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The Book of Revelation, *The X-Files*, and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Harry O. Maier

*Associate Professor of New Testament Studies
Vancouver School of Theology*

Entertainment and the End of Politics

Scenario One

Special FBI agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder enter a large underground room in a top-secret US Intelligence building. In it they discover row upon row of filing cabinets as far as the eye can see. Each one is filled with tens of thousands of cards. On each card is the name of a US citizen and the date and place of her/his elementary school vaccinations, coinciding roughly with the suspected crash of an alien spaceship at Roswell Airforce Base shortly after WW II. With each card is a slide with a sample of blood. Irrefutable proof of what Mulder has been telling Scully all along: the US government has been engaged in a covert scheme to inject each citizen with a secret chemical agent designed, Mulder hypothesises, to make them more susceptible to social control as part of a grand scheme involving a to-the-death-battle with extraterrestrials. Until now the government has been successful in its ability to dupe the American public. Mulder, however, intends to blow its cover and reveal the lies and deception of the US government.

Scenario Two

Neo Anderson is seated before Mopheus, an undercover agent who believes that Neo is "The Chosen One", the one destined to save human civilisation. But first Neo must choose whether he wants to learn "the truth" or not. Mopheus offers him the choice between taking a blue pill

or a red pill. The former will return him to his daily life and he will forget ever meeting Mopheus. The red pill offers him the promise of revelation. Neo chooses the latter and thereby sees the truth masked behind what he had mistaken for reality. He sees that what humankind believes is reality is in fact an illusion fabricated by a powerful computer programme called "The Matrix". Although it appears to be 1999, in truth it is the 21st Century and humans are farmed to feed a machine in control of the earth. Neo is the Chosen One destined to make the Matrix crash and to free humankind from its servitude to illusory "reality". Following a crash course in learning to discern fact from fiction, Neo enters the Matrix where he battles computer simulations of FBI agents (virtual bodyguards of the "The Operating System"). An apocalyptic battle ensues and Neo Anderson proves himself the long-promised Messiah, the "New Son of Man" his name coincidentally denotes, the one to free the world from its slavery to the illusion of virtual reality.

These are the cultural stepchildren of the Book of Revelation. Apocalypse of course literally means "uncovering". Each of our scenarios treats its audience to a privileged uncovering of a secret alleged to be hidden by everyday reality. Like John of Patmos who travels to heaven to report the contents of a revelation uncovered by the breaking of a seven-sealed scroll (Revelation 5:1-6:1), hit-TV show *X-File* characters Scully and Mulder, as well as *Matrix* film characters Neo Anderson and Mopheus offer their audiences revelatory journeys to break the seals of secrecy. Like John they become the media of revelation and lead their audiences to discover the truth hidden behind illusion. For John the illusion is the peace and prosperity, the *Pax Romana*, of the Roman Empire, which in fact masks the brutality of a military dictatorship.¹ In the Apocalypse the prosperity of the lamenting merchants of Revelation 18 is, evidently, unbeknownst to or at least unsuspected by its audience (say, the wealthy Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14-22, esp. v. 17!) based on the brutality of the beasts of Revelation 13. The TV show, *The X-Files*, and the summer movie blockbuster, *The Matrix*, are not new. In some sense every traditional narrative is a revelation in one form or another – from Odysseus's self disclosure to his wife Penelope upon proving her faithfulness to him and his apocalypse-like slaughter of would-be adulterers who would woo her away from him (*Odyssey* 19 ff.), to the self-revelation of Joseph to his erstwhile jealous brothers (Genesis 42-45), to gar-

den-variety modern soap operas with their intrigues of unrequited love, affairs, and secrets about which the devoted viewer is just ever so slightly more in the know than are the unwitting characters in the plot. Traditional story lines invite audiences into an awareness of how things really are beneath or beyond the normal experience of everyday events. They offer a frame for interpreting the events and routines of everyday life.

Conspiracy narratives, however, invite us to consider a revelation of a different order. Their claims to uncover the true and sinister reality hidden in the everyday, link them in a particular way to the Book of Revelation and apocalyptic literature generally. This connection and the success of these narratives in popular culture are symptomatic of a side of secular culture to which I would like to offer some theological reflection in what follows. *The X-Files* and *The Matrix* are only two and not necessarily the most popular examples of the conspiracy genre. Oliver Stone's *JFK*, *The Net*, *Conspiracy Theory* as well as TV shows like *Millennium*, *The Outer Limits*, and *Alien Nation* are only a few of the more notable Hollywood produced versions of governmental conspiracy Boomers have turned-out or tuned-in to see in the last five years. Nor are these limited to celluloid. Tragically, life imitates art. In Waco, Texas David Koresh and his followers, the Branch Davidians, lived out a real-time conspiracy theory stupidly confirmed by the FBI storming of the compound in which Koresh's devotees had locked themselves to wait for the Armageddon show-down between Satan (the US government) and the Messiah (Koresh). *X-Files* creator Chris Carter claims that, judging from the fan mail he receives, his conspiracy theory episodes are the most popular. "Am I putting ideas into people's heads," he wonders. "Other groups out there right now who've made big news are saying they don't trust the government. I don't want people to confuse what I'm saying with that political agenda. And it's weird – a lot of people contact me saying they are or were 'in the loop'. There's an enormous number of conspiracy theorists out there, and they're trying to get me to tell their story."² Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, believed he was 'in the loop'. Under oath he testified that the US government had implanted an electronic device in his buttocks to enable constant surveillance.

Recent studies have scrutinised the role of the Apocalypse in shaping cultural expectations in these last years leading up to a new millennium. For example, Mark Kingswell's *Dreams of Millennium: Report From a Culture on the Brink* (Toronto: Viking, 1996) and Eugen Weber's

Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages (Toronto: Random, 1999; the content of the Barbara Frum Lecture Series broadcast by the CBC in Spring, 1999) offer thumbnail sketches of the role of the Book of Revelation in shaping the consciousness and expectations of western European societies, even in their most secular forms.³ These studies excellently show how millennial thinking borrowed from the Apocalypse has dominated western views of progress and social ideals. Not noted, however, is the degree to which it has provided millennial themes with a counterpoint of suspicion. The Marxist class-free worker's Paradise of an inevitable historical dialectic discovers its tonality in the hymns of the vindicated saints of Revelation 19:6-8 and the final four chapters of the Apocalypse. So does the Nazi Thousand Year Reich. But it is suspicion that furnishes these political philosophies with their dissonant melodies. Marx insisted he was unveiling the true economic processes at work in the bourgeois construction of ideology. The National Socialists claimed to uncover a Marxist-Jewish conspiracy to destroy the German race. Ronald Reagan's depiction of America, "The City on the Hill" pitted against the intrigues of "The Evil Empire" of the Soviet Union, provided the rationale for the largest build-up of military arms in recorded history. Suspicion makes these theories powerfully captivating; paranoia is especially immune to disconfirmation since every attempt to prove it unwarranted can always be turned around as a subtle temptation from the enemy to drop one's guard. It is to these apocalyptic modulations of suspicion that our two scenarios sketched above join in chorus.

Media Apocalypse is, however, suspicion with a difference. Whereas earlier suspicions were raised in the service of achieving a utopian Millennium (the class-free state; the racially-pure nation state), the suspicion of conspiracy theory is decidedly dystopic. At the end of *The Matrix*, Neo Anderson, having brought the computer system crashing down and liberated humankind from its slavery to the material illusions of happiness, offers the hope of a New World order. (The film was released on Easter Weekend, 1999.) Yet the promise seems hollow. For by the film's end so convinced are we that nothing is as it seems, we cannot help to ask (as indeed does one of the antagonists of the film) whether the "New Son of Man's" utopia will be any less illusory than the virtual one constructed out of bits and bytes. The Hollywood Happy Ending seems to fold in upon itself. (The semi-Satanic title track, "Rock is Dead", by anarchistic transvestite rocker, Marilyn Manson, played during the credits, more appropri-

ately sets the tone for leaving the cinema. It is as though the film's directors, Larry and Andy Wachowski, purposely set out to laugh at their own lapse into millennial dreaming.) In this regard, Stephen Carter's *X-Files* practises what it preaches. Week after week special agents Scully and Mulder slavishly obey the exhortation, "Trust No One", by exposing layer after layer of governmental cover-up and deception. Their dark Giorgio Armani trench coats reflect an equally grey world where optimists are either naïve or fools. Yet even here, suspicion is punctuated with hope. For Carter arranges his episodes in twelve-minute sized portions, to allow for the required words from network sponsors, without which such suspicion could never be aired. Here it is the suspicion that rings hollow: dystopic entertainment brought to you by the smiling happy people of the beer/car/bank commercials offering absurd promises of commercial utopia. Trust no one?

I am suggesting that all this represents a late stage of Capitalist development (or if one is offended by the Marxianism, the triumph of the global economy) and is possibly symptomatic of the death of politics in our time.⁴ Apocalyptic suspicion wedded to commercial advertisement has the effect of encouraging citizens to give up social responsibility in favour of a retreat into pure consumerism. Sure the government is corrupt, but what does that have to do with wanting to drive an Acura, or, for that matter, drinking Labatt's Blue? This is symptomatic of what Guy Debord calls "spectacular time", namely, the obliteration of historical culture (that is, the awareness that culture is a human product owned and created by its producers) and its replacement with the spectacles of entertainment (the commodification of culture without stopping to question the social role and function of such a commercial enterprise).⁵ Spectacular time is what one experiences when one watches *The National*/*The Journal* with its multimedia displays of Apocalypse-like catastrophes interspersed with ads for RRSPs. Threatened by time on all sides one nevertheless projects oneself through commercial fantasy into a serene retirement, whence, looking back, we will discover that all worked out well inspite of all evidence to the contrary. What if one of the effects of the graphic displays of news-violence wedded to the bank commercials to which most of us treat ourselves every night was actually to advertise the need to stave off the inevitability of our own untimely deaths by investing in our banks? The News, as Susan Sontag suggests, with its evermore graphic displays of violence does not have the effect of urging citizens to engage in politics, but of entertaining us – simultaneously

numbing us into mute helplessness and a salacious desire for evermore real (i.e., gruesome) footage.⁶ (Apocalyptic News as entertainment: I confess that I often watch *The National* with a bowl of popcorn at my side.)

It is interesting in this regard to recall the analysis of Robert Bellah and colleagues in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Commenting upon the demise of a public sense of citizenship in contemporary American culture (and by extension Canadian culture) they argue, “The citizen has been swallowed up in ‘economic man’ (*sic*).” And then they go on to ask, “Is it possible that we could become citizens again and together seek the common good in the post-industrial, post-modern age?”⁷ That was in 1985, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the advent of the Internet. Postmodernity here is invoked in Utopian terms, a kind of antidote to the individualist culture of Reaganism most of *Habits of the Heart* decries. Seven years later, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* answers Bellah’s question with a resounding, Yes! At the end of the ’90s where environmental disasters and economic collapses make earth-shattering Apocalypse of some sort all too believable, it is easy to forget that by “The End of History” Fukuyama does not mean The End (as in Monty Python’s cartoon hand ending a nonsensical skit through *deus ex machina*). “The End” and “the Last Man” here refer to an Hegelian telos – the inevitable evolution toward a utopian worldwide liberal democracy. Writing in 1992, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama celebrates the inevitable triumph of liberal (i.e., market economy) democracy. The fourth chapter, entitled “The Worldwide Liberal Revolution”, is notable for the way its author gushes over the events of his day: “East Asian economic miracle”, “impressive growth”, “victory of the liberal idea”, “the success story of the global capitalist system”, “social progress”, “human evolution”, and so on.⁸ Only seven years later, the TV spectacular of “The East Asian Meltdown”: Indonesian food riots, despairing Korean businessmen, long-faced threats of economic doom by Alan Greenspan, double-digit negative returns in money markets make Fukuyama’s panegyric to market-wedded democracy seem dangerously naïve. What Fukuyama predicted was a global democracy. What we have is a global economy and the death knell of the traditional nation state. Any inscription of a republican notion of the citizen presumes the (economic) sovereignty of the state, effectively done away with by the click of a money-speculator’s mouse on the internet, instan-

taneously moving vast fortunes from one economy to another and sending economies with their producers into a free-fall. The invocation of such traditional ideals seems now not to belong to a utopian future but an antediluvian past. When one hears of sovereignty these days it is not of nation states, but of the market (“necessary market corrections”, “the decision of the market”, “natural market cycles”, “the life of the market”, and so on).

The End of Christ Transforming Culture

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 this our green and pleasant land.

William Blake’s “Jerusalem” describes the utopian millennialism of a bygone age where church and state conspired together to create a just and equitable commonwealth. In Canada this vision was represented by the Social Gospel Movement, which, hand in hand with social democratic parties and interest groups, established our most cherished social institutions (Women’s Suffrage, Universal Health Care, Unemployment Insurance, the Canada Pension Plan). H. Richard Niebuhr outlines its theological rationale in his description of the relationship of Christianity to culture as one of transformation (“Christ the Transformer of Culture”). Niebuhr claims in *Christ and Culture* to be offering a typology of the way the relation of Christianity to culture has been envisioned in the Common Era rather than settling on a preference for any one.⁹ However disingenuous that claim may seem (he critiques each typical relationship *except* the discussion of the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” option), published in 1951 the transformation model perfectly describes the relationship to culture adopted by the mainstream, post-War Protestant denominations of the North American establishment (in Canada, the United, Anglican and Presbyterian Churches of/in Canada), as well as their state-analogues in western Europe. In Canada these churches have been promoting nothing in the past fifty years if not the transformation of Canadian culture. First on their agenda has been to “build Jeru-

saalem in this our green and pleasant land", as any quick look at statements of the Canadian Council of Churches or the head offices of these denominations attests. Arguably the same agenda has been pursued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and its antecedents, that is, to the degree that they have managed to look beyond the confines of their ethnic boundaries.

These days, however, it is not only the purveyors of popular culture who are struggling to get their heads around apocalypse. "The End of Christendom", "the post-Constantinian Church", "The Once and Future Church", "the post-Christian society", "the side-lined church", "the oldstream churches": these are the cultural currency of the western mainstream churches of the northern hemisphere struggling with their own institutional mortality. If globalisation represents the end of the state, it also calls into question the viability of that favoured marker of prophetic Christian social identity, the Social Gospel Movement and its manifesto, "Christ the Transformer of Culture". My United Church colleagues at Vancouver School of Theology who should know tell me that not even the Moderator of the United Church of Canada can get an appointment to see the Prime Minister anymore. To speak of "The End of Christendom" is not to speak of the end of *the* Church, for the Church is God's creation centred on the proclamation of the inviolable unconditional promise of God's gracious intention for all of creation. Where that promise is, there is Jesus Christ and where there are those gathered around God's promise there is the Church. And there will the Church be until the end of creation when we no longer see through a glass dimly. It is this that we confess when we affirm that we believe in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". But to speak of "The End of Christendom" is to speak of a changed cultural situation and therefore to call for a new posture within culture and a set of ideals different from those of transformation. In this new cultural situation, which if my preceding argument is correct is not only an ecclesial one but a global one, the Book of Revelation may well be the most important New Testament text to help shape Christian identity at the beginning of a new millennium.

From the Hermeneutics of Suspicion to the Hermeneutics of Confession

We believe, teach and confess that God is revealed in the incarnation, the scandal of the cross, and in the wonder of the

resurrection of Jesus Christ – not in power and glory.

We believe, teach and confess that people find their true worth, meaning and purpose in life through the free gift of God's grace in Christ alone – not through their own accomplishments and efforts.

We believe, teach and confess that the crucified Christ calls us into a life of discipleship in which we are to be persons for others.

We understand that the present *reality of the world* involves significant changes in our society, economy and culture. Technological innovations, globalisation, economic and political uncertainties, and shifting morals and values have increased the sense of insecurity for many people. We have been falsely taught to derive our identity only from our work – yet jobs are not secure. These changes confront us with the reality that the needs of the world and our opportunities for mission are found on our doorsteps and not simply at a distance.

The Cross of Christ stands opposed to any ideology which proclaims that people can earn salvation by hard work or positive thinking. The cross of Christ stands opposed to any ideology which treats people as commodities.

(Evangelical Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada)

With bold strokes our *Evangelical Declaration* sets out an agenda faithful to our global and cultural reality. It takes seriously the disenchantment and uncertainties of our era. Its starting point is not a mistaken social millennialism, but the cross of Jesus Christ. It urges repentance (“we have been falsely taught”; “*not* through...accomplishments and efforts”; “the cross of Christ stands opposed to...”). It urges us to costly discipleship (“the scandal of the cross”; “the *crucified* Christ”). It challenges us to resist the individualism of a consumer culture (“we are to be persons for others”). Most importantly, it calls us to believe, teach and confess.

To speak of confession is to invoke *Christian Apocalypse*. If suspicion is the hallmark of the secular apocalyptic, faithful confession is the mark of the New Testament Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic is the mother of Christian theology, to quote Ernst Käsemann.¹⁰ This is so because, as Käsemann suggests, apocalyptic unveils the claim of God on time and creation, and, more centrally, on us in the hearing of the Gospel. To hear and believe the Gospel is to repent and believe that

God's realm is at hand and in our midst in the person of the raised Jesus Christ who meets us in the proclaimed promise of God, and thence to go forth in freedom. It is to walk in a new heaven and a new earth. Apocalyptic is also the "mother of Christian theology" because it brings us face to face with the brute reality of what it means to confess faith in Jesus Christ. To speak with John of Patmos of "Jesus Christ the faithful witness" is to speak of the death of Jesus Christ (as the exegetical clause that follows indicates – "the first-born of the dead", Revelation 1:5).¹¹ It is the Cruciform who greets us on virtually every page of the Book of Revelation. Even where critics have discovered a hateful theology of glory (Martin Luther being chief among them!) – in the vision of the Word of God on a white charger "clad in a robe dipped in blood" with a mouth from which "issues a white sword with which to smite the nations" (19:11-16) – we find the Cruciform. For by what other means does he "smite the nations" than by his faithful confession unto death, and with whose blood is he spattered if not his own? Is he not, after all, the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of time (5:6-14; 13:8), and indeed not only a Lamb, but also a *little lamb (to arnion)*?

The Book of Revelation is traditionally interpreted as a book of comfort for the oppressed. Alan Boesak argues that one cannot really understand the Apocalypse *unless* one reads it from the perspective of the oppressed.¹² Undeniably, Revelation is a powerful source of comfort to those struggling with injustice and suffering for righteousness' sake. And such a reading has enabled scholars nervous about its inclusion in the Christian canon to explain the fact, to quote Luther, that "Christ is neither taught nor recognised" in the Book of Revelation: the desire for hellfire and damnation of one's enemies is understandable in a situation of extreme oppression and tyranny.¹³ But comfort explains only half of the Apocalypse. In it are also words of extreme censure, not of the Roman Empire, but the Church. Of the seven messages to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2:1-3:22) only two are filled with unqualified praise for faithfulness (the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia – Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13). The rest contain either a mixture of praise and blame, or unqualified criticism. The letter to the Laodiceans, notably positioned last at a rhetorically important point of the series, provides, in my estimation, the lens for interpreting the earlier letters of blame. The Laodicean church is "neither cold nor hot". It boasts, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing..." (3:15,17). This helps us to understand the censure registered in a more symbolic way against the Thyatiran church of

2:18-29 and against the churches of Ephesus and Pergamum (2:1-7; 2:12-17).

There is not room here to enter into a sustained exegetical discussion of how John dresses up the characters who appear in these letters with the clothing of mythic Old Testament anti-heroes (Jezebel – 2:20-23; Balaam – 2:14; the Nicolaitans – 2:6,15 [in my estimation a loose Greek translation of the Hebrew Balaam, i.e., “one who conquers the people”]). What these characters share is their leading of the children of Israel to idolatry. John charges that those he names here convince the churches to “eat food sacrificed to idols” and “to practise immorality” (2:14,20). Leonard L. Thompson argues that John is censuring Christian participation in local pagan cults of the sort discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8-10. But whereas Paul offers a “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise to those for and against this kind of activity (8:7-13; 10:23-30), John eschews any such accommodation and takes a hard line.¹⁴ That link seems forced, but Thompson rightly points to the socio-economic implications of (non-)participation in local pagan cults. The ancient world was one in which economics, politics and religion were inextricably intertwined. To opt out of local pagan festivities was at once to risk the censure of civic patron deities (“No rain because of the Christians” became a proverb of good third century pagans trying to figure out why the bad things were happening to them). Further, it was to raise the suspicion in the eyes of one’s neighbour that one was an enemy of the public good. Add to that the evidence from the roughly contemporary Book of Acts, which offers profiles of relatively well-to-do merchant Christians, some of them from the very cities listed in our seven letters, and very much involved in the civic and economic life of the Asia Minor polis (Lydia is a wealthier merchant of purple from Thyatira – Acts 16:14), and John’s teaching seems a bitter pill indeed. Yet, one prophet’s lukewarm Christian, is another’s levelheaded one. It is at least possible that the Laodiceans found in the teaching of whomever Jezebel represents (if indeed the name designates any single person in particular) a way of squaring Christian monotheism with the religio-economic life of their surroundings. John goes to some lengths to spell out the doom of those whom he styles as “false prophets” (2:20,22; 20:10; see 22:9).

The messages to the seven churches are for miscalculated source-critical reasons too often treated in isolation from the content of the visions that follow them (chs. 4:1-22:5). The link between them be-

comes all the more persuasive when one considers the lament cycles of Revelation 18. Those who mourn the passing of Babylon are the merchants and seafarers, the shipmasters and sailors. Considering that our seven churches are either port cities or on the trade routes along which luxury goods travelled through Asia Minor to the conspicuous consumers of Rome's elites (so caustically pilloried by contemporary Roman satirists) the link seems all the more notable. So also does the fact that the cities of the seven letters were falling over themselves to prove their devotion to the Emperor through devotion to a homespun imperial cult (usually to win a kind of first-century "most-favoured-trading partner status" in the form of guaranteed trade contracts with the Emperor and his household).¹⁵ With his grumpy messages to the churches and his depiction of lamenting merchants John introduces a singularly sour note into what was by most measures of his day the best of times. Taken together, the seven messages and the visions that follow offer a sustained critique of Roman economic ideology and the beneficent claims of its military dictatorship.

It may be that because elements of the Apocalypse have been incorporated into contemporary liturgy we tend to take the text rather more seriously than intended. There is a parodic if not directly satirical character to the Apocalypse which, I think, is too often passed over. The comic in the form of irony appears, for example, in the vision of the throneroom of Revelation 4-5. To Revelation's original readers most of the description contained there would have been recognisable as belonging to the Emperor's throneroom, many elements in fact borrowed from eastern court ritual common to Asia Minor (again the brunt of anti-Imperial pro-Republican Roman satirists). The incense-filled throne, the seat of power surrounded by senators, the unending praise of the emperor/king by attendants, the unrolling of the royal scroll, the breaking of the imperial seal by the Emperor alone – all of this is directly from the court ceremonial of the day.¹⁶ But where John introduces an ironical twist is in the identification of the object of this worship, "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (a royal title!), "the lamb" (5:5-6). Here we find a kind of "send-up" of imperial ideology. The ironic strategy here is not unlike what one finds in the Passion Narratives (John 19 develops the most sustained and brilliant application) in which Jesus is crowned king by the very opponents most resistant to his realm. The Apocalypse develops analogous irony by depicting the Emperor, his economic policies, and his merchant allies as representative of a kind of bogus divinity (the Beast

of Revelation 13). In contrast to the “one who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:4,8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5), the Beast “was, and is not, and is to...go to perdition” (17:8). The Mark of the Beast (14:16) contrasts with the Mark of the Saints (9:4; 14:1; 22:4); the Beast’s prophets counterfeit the signs of the true prophets (14:14; 11:4-13). But perhaps most provocatively, whereas the Beast and his minions terrorise with the military sword (2:13; 6:9-10; 9:5-6; 13; 17:6), this is only a false imitation of the true power the Apocalypse celebrates: that of witness. Jesus fights not with a physical sword, but with the sword of his mouth (19:15). Consistent with the power of witness is the way the Apocalypse celebrates speech: blessed is the one who reads the text (1:3). In the Apocalypse one testifies one’s way into the end of the world, and this testimony usually takes the form of singing hymns to the Lamb of God (e.g., 11:17-18; 15:3-4; 19:1-8). It is through testimony that one world is ended and another is inaugurated (for example, 11:4-13). In the reading of the text the visions take their course and God’s victory is enacted, a theology consistent with the first creation story of Genesis 1 with its celebration of the speech of God. Speech in the Book of Revelation, as is characteristic of oral cultures generally, has a kind of numinous, extra-human power.

Such a use of irony, with its parodic reformulation of Imperial commonplaces, turns John’s Apocalypse into a mischievous text.¹⁷ It invites us into a world where the role of the Church in relation to culture is one of trouble-maker rather than transformer. John repeatedly offers tongue in cheek performances of the military might of Rome. This is most graphically displayed, for example, in the ludicrous depiction of “the generals and the rich (!) and the strong” cowering before the wrath of the (tiny!) lamb (6:15-17). Irony here functions to bolster a much more serious claim, that in the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, and in God’s vindication of him by raising him from the dead, all that counts for power and might in this world has been overturned.¹⁸ It is a theology consistent with that other New Testament apocalypticist, Paul (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:9; Philippians 2:6-11). John’s is a theology of the cross. Just as Paul depicts Jesus Christ as stumbling block, so John urges the seven churches toward stumbling block activities through faithful confession against the idolatry of his age. He has no illusions concerning the cost of such testimony. In my estimation the Apocalypse does not describe an existing persecution of the Church. It rather is prophetic in the sense that it anticipates what is in store for a Church that takes seriously a vocation of trouble-maker or stumbling block.

John of Patmos insists upon world-ending speech. He exposes the idolatrous military and economic claims of a tyrannical empire and exhorts his readers to make a choice between Lamb and Empire. For John these are two wholly opposed and irreconcilable entities. In the apocalyptic world of John it only makes sense to speak of transformation of culture as God's work. He does not call for armed revolt. He does not spell out the means to bring an evil system crashing down. He does not offer a blueprint for building Jerusalem. For John this is God's work, as the word of promise (Revelation 6:10-11) to the subaltern saints slain for the Word of God insists. What he demands is very simple: that his audience worship the Lamb of God and not the economic prosperity of its age. He calls on the seven churches to be what Luther would later call a "Mundhaus", which is to say houses of proclamation united in their announcement that it is in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth that real life and hope are to be found and that it is by him that all claims to such hope are to be measured.

John does not leave his audience at the brink of a kind of first-century consumerist nihilism. Having deployed suspicion to unmask his world he insists upon a hermeneutic of confession to call into question the idolatry of his time and to point the way toward enduring life. In this period now named post-Christian (passing over the deception embedded in naming any society "Christian") the church of Jesus Christ is called to examine its hermeneutic of confession to the crucified Lamb of God. In Canadian society this means giving up the fool's Paradise of Christ transforming culture. The way of the cross, if not our pluralist society, eschews any such Christian cultural triumphalism. In that society which we call the Canadian mosaic a hermeneutic of confession means to be a distinctly coloured square representing the promise of God and hope in a world assaulted by economic forces scarcely understood or, much less controlled. We embrace such a hermeneutic not because we are optimists, but because with the saints of John's Revelation it is our call to hymn God and so to announce God's realm in our midst: "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered by the blood of the Lamb, and by their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that

his time is short” (Revelation 12:10-12, slightly revised). May God grant us such courage.

Notes

- ¹ A point not lost on John’s contemporary pagan political commentators, especially Tacitus – see Wes Howard-Brooks and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999) 117-152 for an excellent discussion of myth and reality. I am indebted to Prof. Howard-Brooks for kindly allowing me to see a draft of this book before it went to press.
- ² Quoted by Hal Schuster, *The Unauthorized Guide to the X-Files: Conspiracies Probed, Secrets Revealed, Subterfuges Exposed, Plus! The FBI Infiltrated* (Rocklin, CA: Prima, 1997) 27.
- ³ Catherine Keller’s *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), basing much of her analysis on Ernst Bloch’s *Das Prinzip der Hoffnung*, 1959 (ET *The Principle of Hope* Trans. Melville Plaise et al. [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986]) and Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) offers a theological genealogy of the Apocalypse in western culture, in the course of which other major studies are cited.
- ⁴ Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), especially pp. 260-278 and David Harvey’s *The Condition of Post-Modernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), especially pp. 121-200, 327-359 form the theoretical backdrop for the following discussion. The invocation of “Late Capitalism” of course sounds its own dark apocalyptic tone.
- ⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995) 109-117, 129-147.
- ⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 153-180.
- ⁷ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 271.
- ⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992) 39-52.
- ⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951) 230-234.

- ¹⁰ Ernst Käsemann, "Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik," Vol. 2, pp. 105-131, here p. 130 in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964); see also "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie," in *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 82-114.
- ¹¹ All quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.
- ¹² Alan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 38. Similarly, Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995) 22-25; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 181-203.
- ¹³ *WA Bibel Bd. 7 (Das Neue Testament, Episteln und Offenbarung 1522/46)* 404. Luther's full quotation in his preface to the New Testament of 1522 is "My spirit cannot commend this book. And it is reason enough for me not to regard it highly that in it Christ is neither taught nor recognised." He is more irenic in his preface to the Apocalypse in his 1530/46 Bible (*ibid.*, 419-421), but still complains of its misuse by literal-minded Enthusiasts. Of course that did not prevent Luther from trying his own hand at literal interpretation [the pope as "Anti-Christ", the threat from the Turks as representing the coming battle of Armageddon and so on]. For scholarly attempts to empathize with the desire for vengeance see the sociological interpretation of John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of the Apocalypse* (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975) 49-65 (the Apocalypse overcame a crisis of identity of election disconfirmed through the event of persecution and offered a recovery of that identity through participation in a mythic narrative about Rome's destruction). Adela Yabro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 141-164 offers a social-psychological account: the violence of the Apocalypse offered otherwise helpless Asia Minor Christians the opportunity to express pent up feelings of rage against their Roman persecutors and to experience catharsis, rather than engage in suicidal acts of resistance against the Empire.
- ¹⁴ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 123-124.
- ¹⁵ J. Nelson Kraybill magnificently reconstructs this in *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*. JSNT Supplement Series 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
- ¹⁶ For fuller discussion see David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John." *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 28(1983):5-22.
- ¹⁷ For the Apocalypse as parody see Sophie Laws, *In the Light of the Lamb:*

Imagery, Parody and Theology in the Apocalypse of John (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988). Laws argues that in the Apocalypse Empire parodies God. I am arguing the reverse: the Apocalypse parodies Empire so as to deconstruct Imperial ideology by linking it with the weakness of the slain lamb of God. If Laws is correct, the Apocalypse returns us to a Theology of Glory.

- ¹⁸ The resurrection theology of the Apocalypse thus links up with martyr-vindication traditions, most notably those of 2 and 4 Maccabees.