He is the Man, that will not suffer me to live with him, that will not receive me into his Habitation, unless I deny the Lord, and his Message, and avow to be deluded by a lying Spirit (Anne Wentworth *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1679)).

Elsewhere, Wentworth uses the contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon to interpret her situation (Rev 17–18 and 21–2). She finds the activities of Babylon fulfilled in what her husband, aided and abetted by his clergy friends, is doing to her by his abusive behaviour and looks forward to her vindication. She uses the language of conflict to speak of the struggle that is needed before she achieves her vindication by God. For Wentworth Babylon's culture is found in a society based on patriarchy in which a woman who rejects the harsh treatment finds herself utterly destitute and an outcast. For her and many other women in seventeenth century England, the Apocalypse is a text which empowers her and provides the imagery for her prophetic critique.

Gerrard Winstanley

One of the most interesting examples of a social critique inspired by the Apocalypse and other parts of the Bible emerged in the writings of Gerrard Winstanley.²¹ Between 1648 and 1652 Winstanley wrote tracts while he was actively involved in creating the 'Digger' colony on St. George's Hill in Surrey (now arguably one of the most affluent areas in the UK and home of many media stars). Winstanley had a vision, not just to improve the lot of the hungry and landless through the cultivation of the commons, but also to create a communist, that is, moneyless and propertyless, society of the kind he believed had existed before the Fall. Winstanley held the Earth to have been originally a 'common treasury' for all to share. The Fall he interpreted as the practice of buying and selling land, which allowed some to become rich and others to starve. From the consequences of this Fall humanity stood in need of redemption. True freedom could not be enjoyed by all until the land was held again in common. The Diggers' practice of 'digging' the common land soon spread to many parts of the south of England, but the violence and hostility of local landowners ensured that no colonies survived for long, though it is arguable that, had the movement not been suppressed, the 'commonwealth' then being fashioned under Oliver Cromwell might have been more literally that.

Winstanley himself had a strong consciousness of his own prophetic vocation (*New Law of Righteousness*;²² *True Levellers Standard*).²³ He believed that the prophetic spirit was again active in the momentous days in which he lived and that the apocalyptic images of the Bible were the currency with which latter day prophets could speak God's word (*The True Levellers Standard Advanced*).²⁴ Following in the radical spirit which was manifest in the annals of early Anabaptism, Winstanley uses the imagery of Daniel and the Apocalypse to interpret the oppressive behaviour of the wielders of political and economic power of his day.

Winstanley regarded the prevalence of private property as typifying the rule of the Beast of the Apocalypse and the Book of Daniel. For Winstanley, the first of the four beasts in Daniel was royal power, which by force makes a way for the economically powerful to rule over others, making the conquered a slave giving the earth to some, denying the Earth to others; the second Beast he sees as the power of laws, which maintain power and privilege in the hands of the few by the threat of imprisonment and punishment; the third Beast is what Winstanley calls 'the thieving art of buying and selling the earth with the fruits one to another; the fourth Beast is the power of the clergy which is used to give a religious or (in something like Marx's sense) an ideological gloss to the privileges of the few. According to Winstanley, the Creation will never be at peace, until these four beasts are overthrown and only then will there be the coming of Christ's kingdom.

These four powers are the four beasts, which Daniel saw rise up out of the sea is the bulk and body of mankind for out of Mankind arises all that darkness and tyranny that oppresses itself. The first Beast which Daniel saw rise up out of the deceived heart of mankind, was like a lion; and had eagles' wings. And this is kingly power, which takes the sword, and makes way to rule over others thereby, dividing the creation, one part from another; setting up the conqueror to rule, making the conquered a slave; giving the earth to some, denying the Earth to others. The second Beast was like a bear; And this is the power of selfish laws, which is full of covetousness the power of prisons. The power of whipping, banishment, and confiscation of goods. The power of hanging, pressing, burning, martyring; take these three ribs out of the mouth of the law, or Inns of Court trade, and that beast hath no power but dies. The third Beast was like a leopard this is the thieving art of buying and selling the earth with the fruits one to another this beast had four wings: policy; hypocrisy; self-love and hardness of heart; for this beast is a true self-lover, to get the earth to himself, to lock it up in chests and barns, though others starve for want. The fourth Beast is the imaginary clergy-power, which indeed is Judas; and this more terrible and dreadful than the rest. When Christ the Anointing spirit rises up, and enlightens mankind, then in his light, they shall see the deceit and falsehood of this beast, that hath deceived all the world; and shall fall off from him, and leave him naked and bare; and if he will teach and rule, let him shew his power over the beasts; for the people will all look up to God, to be taught and governed by him (Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76): *The Fire in the Bush* (March 1650)).

Winstanley does not suggest that the overthrow of the Beast should come about through force of arms. Indeed, he offers a view of political change which is dependent on change in attitudes: the 'rising of Christ in sons and daughters' is what is required to bring about change. Throughout his works there is a rejection of violence, even in the face of extreme provocation from local landowners to the

Digger communes (though there is nothing to suggest that he disapproved of the execution of Charles I). He wrote 'though you should kill my body or starve me in prison, yet know that the more you strive, the more troubles your heart shall be filled with'. Winstanley's aim was not to conquer by force of arms but to enlighten. This practice he recognized was different from what he saw around him: 'I see, Father, that England yet does choose to fight with the sword of iron and covetousness than by the sword of thy spirit (which is love). We find in Winstanley's work an anticipation of the spirit of protest against violence which characterized the Quakers. Indeed, it was as a member of one of its assemblies Winstanley probably ended his days. It was among such groups that the flame of radical protest was kept alive at the end of the seventeenth century when the opportunities for radical social change which seemed to be on offer in the 1640's in England seemed to have disappeared.²⁵

William Blake

Winstanley's interpretative approach remained alive among the radical fringes of English religion down to the end of the eighteenth century. The prophet, poet, artist and interpreter of the Apocalypse, William Blake stood in this tradition. He often condemned what he describes as 'religion hid in war', the alliance of religious ideology and militarism which he saw all around him in the activities of the mainstream churches of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England.

In the 'Preface to Milton'²⁶ we read that the New Jerusalem is not something remote or far off but a present possibility, something which may be built in England's green and pleasant land:

And did those feet in ancient time.

walk upon England's mountains green:

and was the holy Lamb of God.

in England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine.

shine forth upon our clouded hills?

and was Jerusalem builded here,

among these dark Satanic Mills ?

bring me my Bow of burning gold:

bring me my Arrows of desire:

bring me my Spear: O Clouds unfold:

bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight.

nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:

till we have built Jerusalem,

in England's green and pleasant Land

Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets.

Numbers xi.29.

As with his radical predecessors there is no disjunction between human activity and divine activity in bringing this about. For Blake God is involved through the imaginative and creative work of the prophet. Prophecy is not a thing of the past, for it is the vocation of all people (note the quotation from Numbers 11 at the end of the familiar stanzas printed on the sheet). Elijah is not just part of past history or future expectation but an inspiration for each new Elijah in every generation, who is willing to condemn the Baalism of a contemporary culture and politics. It was this religion of Baal, which, according to Blake, characterized the capitulation of Christianity to a religion of rules and the acceptance of war and violence. The vision of the New Jerusalem is one that is open to all and the task of building belongs to all. This poem is based on a contrast between what is actually the case and what might be, which is typical of the story line of the biblical Apocalypse. The contrast between the implied question of the opening lines becomes explicit at the beginning of the second stanza where the question marks are to be found. What is needed for that hope to be fulfilled is 'Mental Fight'. The use of military imagery here reflects the Apocalypse and Eph.6.10. 'Mental Fight' is the process of challenging the way in which dominant patterns of thinking and behaving make it difficult for all God's people to be prophets. The 'satanic Mills' is the grinding logic of the reason of the philosophers which has to be overcome to allow imagination to flourish in the spirit of biblical religion. By the time Blake wrote the 'preface to Milton' he challenges Christianity's over-reliance on classical study and philosophy as the immediate context of these verses make plain.

Blake's drawings and illuminated books are saturated with apocalyptic images many of which reflect the violent world in which he lived and about which he protested. Two must suffice. In the 'Songs of Experience' version of 'Holy Thursday' the marginal designs, such as a necessary complement to the interpretative process in Blake's Illuminated Books show a woman contemplating a dead child and the

comfort offered by a woman for fearful children. There is a close connection with the image of a child cuddling up to the woman reminiscent of the scene of desolation in the frontispiece of 'America', where a gigantic demon overshadows a woman and a child, naked and overawed, in a desert, dominated by a single cannon, echoing the persecution of the woman and the child by the Dragon in Rev 12–13. The protest against an oppressive state is nowhere better seen than in Blake's illustrations for Young's 'Night Thoughts'.²⁷ The author, a conservative and a monarchist, found in Blake an artist whose political views were diametrically opposed to his own and who took the opportunity of the political repression of the 1790's in England to offer a radical interpretation of apocalyptic images. His depiction of the heads of the beast on which Babylon is seated follows in the radical tradition of Winstanley in 'Fire in the Bush', for the heads include identification with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, the king, a military figure and a judge. The representation of Babylon as a gaudy woman is, for Blake, curiously literal. Blake was usually extraordinarily sensitive to issues of economic oppression and race but not to gender. Perhaps in the context of illustrating another's book he dared not risk too much of a departure from the Bible. The impact of the drawing is, however, striking, particularly for the time and the context.

The approach to the Apocalypse of Wentworth, Winstanley and Blake anticipates aspects of late twentieth century reading of the Apocalypse: reading the signs of the times; challenging oppressive behaviour which afflicts the poor and vulnerable. This may be seen, for example, in the reading of the Bible in the grassroots biblical interpretation inspired by Latin American liberation theology and in the socialist biblical politics of those like William Stringfellow and his followers in the US.²⁸ In popular religion in Latin America, the use of the Apocalypse is an important part of the political critique of those influenced by liberation theology, but also in parts of the burgeoning pentecostalist movement in Latin America we find the reading of prophetic texts familiar to us from the Scofield Reference Bible.²⁹ With regard to the former, while one needs to take care not to generalize about a complex phenomenon like liberation theology, there is little evidence of the use of the Apocalypse to support violent, revolutionary, activity. (There is no evidence that the Apocalypse is used in the context of the Movimento dos Sem Terra in the struggle for land in contemporary Brazil, though appeal is made to other egalitarian strands in the Bible). The writing of a Christian revolutionary like Camilo Torres, for example, who died fighting a guerrilla struggle in Colombia, does not appeal to the Apocalypse.

There is much to suggest that the hermeneutical approach of Wentworth, Blake and Winstanley have their twentieth century counterparts in this form of political theology.³⁰

Hermeneutical reflections:

Despite its reputation the Apocalypse has only rarely been directly linked with the prosecution of violence. In the cases where there is evidence that it has had a catalytic effect, it would appear that there is often a particular hermeneutical move in which actualizing the text takes place, which may be supported by appeal to visions, dreams and direct divine communication. In these cases the authority given to visionary experience seems to have neglected any attempt to 'test the spirits'. In fact, it seems to me that we have an inversion of the imbalance between imagination and reason which prompted the prophetic critique of William Blake of the rationalism which he found dominant in the religion of his day. At Muenster imagination is given full rein with little credence given to reason or to any critique of the claims to inspiration which were taken as signs of bad faith and indeed apostasy. Unsurprisingly, down the centuries there has been suspicion of a mix of visionary enthusiasm and political activism. Instead there is long-standing tendency to play down actualizing of the text, and to favour a more detached, analytic reading of the text, which plays down identification with its images or interpretation of contemporary situations in the light of the Apocalypse. One major reaction to actualization has been to reject present identification in favour of linkages of the text with the distant past or the eschatological future. As we have seen from the seventeenth century examples, actualizing does not always lead to violence, however. While the examples considered in the first part of this lecture suggest that 'acting out' images from the Apocalypse by those who considered themselves agents of the last days is a recurring feature in these examples, actualization did not always lead to violence. One common factor in the first three examples is that all believed that the biblical prophecy was being fulfilled and that theirs, therefore, was the meaning of the text without remainder. Tentatively, it may be suggested that in the other cases there may have been a greater degree of openness allowing a present reference and future occasions when apocalypse could go on to make its challenge. Winstanley, like Muentzer and Koresh, believes himself called to be a prophet of the end time but it is not impossible that when the decisive opportunity passed he did not press for fulfillment by force. His last extant words in his last work 'The Law of Freedom' suggest a deep sense of disappointment that the leaders like Cromwell had let the opportunity for change pass. 'Falsehood ruling power' is 'a cause of grief each hour' for Winstanley and his radical companions.³¹ But the radical challenge of Apocalypse might offer a resource when the opportunity next came.

I hazard the guess that other biblical passages may have provoked more violence in the last 2000 years, e.g. Luke 3.14 which implies acceptance of military involvement unquestioningly, the two swords seemingly commended by Jesus at his arrest in Luke 22: 38, references to the centurions in the New Testament and especially Romans 13. It is true that the distinguished commentator on the politics of apocalypticism, Norman Cohn, thinks that there is a direct line from the Apocalypse via those who were in pursuit of the millennium in the late medieval period to the Third Reich. Against this must be set the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who challenged the church of his day to be 'a community which hears the Apocalypse.'³² This suggests to me that he thought that the church's problem in the 1930's was that there too little Apocalypse and not too much, for this text might have offered more appreciation of the titanic struggle going on in their midst.

Apocalyptic images have also contributed indirectly to violence in helping to promote a culture of assured complacency in some modern Christian circles.³³ If one is assured of election and final redemption out of a corrupt world destined for destruction, there is no urgency to work for its change. Implicit, and occasionally explicit, approval, may be given to that which may contribute to the world's end. A fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of a 'doomsday' scenario for the world can mean withdrawal from protests against social injustice and violence or the tacit approval of the way in which weapons of mass destruction might contribute to the end time events.³⁴ Apocalypse here functions less as a means of social protest than as a small piece of an eschatological jig-saw in which those who have assurance of salvation are assured of their destiny.

The Apocalypse can contribute to conviction of the rectitude of one's cause and lead to the unswerving commitment to acts and attitudes which may seem irrational to the majority and detrimental to what is normally perceived as contributing to human flourishing. It does give encouragement to those who resist and protest to maintain their stance even at personal cost to themselves, though in this it differs little from every other piece of early Christian literature and a long literary tradition since, even if it offers the most unequivocal support for those who resist compromise. The Apocalypse is described as prophecy. In it we hear the voice of a lone prophet. The book has, unsurprisingly, appealed to others in similar situations: dissidents and non-conformists and those who do not feel called to promote a sense of community. Indeed, the messages to angelic representatives of the communities in the book evince no strong sense of community but disdain for back-sliding, compromise and complacency. One can see why it cannot be the staple diet of any concerned to build up community.

The stark contrasts in the book can lead to attitudes of cultural disdain, sectarianism and aversion to compromise, as well as certainty about the rightness of one's cause and ultimate salvation. Assurance, however, is hardly what is offered to readers of the book. Tyconius, the Donatist Christian from fourth century North Africa, whose interpretation of the Apocalypse greatly influenced Augustine, suggested that the text has little interest in supporting the self-righteousness of an elect community over against the world.³⁵ Most of those addressed in the opening chapters of the book are seen as compromised and in need of change. Indeed, there is a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the identity of those who will be ultimately inhabitants of the New Jerusalem.

The conflictual patterns in the Apocalypse passed into mainstream Christianity via Augustine's 'City of God,' which stresses the ongoing struggle between the two cities, the heavenly and the earthly, Jerusalem and Babylon, both individually and socially and has contributed profoundly to Christian identity. In the light of events like Muenster the Apocalypse was almost completely excluded from the regular pattern of readings in the Church of England.³⁶ When it was included again at the end of the nineteenth century, politically sensitive material like Rev 13 and 17 was omitted. Today, in mainstream churches the Common Lectionary only exacerbates this situation, and the book is largely ignored, despised and suspected. The task confronting interpreters is to enable readings which both own its imaginative potential and allow that potential to function within the parameters of community building not destruction. Indeed, it was this which Menno Simons achieved in the wake of the events surrounding the aftermath of Muenster.³⁷ Menno's actions focused less on individual prophetic charisma than community building. In his day he managed to preserve some of the social radicalism of the Apocalypse which characterized early Anabaptism while rejecting the variegated forms of violence which had become endemic in Muenster, by offering a more realistic, if no less personally vulnerable, alternative form of communal social protest.

The examples in this essay, mainly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, illustrate the way in which the Apocalypse has helped to provoke violence on the one hand and protests against violence on the other. Nothing has been included on the way in which apocalyptic images of violence and conflictual views of the world pervade modern culture.³⁸ For all the distaste for the Apocalypse in the mainstream churches, especially since the Enlightenment, its influence has been felt, more or less directly, in such diverse cultural forms as art and the 'end of the world' literary genre. So, the Apocalypse may not directly inspire acts of violence but it may have contributed to perceptions of the world which are less quantifiable but no less pervasive.

Endnotes

- ¹ N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957), 198–280.
- ² V. Dobroruka, *Antônio Conselheiro, o beato endiabrado de Canudos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1997); E. da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands* (Chicago, 1944); R. M. Levine, “Apocalyptic Movements in Latin America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in S. Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. Vol. 3. Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age* (New York, 1998) 179–203.
- ³ On “actualizing” see J. L. Houlden, ed., *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (London, 1995), 82–6.
- ⁴ C. Rowland, “The Book of Revelation,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 12* (Nashville, 1998) 501–743.
- ⁵ J. M. Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal, 1991).
- ⁶ For the texts see P. Matheson, *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh, 1988), idem, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 200), W. Klassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Boston, 1996).
- ⁷ C. Rowland, *Radical Christianity* (Oxford, 1988), 89–114, A. Bradstock, *Faith in the Revolution: The Political Theologies of Müntzer and Winstanley* (London, 1997).
- ⁸ M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea* (Cambridge, 1987).
- ⁹ K. Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman* (Edinburgh, 1987).
- ¹⁰ Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 257, 336; Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 261–70.
- ¹¹ Cohn *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 252–280; G. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962); J. M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS, 1972); English translation of eye witness accounts in S. Baring Gould, *Freaks of Fanaticism and other Strange Events* (London, 1891), 195–372.
- ¹² M. Waltzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York, 1985) 120.
- ¹³ Klassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*.
- ¹⁴ K. Newport, *Apocalypse and the Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegeis* (Cambridge, 2000), 197–236.
- ¹⁵ R. L. Numbers and J. M. Butler, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington, IN, 1987).
- ¹⁶ R. Smolinski, “Apocalypticism in Colonial North America,” in Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3.36–71; P. Boyer, “The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalypticism in the United States,” *ibid.*, 140–78; Newport, *Apocalypse and the Millennium*, 222.
- ¹⁷ P. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More. Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA 1992) 225–53.
- ¹⁸ Newport, *Apocalypse and the Millennium*, 224–5.
- ¹⁹ A. Bradstock and C. Rowland, *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford, 2002), 109–156.
- ²⁰ E. Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women’s Writing 1649–88* (London, 1988); E. Graham, H. Hinds, E. Hobby, H. Wilcox, *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings of Seventeenth Century English women* (London 1989), 180–96, and more generally on the background, P. Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-century England* (Berkeley 1992). The text of Wentworth’s Revelation may be found at the Women Writers Resources Project at Emory University.
- ²¹ C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London, 1972); M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (London 1966); A. Bradstock, *Faith in the Revolution: The Political Theologies of Müntzer and Winstanley* (London, 1997); Bradstock and Rowland, *Radical Christian Writings*, 120–134.
- ²² G. H. Sabine, ed., *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (New York, 1941) 190.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 261.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.
- ²⁵ J. Sproxton, *Violence and Religion: Attitudes towards Militancy in the French Civil Wars and the English Revolution* (London, 1995) and Bradstock. *Faith in the Revolution*, 103–5, 130–4.
- ²⁶ Copy B c.1805 in ‘Milton: A Poem’ in D. Bindman, *William Blake’s Illuminated Books vol. 5* (London, 1993), 94.
- ²⁷ M. Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven, 1981), plate 344.
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- ²⁹ D. Martin, *Pentecostalism: the world their parish* (Oxford, 2002).
- ³⁰ C. Rowland, *Radical Christianity* (Oxford, 1988).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ³² D. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (London, 1965), 324–5.
- ³³ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*.
- ³⁴ A. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: Living with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (Boston, 1987).