



Distinguishing Eschatology and Apocalypse, with the help of Mimetic Theory

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Rozróżnianie eschatologii i apokalipsy z pomocą teorii mimetycznej

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule podjęto próbę dokładnego zrozumienia pojęcia apokalipsy, zarówno w jego biblijnym pochodzeniu, jak i we współczesnym zastosowaniu w odniesieniu do kryzysów politycznych, gospodarczych i środowiskowych. Analiza fragmentów *Nowego Testamentu*, zwłaszcza „małych apokalips” w *Ewangeliach Marka i Łukasza* wskazuje na mieszaną afirmację i powściągliwość w odniesieniu do apokaliptycznego sposobu myślenia. Hipoteza mimetyczna René Girarda pozwala nam wyjaśnić tę dwuznaczność, wykrywając w apokalipcie pokusę manichejskiej polaryzacji przeciwko tym, których uważa się za nieczystych lub niegodziwych. Konieczne jest rozróżnienie między tego rodzaju fałszywą projekcją a prawdziwą wizją apokaliptyczną, zgodnie z którą Bóg jest zdecydowanie afirmowany jako poza wszelką przemocą i mściwą „innością”. Girard i naśladujący go uczeni proponują różne opcje, kiedy mówią o apokalipsie „dobrej” i „złej” lub „ironicznej” i „wulgarnej”. James Alison proponuje kontrast między (agresywnymi) apokaliptycznymi i (nieagresywnymi) eschatologicznymi wyobrażeniami. Możemy zauważyć, że tocząca się tutaj rewizja leksykalna jest podobna do dyskusji wokół właściwego znaczenia słowa „ofiara” na wcześniejszym etapie kariery Girarda.

Słowa kluczowe: apokalipsa, *Księga Objawienia*, René Girard, teoria mimetyczna, religia i przemoc

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Introduction

What do we expect of the ‘end time’? As I write, we are entering the season of Advent, in which we anticipate the nativity of Christ, but also His triumphant second coming at the end of time. Few mainstream Christians take this seriously, however, and Advent calendars have become just another commercial opportunity (like Christmas itself).

And yet our culture is suffused with imagination and discussion of ‘the end’, especially in terms of the language of ‘apocalyptic’. For one commentator, apocalyptic discourse has become the *lingua franca* of our time.

The word is applied to phenomena of escalating and seemingly irreversible destruction: whether caused by political or economic instability, military conflicts, or anthropogenic climate change. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek named the ‘four horsemen of the apocalypse’: the worldwide ecological crisis, economic imbalances, the biogenetic revolution, and exploding social divisions and ruptures- and this was pre-Covid 19.¹ The disasters which beset us, we are told, are ‘of biblical proportions’.

This article will consider how a Christian believer might respond to this curious fact, of a culture which largely sees itself as secular, having left faith behind, but turning to religious language and imagery in order to describe its situation. I will begin with three preliminary observations.

The first observation is the famous dictum by the twentieth-century German political theologian, Carl Schmitt, that ‘all significant concepts of the modern state are secularized theological concepts’. When politicians speak of sovereignty, legitimacy, authority, they are drawing on concepts which have their roots in our conception of God. So even when they are used to describe secular politics arrangements, they still have an aura of religious faith about them. Many of the confusions and difficulties in our political lives arise from our inability or reluctance to acknowledge this. Schmitt’s insight might help us to understand why, in situations of turmoil, we instinctively turn to religious narratives, such as the Book of Revelation, to describe what is happening.

The second observation concerns the contribution of the noted Catholic thinker René Girard (1923-2015), whose ‘mimetic theory’ affirms two insights into humanity in the light of gospel revelation. Girard was not himself a theologian, but his theory can usefully be considered a ‘theologically-inflected anthropology’. The two pieces of information to which he draws attention are not ideas of his own, but are revealed to us in sacred scripture. They are: firstly, the ‘mimetic’ or imitative nature of desire; and secondly, the propensity of human communities to resolve social instability and escalating conflict by identifying and excluding victims- scapegoats. The removal or execution of the person or persons who are blamed for the disorder brings about a new peacefulness, as the community’s wrath is projected onto their heads.

The clearest example of this is the figure of Christ, who takes the place of the victim in order to bring an end to the ‘victimary mechanism’. He turns the process around, making it into something which can generate peace and life. The New Testament bears witness to the stone rejected by the builders which has become the corner-stone; above all, there is the ambiguous prophecy of Caiaphas, the high priest:

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010).

“You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish”. He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. (John 11: 49-52).

This is wonderful irony from the evangelist: it is Caiaphas who knows ‘nothing at all’ of the real significance of what he is saying.

The third observation is that we should take our cue from scriptural passages which urge us to caution: in Luke 21.28, Jesus encourages us: ‘Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’. Here, and elsewhere there is a recognition that disasters are taking place; but we are not to be swept along by the feverish atmosphere. ‘They will say to you, “Look there!” or, “Look here!” Make no move; do not set off in pursuit.’ (Luke 17: 23) People will crowd together around false Christs and false prophets: we must refuse to be led astray (Mark 13: 21-23). The real meaning of the terrible events is in fact something quite opposite: ‘this is but the beginning of the birth pangs’. (Mark 13.8)

There is, in short, a two-sided attitude toward apocalypse in the New Testament as a whole, and especially in the ‘little apocalypses’ of the synoptic gospels. We are assured that that there will be the most unimaginable disorder and suffering; and yet, believers are called to hold back from the frenzy, and even to read events hopefully, as birth-pangs. There are a number of ways commentators have described this ambiguity, as we shall see: as two kinds of apocalypse, or as a distinction between ‘apocalypse’ and ‘eschatology’.

1. Affirmation and Reticence

Before we explore these options, I wish to draw attention to one possible example of what Carl Schmitt understood as the theological ‘ancestry’ of secular political concepts. The phenomenon to be discussed is that of the oppositional style of politics, which now seems to have the upper-hand in many countries, with the rise of populist and authoritarian governments. The term ‘polarisation’ points to the extreme animosity between parties and factions, reinforced by the ‘bubbles’ of social media and post-truth values. Each tribe insults, denounces, and condemns the other as the source of all wickedness; truth and goodness are to be found entirely and exclusively with those of my own allegiance. The practice of ‘othering’ covers the full spectrum, from animosity to actual conflict.

There is no doubt that modern communication and media have reinforced this kind of dualism, but the pattern is ancient, and seems to be hard-wired in us as the most basic distinction of all: the delineation of what is sacred from what is non-sacred. The pull to divide the cosmos, including its inhabitants, into holy/pure/good on the one side, and unholy/impure/evil on the other, is strong. It is, nevertheless, a pull that Christians must resist, because it maligns the goodness of God's creation. The theological term for this heresy is Manichaeism, which divided the cosmos into equal and opposed principles of good and evil. What we see in our politics today is a secular version of it. Augustine of Hippo was for a time an adherent of the Manichaean world-view, before gradually returning to mainstream Christianity. Much of his writing makes sense, in fact, if we read it as the work of a 'recovering Manichean'; above all, Augustine's insistence on the Church being a home for all people – sinners included – and not a community reserved for the holy.

Why this is important for the present discussion, is that there are forms of 'apocalyptic' thinking which manifest the oppositional and violent tendencies of Manichaeism. There is a call to rejoice at the turbulent separation of good and wicked, the wheat and the weeds being separated at last. One can think of the dramatic events in the 'Left Behind' series of novels and films, in which the righteous are carried to heaven in a 'rapture', leaving the unholy behind on earth. But the imagination goes much further back, and we can point to the likes of Tertullian insisting that one of the pleasures for the redeemed in heaven will be watching the agonies of the damned (better than any gladiatorial show). Faced with this kind of apocalyptic thinking, it is hard not to recall Nietzsche's condemnation of Christianity as barely-suppressed resentment.

Here is one reason, therefore, for the ambiguity of apocalypse, its tension of affirmation and reticence. If the stress is on violent, jubilant vindication over one's enemies, a Manichaean separation, then we may speak of a 'false' apocalypse. The true meaning of apocalypse for the Christian must lie in the approach of a loving, forgiving presence. Any violence which accompanies it is from our own sinful resistance, not from the one who approaches.

The mimetic theory of René Girard helps us to understand this. His two anthropological 'discoveries' – the mimetic or imitative (therefore potentially rivalrous) nature of human desire; the intuitive practice of 'othering' (scapegoating) as a way of achieving or restoring group stability – together point to our tendency to be drawn into processes of conflict, rather than peace and reconciliation. In times of 'apocalyptic' crisis, then need to be on our guard, to work against the tide of polarisation, is important.

Girard shows how easily human beings falls into the ‘blame game’, of looking for someone outside of ourselves who can be made to carry the responsibility for what has gone wrong. Two biblical passages are cited: each tells of human origins, what happened ‘in the beginning’. The story of the Fall in Genesis describes a transgression (seeking to be like God), followed by recriminations between God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent. The episode ends with an expulsion, as Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden. The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel tells the same story, but differently, in the light of the Christ event. Here it is Christ who is expelled – he came to his own home, and his own people did not receive him (that is, they crucified him). And the divine life, which, in Genesis was prohibited to the first couple, is here offered as free gift, the power to become children of God. There are, indeed, two sides to every story.

2. Defining apocalypse, with the help of Girard

At this point it will be helpful to look at more precise definitions of apocalypse, as interpreted by Girardian scholars. Girard himself describes the ‘incredible paradox’ at the heart of apocalyptic thinking, and also of mimetic theory:

The incredible paradox that no-one is willing to accept is that the Passion turned violence loose at the same time that it set holiness free. The modern form of the sacred is thus not a [simple] return to some archaic form. It is a sacred that has been satanized by the awareness we have of it, and it indicates, through its excesses, the imminence of the Second Coming.²

Girard’s own Christian commitment does not blind him to the seriousness of the present situation. He is fully aware of the ambiguity of the apocalyptic reality, and the incredibly violent consequences of the death and resurrection of Christ. These have come about because the sacrificial order, established on the ‘founding murder’, has been overturned and rendered ineffective, so we no longer enjoy its protection:

As we understand better and better where we have come from, we realise a little better each day that this origin is coming towards us: the bolt holding in the founding murder has been drawn back by the Passion, and is today letting loose a planetary violence; and there is no way of closing the stable door.³

² René Girard, *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoit Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), xi.

³ Ibidem, x-xi.

In a collection entitled *Politics and Apocalypse*, Robert Hamerton-Kelly asserts that apocalypse is an interpretation of politics in the form of a coded narrative. A typical apocalyptic commentary is a seamless union of prophecy and politics; Jewish apocalypse and its worldview came into being as political commentary and propaganda. In apocalypse, 'something is being revealed about our world order, whether by divine grace or human reason.' The importance of this is evident in the later phase of Girard's work which, in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, takes an 'apocalyptic turn'.⁴ Through the lens of mimetic theory, the discernment of two kinds of apocalypse becomes clear:

Mimetic theory is ironically apocalyptic, because it is the opposite of what normally passes for that genre. It is nonviolent, while the vulgar apocalypse is violent, it decodes while the vulgar encodes, nevertheless, it is apocalyptic because it deals with universal history and human nature and assumes that historiography is possible and the human story is not "a tale told by an idiot." It is apocalyptic because it decodes the encryption of violence in the vulgar apocalypse, in symbols such as the divine judgement and the torture of the guilty.⁵

In the same volume, Józef Niewiadomski similarly underlines the reticence which we can see relates to the 'vulgar' or 'non-ironic' version of apocalypse.⁶ The apocalyptic imagination presents us with a puzzle, as to how the earliest Christians' firm conviction of Christ's eschatological victory co-existed with the expectation of ongoing struggle. He adopts a dramatic theology approach (drawing on Raymund Schwager and Girard) to show how 'the analogies and differences between legitimate Christian apocalyptic expectations and the undifferentiated fascination with apocalyptic scenarios become apparent'.⁷ Jesus associated himself with the apocalyptic tradition, yet explicitly rejected the apocalyptic expectations of his environment (for example, by disavowing any knowledge of dates and times).

The ambiguity of 'apocalypse' is scripturally warranted, therefore, and accounted for within mimetic theory. There is the version of apocalypse which must be rejected, as a thinly-disguised *ressentiment*; there is also a kind of 'apocalypse' which is to be welcomed. This is the approach of the

⁴ Robert Hamerton-Kelly, "An Introductory Essay", in *Politics and Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 1-28; 5.

⁵ Ibidem, 15.

⁶ Józef Niewiadomski, "»Denial of the Apocalypse« versus »Fascination with the Final Days«: Current Theological Discussion of Apocalyptic Thinking in the Perspective of Mimetic Theory", in Hamerton-Kelly, 51-67.

⁷ Ibidem, 60.

truly non-violent divine, whose proximity does not lead to conflict; it is the climactic cry of the Book of Revelation: 'Amen, Come Lord Jesus!'

Another Girardian interpretation of the apocalyptic theme is offered by James Alison, who concurs with Hamerton-Kelly, Niewiadomski, Heim, and Girard himself on the need to distinguish two apparently similar but quite different phenomena, on the basis of their relation to violence. The distinction is necessary to repeat, in order to prevent ourselves being drawn into 'Manichaean' patterns of othering. To succumb to these is to project our own fearful, resentment-soaked imagination as divine agency. Rather than specifying two kinds of apocalypse, however ('good' and 'bad', 'vulgar' and 'ironic'), Alison proposes a distinction between 'apocalyptic' and 'eschatological'.⁸ The 'eschatological imagination' is, simply, the perspective of a victim who has been raised from the dead, and is therefore utterly free of all possible mimetic entanglement and resentment. A life and hope grounded in such an imagination is the total opposite of the fearful defensiveness of apocalypticism.

3. Making the Difference

The essential difference from the perspective of mimetic theory is that 'apocalyptic' violence is the violence, not of God, but of human beings. This is true, indeed, of the Cross; Calvary is entirely the result of malevolent human beings, operating out of a warped religious sensibility; in no way should we understand it as the will of a deity seeking punitive satisfaction at the expense of his Son. The existential threats which face us now are entirely open to interpretation by the apocalyptic texts; but fundamentalists who see the ultimate violence as coming from God, and not from humanity, are missing the point of what is really going on.

S. Mark Heim writes of 'two kinds of apocalypse'.⁹ Texts such as Revelation offer absolutely contrasting alternatives- the reign of God and the reign of the anti-Christ- which can nevertheless look identical. This is because the increased violence described in Apocalyptic texts may arise from the unmasking of violence and its power. Like increasing the dose of a medicine that is no longer working, violence is redoubled, to no avail.

An important point in our discernment of good and bad apocalypse concerns how we read the relevant New Testament texts in relation to one another. The Book of Revelation tends to loom large, simply because it is the

⁸ James Alison, *Living in the End Times: the Last Things Re-imagined* (London: SPCK, 1997).

⁹ S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: a Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2006); see his chapter entitled "The Bad News about Revelation: Two Kinds of Apocalypse".

last book of the Bible, and therefore looks like the ‘last word’. It is important however to read Revelation in the light of the New Testament as a whole, and especially the gospels, and not the other way round. To this extent, the ‘little apocalypses’ of Mark 13 and Luke 17, presented as the words of Christ, should carry more hermeneutical weight. These passages allow for an ‘ironic’ reading, whereas the Book of Revelation seems to consist of more traditional patterns of religious violence: the wrath of God, exercised on behalf of the slain martyrs; cosmic warfare). The descriptions of righteous devastation and cosmic war occur in the middle of the Book of Revelation, and are not its climax. Nevertheless, these problematic passages do seem to demonstrate the scenarios envisaged by Elias Canetti, who warns against the dangers of ‘religions of lament.’¹⁰ In brief, any attempt to give articulate expression to the innocent suffering, such as we find in the great monotheistic traditions, raises the prospect of prolonged violence, as the desire for righteous vengeance takes hold. The thirst for vindication must be tempered by a desire for mercy and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion does not address the difficulty posed at the beginning of this article, about how the Christian believer might make sense of eschatological pronouncements about Christ’s second coming. What mimetic theory does do, in reinforcing the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ versions of the apocalyptic imagination, is help to identify false or misleading interpretations. It can exercise a purifying role for theological thinking.

Mimetic theory has been here before. Girard first came to widespread attention in 1972, with the publication of *La violence et le sacré*. This book sets out his hypothesis of the exclusionary mechanism by which a society establishes or restores its equilibrium in the face of escalating violence. This mechanism is the generative origin of all cultural phenomena, including religious institutions and practices: ‘Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred’. The book caused, among other things, a widespread re-evaluation of the concept of sacrifice, which for Girard was now compromised as a theological term, because of its association with sacralised violence. Girard ultimately came to accept that the term could be used by Christian theologians, provided this usage was clearly distinguished from scapegoating. Both meanings are contained in the prophecy of Caiaphas cited earlier in this

¹⁰ Canetti’s argument is discussed at length in Wolfgang Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood: On Violence and Monotheism”, in *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, eds. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (London: Continuum, 2008), 68–87.

article; but it is his unconscious affirmation of Christ's saving death which is the true meaning of his words, and not his cynical *realpolitik*.

An examination of 'apocalypse', especially in the light of Girard's later writings, would suggest a similar lexical imperative. Just as there are 'good' and 'bad' versions of sacrifice, so it seems we need to speak of 'good' and 'bad' apocalypse. Girardian scholars have refined the distinction by speaking of 'vulgar' and 'ironic' apocalypse, or affirming the eschatological imagination over against the apocalyptic. In each case the goal is the same, to delineate divine action as entirely free of any hint of retribution, to move all of us beyond the 'blame game' which comes so naturally.

Such a tightening-up of our language seems to be imperative at a time when apocalypse has become the *lingua franca* of our culture. There is little doubt that the onset of violent Islamism at the turn of the century was extremely unsettling for Girard; in *Battling to the End* he turns to the nineteenth century theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, as the prophet of the 'escalation to extremes'. This grim phenomenon describes the escalation of military conflict, what happens when war gets 'out of control'. But we are also helpless in the face of the runaway statistics of anthropogenic climate change, and the 'tipping points' of no return.

The application of mimetic theory to the existential threat of climate catastrophe turns out to be especially fruitful.¹¹ Here the blame game is fully at work, as even politicians who are agreed on the danger are unable to cooperate effectively. The description of the planet or nature as the innocent 'victim' is now a common motif. Mimetic theory, as a fully-explicated 'anthropology of the victim', inspires a theological reflection upon climate depredation which is akin to other theologies of the victim (e.g. liberationist). One can also point to the many passages in Girard's work where the phenomenon of mimetic escalation is pictured in metaphors of uncontrollable destruction: fires, floods, plagues, famines. Where these motifs appear in myths and legends, Girard reads them as a palimpsest; what is really being referred to is the deadly social unrest rising out of control. In such texts, various modes of agency – divine, human, natural – become confused or conflated. It is the same with apocalyptic texts, where the origins of violent action may be obscure. And it is recognisable in our own context:

Violence is today unleashed at a global and planetary level, bringing about something heralded by the gospel texts on this theme: a fusing of natural and man-made disasters, a confusion of the natural and the artificial

¹¹ See Michael Northcott, "Girard, Climate Change and Apocalypse", in *Can We Survive our Origins?*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello, and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 287-310.

orders: global warming and the rising of oceans are today no longer just metaphors [of human violence]. The violence which once generated the sacred, no longer produces anything but itself.¹²

Precisely because of this, an ability to discern the signs of false apocalyptic, as opposed to the advent of the genuine sacred, is essential. Apocalyptic thinking, with its temptation to desperate Manichaeism, has become a *lingua franca* for our culture. René Girard's mimetic theory offers a way of decoding it.

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¹² Girard, x. For further reflection on the conflation of human and natural causes, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

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SUMMARY

The article attempts a precise understanding of the concept of apocalypse, both in its biblical origins, but also in its contemporary usage in addressing political, economic and environmental crises. An examination of the New Testament passages, especially the ‘little apocalypses’ in the gospels of Mark and Luke, indicate a mixture of affirmation and reticence with regard to the apocalyptic mindset. The mimetic hypothesis of René Girard allows us to explain this ambiguity by detecting in apocalypticism a temptation to Manichaean polarisation against those regarded as impure or wicked. There needs to be a distinction between this kind of false projection and a true apocalyptic vision, according to which God is emphatically affirmed as beyond all violence and vengeful ‘othering’. Various options are offered by Girard and Girardian scholars, who speak of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ apocalypse, or ‘ironic’ and ‘vulgar’. James Alison offers a contrast between (violent) apocalyptic and (non-violent) eschatological imaginations. We may note that the lexical revision under way here is similar to the discussion around the correct meaning of ‘sacrifice’ earlier in Girard’s career.

Keywords: apocalypse, Book of Revelation, René Girard, mimetic theory, religion and violence

