

Revelation, Apocalypse, End-times Fascism, and Being Here Now
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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In June, I traveled to Baltimore for the big annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists. I took an overnight flight and arrived at 5:45 in the morning. So, after stretching out breakfast at a little diner as long as I could, I went to the hotel to say that if there were any way I could check in before 4:00 in the afternoon, that would be great. The person looked up my booking and said, I can check you in right now. This was 8:00 in the morning. Excellent! They processed my reservation and handed me a little holder with my key card and my room number written on the outside: Room 666.

You may know that in the Book of Revelation, the last book of, and the last book added to the Christian Bible, 666 is the sign of the beast - which, by the way, came out of the sea, has seven heads and ten horns, the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion. These days the “beast” is more often known as the “anti-Christ,” one of Jesus’ primary opponents in the end-time battles of good vs evil.

People whose shopping bill has added up to \$6.66 have screamed, left everything, and run out of stores. A friend told me this week that his family always paid an additional penny to avoid the \$6.66. After wondering for a moment whether the hotel clerk was trying to send me a message, I decided that Room 666 was probably just a sure go-to because it was likely the last room ever rented, and so they knew it would be available. My room 666 was just fine, ...although 3 days later I did come down with COVID.

The thing is, that many people who aren’t at all familiar with the Book of Revelation are familiar with the idea of the number 666 marking something or someone as terribly bad or evil. When Ronald Reagan moved into a house whose street number was 666, he insisted on changing the address to a less satanic number, though he himself was thought by some to be the anti-Christ because each of his names - Ronald Wilson Reagan – has 6 letters.

The Book of Revelation is by far the most popular – and most misunderstood - book of the Christian Bible, and its language, images, and themes are threaded everywhere in the general culture: Armageddon, Judgement Day, The Grapes of Wrath, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, heaven’s “pearly gates” and streets paved with gold, The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, the Grim Reaper, Hitler’s Thousand Year Reich, and Princes’ song “7” among them.

The book includes letters to seven specific Christian churches of antiquity, meant in part to encourage them in the face of violent persecution (I’ll come back to this), and in part to admonish those who were getting a little too familiar and friendly with their local non-Christian

customs and values. It includes a travelogue of the author's mystical tour of the heavenly realms.

It is filled with wild, dynamic, colorful and confusing scenes, signs, and symbols, angels and extraordinary creatures above and below. Someone said it's as if the beings came out of one of Dr Suess's dreams after he fell asleep reading a Stephen King horror novel. To some, the stories in it most resemble an acid trip. Its overlapping timelines are filled with plagues, other disasters, much violence, blood and death and ultimately, a spirit of retribution and revenge on the way to a happy ending for those who are faithful.

It is presented, in part, as a prophecy of what is to come, and also as an apocalypse, the Latin word for "revealing," a revelation of what will happen in the end times, of what is otherwise hidden. And while there are many fascinating things to discover and explore about the Book of Revelation, it's the prophecy and apocalypse aspects that I want to point to this morning, because some very powerful and passionate people are drawing on their interpretation of - if not always the details, the general spirit of it - to drive national policy, shape national politics, and reshape the culture of the United States.

Here's Jonathan Kirsch's synopsis of the central story line of The Book of Revelation in his book, *A History of the End of the World*. I invite you to keep in mind what's unfolding right now in the world and how someone drawn to literal interpretations of the Bible might line it up with our time:

"The beginning of the end, according to Revelation, will be [signaled] by mysterious signs and wonders—a black sun and a blood-red moon, the stars falling to earth, persecutors and false prophets, [earthquakes, floods, plague and pestilence and famine. [and a series of mighty battles in heaven and on earth.] Then the satanic arch-villain [the beast] who has come to be called the Antichrist will rise to absolute power on earth.

After seven years of oppression and persecution under the [heel of the] Antichrist, Jesus Christ will descend from heaven in the guise of a warrior-king, lead a celestial army of [bodily] resurrected saints and martyrs to victory over the demonic hordes at the Battle of Armageddon, drape Satan in chains and confine him in a bottomless pit, and Jesus will reign over an earthly kingdom for one thousand years.

At the end of [this] millennium, Satan will break out of his bonds, and Jesus Christ will be compelled to fight a second and final battle. At last, [all] the dead [from all times] will be resurrected, the living and dead alike will be judged, and the earth as we know it will be destroyed once and for all.

The end of the world, according to Revelation, will be followed by the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth," a celestial paradise where the [faithful, the] Christian saints and martyrs will spend eternity in perfect bliss. Everyone else will sizzle forever along with Satan in a lake of fire and brimstone."

“That,” he writes, “is the pitch line for the book of Revelation.”

APOCALYPSE

One of the ironies to me, is that the book of Revelation, like the many other Jewish and Christian apocalypses written in its time, was meant to encourage and give hope to its readers, who were suffering under brutal regimes. In the case of the Book of Revelation, it was to encourage the Christians who were suffering intense and violent persecution by the Roman Empire. The point wasn't the literal details of the fantastical story line, but the way the figures in the story were, at the time, rather obvious symbols of the key figures in their current experience of persecution, with the main message being: yes, times are terrible, and it's likely to get worse, much worse, before it gets better, BUT... it's going to work out in the end, God's got this eventually. And though you are suffering and will suffer more, if you stay faithful to Jesus's teaching, you will eventually be taken home to paradise.

Mark Powell, the author of one of my seminary textbooks, writes that to try to interpret the Book of Revelation is to misinterpret it. It's appeal, he writes, is to the imagination; it's a book to be experienced, not explained. For all its death and destruction, it was meant to be encouraging and hopeful.

I'm not a biblical scholar, my personal theology and spirituality are not Bible-based, and I'm not looking there for prophecy of what's to come, but I'm finding it increasingly important to be aware of what some others are making of it, because here's the black and white bottom line of the Revelation story if you take it at all literally: the only way for God to defeat the Devil – or for good to defeat evil - is to destroy the world and start all over again.

As Kirsch puts it: “Above all, the moral calculus of Revelation — (which includes) the demonization of one's enemies, the sanctification of revenge taking, and the notion that history must end in catastrophe—can be detected in some of the worst atrocities and excesses of every age, including our own. For all of these reasons, the rest of us ignore the book of Revelation only at our impoverishment and, more to the point, at our own peril.”

END-TIMES FASCISM

Which brings us to end-times fascism....and the insights of Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, as they expressed them in an article in The Guardian and numerous related interviews since.

They point out that progressive people (as some of us identify) are confused by the unexpected coalition of Extremist Christian Nationalists, impossibly wealthy, mostly more secular tech-bros, authoritarian political figures like Donald Trump and his key players, and much, much less wealthy Preppers, people preparing physically for catastrophe, some for ordinary catastrophe, and some for ultimate catastrophe. A preppter I know refers to it as preparing “for when the world goes dark,” and in their voice I can hear that they are not merely preparing “just in case” it happens, they are expecting, even assuming, that things will go dark at some point.

What they all have in common at root, say Klein and Taylor, is that they have given up on the world. They are, in various ways, all believing and behaving as if we are entering the end times. Many of the tech bros are not in denial about climate change, says Klein, they know the world is burning, they just see it as inevitable and they are throwing gasoline on the flames, as they extract resources to build as fast as they can their personal AI-aided bunkers, or their own protectively bordered city-states for the chosen few (Trump proposed establishing a set of Freedom Cities already during his first term), city-states without regulation or pesky government control, or their tech-protected walled countries, or their colony on Mars. The masses will be left to their own devices. The chosen few are preparing to bunker down.

They have, each in their own way, given up on most other people and on people caring for each other beyond their in-group.

I speak often of the fundamental importance of empathy to our UU values and progressive values in general, our ability to imagine what others are feeling. Elon Musk claims that empathy is the fundamental weakness of western civilization. Certain Christian writers are writing now of “toxic empathy” and their view that left-wing activists are using empathy as a tool of manipulation to force their views on the issues of abortion, gender, sexuality, immigration, and social justice. Mark Zuckerberg says it’s time to bring back aggression. The attack on empathy, which has often been seen in western history as a feminine value and virtue, tends to be wrapped up with misogynist machismo.

You’ll be glad to know that Venture capitalist, co-founder of Pay-Pal, 103rd wealthiest person in the world, and Biblical literalist Peter Thiel, has identified the real anti-Christ for us. Over the centuries various Popes and any number of Protestant reformers have been labeled the beast or the anti-Christ – for the original writer of the Book of Revelation, likely the Roman Emperor Nero. Since then, also Hitler, Sadam Husein, and more recently Vladimir Putin, Prince William, Pope Leo. Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and for a week in Baltimore, maybe me.

But no, the real anti-Christ, according to Peter Thiel, is... Greta Thunberg, who he believes is taking over the world by stoking fear of existential risks like environmental disaster. He views the environmental movement as blocking technological progress, which is for him, apparently, the highest good.

BEING HERE NOW

So, why share all this disturbing perspective (just skimming this insight and information) in this service and in this community, when our spirits and our bodies are already wrung out with fear and frustration and anger, when we are ready for relief, and when the fire-hose of daily news is feeding into our own progressive apocalyptic visions of the end of the world as we know it.

Because, says Naomi Klein, “If we can find the courage to look, to really look, at the *bleakness* of what [people with apocalyptic visions] believe in – we can recognize the opportunity” that this moment opens up, and can see a path forward.

The techies and wealthy people who are surrendering to the expectation of apocalypse, and who are in fact fanning the flames of apocalypse, have given up on the future. They don’t see a future. They are betting on climate change, willing to burn it all down for the sake of the extractive and polluting and gargantuan energy needs of AI, which they believe will save them inside their bunkers of various sizes and configurations. They are betting on climate disasters, betting on increasing dangers, betting on increasing inequality, and betting on democracy crumbling and societies collapsing.

So are extreme end-times Christian nationalists, in their own way, betting on the end, believing that violent and bloody collapse must happen in order for Jesus to return, for God’s plan to move forward, and for a new world to be born. For them it is inevitable and right, even if painful.

And so are everyday disenfranchised doomsday preppers of many stripes, in their own way, betting on the end, with so much frustration, discouragement, and fear in their hearts.

They have all, in important ways, given up on the future.

And here, say Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, is our opening and our antidote: It is to believe in a future, to not give up on the future, to not succumb to our own apocalyptic expectations. It is to cherish the sacredness of here and now, to appreciate the beauty and wonders of this place, to invest in here (and now and each other) for the sake of a future.

By abandoning the future, those who are living into their apocalyptic expectations are ceding the future to us, placing it in OUR hands. Let this be a pivot, say Taylor and Klein.

Want to make a difference? Start by claiming in your heart and your vision and your behavior, a future beyond this crisis, by not losing sight of a future beyond this crisis.

This, the two of them say, has a chance to be the most potent possible gravity source for building a wide coalition across many kinds of difference – to build solidarity with those who are not giving up on the future.

It doesn’t mean easy, it doesn’t mean quick, it doesn’t mean not painful, it will indeed likely get worse, perhaps much worse, before it gets better, but it is the most potent and cost effective of resources: holding on to a future beyond these times, even beyond our lifetimes, and building connectedness that is not about fear.

That’s what ancient apocalyptic writings like the book of Revelation were actually meant to accomplish. To keep alive a sense of a future, grounding us in the possibilities of this moment.

Drawing on language from Astra Taylor and Naomi Klein,

Let us be a people who believe in the beauty and value of this realm,
Who believe in this world, in the beauty and extraordinary gift of creation,
People who believe enough in each other,
And so, who claim the future that is being ceded to us.

And so, my people of empathy, and compassion, and resistance and resilience, and
sustainability and justice, and wonder, and love –
so may we together be.

Primary resources consulted and cited

A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization by Jonathan Kirsch

["The Rise of End Times Fascism"](#) by Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor in the Guardian

[Naomi Klein & Astra Taylor: Are We Entering "End Times Fascism"?](#) Video interview on Laura Flanders and Friends

["Naomi Klein on Trump, Musk, Far Right & "End Times Fascism"](#) Video interview on Democracy Now

Introducing the New Testament (a textbook) by Mark Allan Powell

"The New Testament," a Teaching Company course taught by Bart D. Ehrman