

Preface

APOCALYPTIC ESCHATOLOGY SETS US questions that lead us into the heart of the relationship between ideas and their expression in culture. The significance of apocalyptic eschatology becomes apparent upon a brief consideration of its immense existential scope. Human beings seem to possess an extraordinary capacity to rise above present adversity by looking forward to future possibilities out of which to create new horizons of hope. Apocalyptic-eschatological language furnishes the human imagination with a munificent array of conceptual possibilities through which to envision an “ideal world.”¹ These conceptual possibilities can be directed towards the transfiguration of present circumstances through hope. Such hope is predicated on the power of the apocalyptic-eschatological imagination to conceive of the future as the realm of “realised possibility.”² Apocalyptic eschatology postulates an earth-shattering vision of hope by providing an overarching conception of reality and cosmic purpose through which to surmount the tragedy, irony and apparent contingency of human experience. The ubiquity of the utopian impulse throughout history in diverse religions and cultures testifies to the notion that the hope for a better world is an ineradicable fact of the human condition.³

Apocalyptic eschatology is the language of human hope.⁴ As such it supplies the conceptual resources through which utopian impulses are articulated and enacted in human life and history. Although often associated specifically with Christian theology, apocalyptic eschatology,

1. Ernst Bloch alluded to the notions of “Tagträume” and “Wunschbilder”, which he posited as the preconditions of artistic creation. See Kesser, *Ernst Blochs Ästhetik*, 70–72.

2. Bloch, *Literary Essays*, 342.

3. Levitas, “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society,” 53.

4. Hayes, *Visions of a Future*, 93–95.

as “an inherent . . . component of the human condition,”⁵ is a matter of decisive historical significance that extends beyond particular denominations and theological perspectives. A proper phenomenology of the human condition recognizes that hope, as a primary conviction involving the will as well as reasons and feelings, inhabits every aspect of human motivation and action.⁶ Hope, in the words of Ernst Bloch, is “a basic feature of human consciousness.”⁷ Hope initiates a process of existential transformation through which human subjects are endowed with the capacity to engage in creative acts of self-surpassing and self-transcendence and thereby to elevate themselves to new levels of being.

Yet far from being confined to existential conceptions of individual development, hope has social consequences that can transform cultures and alter the course of world history. The shaping power of apocalyptic-eschatological hope as a change-agent of cultures consists in the imaginative vision it sets forth for social reconciliation and cosmic consummation. Theologians have alluded to the notion of a “messianic idea,” which denotes a gradual yet inexorable spiritual resolution in human history.⁸ The culmination of this idea is described as a utopian golden age in which “all that is in heaven and under the earth flows together in one laudatory voice.”⁹

The principle of a messianic resolution perceives in the historical process not a chaotic improvisation of unrelated accidents but a dynamic unfolding development which moves towards a determined *telos* of “a fuller disclosure and realisation of life’s essential meaning.”¹⁰ In the Christian understanding, this resolution is manifested in the eschatological metaphor of the kingdom of God and the conviction that history is orientated according to a messianic purpose. History is under the control of a benevolent, sovereign Lord who will ultimately save the world and its inhabitants from sin, death, persecution, fear, angst and every other kind of existential impediment to human flourishing. According to this interpretation, the messianic resolution of history will culminate

5. Gardiner, “Bakhtin’s Carnival: Utopia as Critique,” 44.

6. Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity*, 244.

7. Bloch, quoted in Amsler, “Pedagogy Against ‘Dis-Utopia,’” 305.

8. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, 7–12.

9. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.

10. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, ii, 2.

in a “glorious appearing” (Titus 2:13) of the “Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64).

Far from being confined to the dusty monographs of erudite, esoteric theological scholarship, apocalyptic eschatology is, and has been throughout history, an integral and universal part of human history and experience, reaching into the hidden depths of both popular and elite cultural production.¹¹ “Apocalypse,” asserts Thomas Altizer, “is at the very center of an original Christianity, just as it has been a primal ground of a uniquely Western and Christian history and culture, and has even been reborn in our contemporary world.”¹² Recent scholarship in millennial studies has reinforced the notion that “apocalyptic and millennial ideas are far more central to western historical consciousness than was previously recognized.”¹³ The apocalyptic-eschatological narrative of hope has the power to shape nations and to change the course of world history. For the Marxist-atheist thinker, Ernst Bloch, to be human meant to exhibit the capacity to hope. Thus arose Bloch’s formulation of the dynamic *spero ergo ero*¹⁴ as an inversion of Descartes’ static *cogito ergo sum*. Out of this primary conviction arose his notion of a “utopian impulse,” which he posited as the main driving force behind all of the great creative artistic, cultural and political achievements of humankind.¹⁵ Likewise, for Nikolai Berdyaev, the messianic idea of eschatological fulfilment was nothing less than the “basic theme of history.”¹⁶ Theologians have also recognized the visionary power of the apocalyptic-eschatological narrative on the course of world history. “The religious and secular enactments of this narrative,” notes Catherine

11. For a general historical overview, see Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse: A Brief History*. An example of a work which effectively uncovers the subtle yet pervasive ways in which apocalyptic ideas inhabit modes of popular cultural production is Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse*. For an overview of the ways in which apocalyptic motifs prevail in American popular culture, see Rehill, *The Apocalypse Is Everywhere*.

12. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 9.

13. Shantz, “Millennialism and Apocalypticism,” 42.

14. “*Ich hoffe, also werde ich sein*” (I hope, therefore I will be); Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 332. My thanks to Kurt Seidel for giving me this reference.

15. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, ii, 624 (originally published as *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* between 1954 and 1959). Bloch regarded his philosophy of hope as a genuine contemporary expression of the apocalyptic tradition of the biblical prophets. See Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 333; see also Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 3.

16. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 200.

Keller, “have generated . . . much of the dynamism of Western history.”¹⁷ In his radical theological appropriation of Ernst Bloch’s *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954–59), Jürgen Moltmann made a decisive contribution to our understanding of the power of this narrative in world history. Rejecting deterministic conceptions of historical progress, Moltmann opts for the notions of creativity and freedom that inhere in the idea of the fulfillment of the divine promise in history.¹⁸ Moreover, according to Paul Ricoeur’s commentary on Moltmann, this fulfilment signifies not an end or definitive closure but “an increase, a surplus, a ‘not yet’ which maintains the tension in history.”¹⁹

History furnishes countless examples of the epoch-making dynamism of apocalyptic-eschatological convictions. “History from Abraham to Marx,” observes John Howard Yoder, “demonstrates that significant action, for good or for evil, is accomplished by those whose present action is illuminated by eschatological hope.”²⁰ Every major world religion, including Judaism,²¹ Islam,²² Hinduism,²³ and Buddhism²⁴ (notwithstanding conspicuous differences both within and among these religions) has retained an apocalyptic-eschatological consciousness. Thus, despite fundamental differences in conceptions of historical development,²⁵ each variation manifests a certain commonality on the point of its orientation towards the transcendence of death and the possibility of the transfiguration of present circumstances into a greater state of existence. These notions have been a wellspring of hope for countless millions throughout world history. The focus of this study,

17. Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, x.

18. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 98.

19. Ricoeur, “Freedom in the Light of Hope,” 405.

20. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 71.

21. Idel, “On Apocalypticism in Judaism,” 40–74; Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*.

22. Zakzouk, “The Islamic Doctrine of the Eschatological Completion,” 89–100; see also, Kehl, *Eschatologie*, 81–90; Kabbani, *The Approach of Armageddon? An Islamic Perspective*; Kenney, “Millennialism and Radical Islamist Movements,” 688–715.

23. Knipe, “Zur Rolle des provisorischen Körpers,” 62–81.

24. Upton, *Legends of the End*, 29–31.

25. Wessinger argues that millennial thinking does not necessarily presuppose a linear view of history, noting that forms of apocalypticism have prevailed in Asian contexts in which history was understood in terms of cyclical patterns. See Wessinger, “Millennialism with and without the Mayhem,” 51.

however, is upon a certain conception of apocalyptic eschatology that is associated specifically with Christian theology.

This distinctive contribution to our understanding of the underlying meaning of world history and human destiny was inaugurated two thousand years ago through the proclamation of a radical young Jewish preacher from the town of Nazareth who was destined to change the course of world history.²⁶ He began by announcing that the “kingdom of God” was “now at hand” (Mark 1:15). Towards the end of his life, before he was put to death by crucifixion, he declared that there would be a fearsome ordeal, a period of unprecedented adversity, known as “great tribulation”, which was to presage the end of the world (Matt 24:21).²⁷ According to the Gospel accounts, Christ, following his resurrection from the dead and before his ascension into heaven, left his followers with the reassurance that he would be with them “to the end of the age” together with an earlier promise that he would return again one day in glory and send his angels to gather up his chosen people “from the four winds” (Matt 28:20; 24:31).

This vision of hope finds its definitive expression in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of John, in which a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, is depicted. Many have regarded this distinctive depiction of cosmic consummation, in which a redeemed humanity is to enjoy perpetual bliss in this ultimate arena of human fulfilment and flourishing, as one of the most creative conceptions of human destiny ever to have been produced by the human imagination. Countless myriads down through the centuries of church history have been inspired by the depiction of the effulgence of the heavenly city, which will be such that God’s people will have “no need of the light of the sun or moon for the Lord their God will be radiant in their midst” (Rev 22:5). Despite the lapse of nearly two thousand years since these prophecies were first transcribed, the Christian vision of apocalyptic-eschatological hope has inspired innumerable generations and remains the basis of hope for millions throughout the world today.

26. In saying this it is important to note the indebtedness of Christian conceptions of apocalyptic eschatology to the preceding prophetic tradition of ancient Hebraic texts and the great extent to which Christ himself draws on the imaginative apocalyptic-eschatological visions depicted in earlier Jewish scriptures. This will be acknowledged in more detail in chapter 2.

27. Cf. Mark 13:10; Luke 21:23; Acts 7:11.

But apocalyptic eschatology, in common with all major historical change-agents, has its dark sides. On this point Paul Ricoeur's remark is particularly lapidary: "evil and hope are more closely connected than we will ever think them."²⁸ Twentieth-century history testifies to the diverse manifestations of apocalyptic eschatology and to the catastrophic consequences of misplaced millennial optimism.²⁹ Beneath the maniacal fantasies of Adolf Hitler and the callous brutality of Joseph Stalin's purges there lay varying degrees of an apocalyptic-eschatological conception of history.³⁰ Many studies have demonstrated that Hitler believed that he was engaged in an apocalyptic struggle against the Jews and Communists on behalf of Christian civilization.³¹ As an important part of the programme of its brazen and systematic campaign of falsification of German history, the Nazi propaganda machine seized upon the notion of the "Third Reich" which was made to correspond with the "age of the Holy Spirit" alluded to by the medieval apocalyptic seer, Joachim of Flora.³² Moreover, the apocalyptic undertones of the Nazi conception of the "Final Solution" (*die Endlösung*) are unmistakably apparent.³³ As historians, theologians, and literary theorists have pointed out, the Nazi's conception of the thousand-year Reich was inspired explicitly by the millennial reign of the saints prophesied in Revelation 20.³⁴ Similar claims have also been made with regard to Communism,

28. Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 423. For a contemporary literary appropriation of this apparent link between evil and hope, see Shalom Auslander, *Hope: A Tragedy*.

29. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 167–68.

30. This thesis is powerfully articulated by John Gray in his *Black Mass*; cf. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

31. Idinopulos, "Nazism, Millenarianism and the Jews," 298; Michael Burleigh's work, *The Third Reich*, devotes considerable attention to the millennial aspects of Nazi ideology. For a detailed account of the roots of Nazism in popular millennialism, see Redles, *Hitler's Millennial Reich*. See also Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement*. Moreover, the anti-Semitic invectives contained in Hitler's own *Mein Kampf* are laden with apocalyptic overtones.

32. Frank Kermode makes this connection in his *The Sense of an Ending*, 12–13. Joachim's vision of the "Third Age" has surfaced in various other forms throughout history and can be discerned in the millennial programmes of Thomas Müntzer, Girolamo Savonarola, G. E. Lessing, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin among others.

33. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 11.

34. Robbins and Palmer, *Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem*, 9; Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 193; Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*. Cohn refers to such beliefs as

which some have argued was just as much a messianic, apocalyptic religion as it was a political ideology.³⁵ The important point to draw from this in terms of the present study is that apocalyptic belief has its dark sides. Although utopian visions can inspire human agents to heroic acts of compassion and self-sacrifice, their implied hermeneutic of absolute commitment also render them vulnerable to dehumanizing ideologies. Put to the service of such ideologies, millennial belief can exacerbate what one theologian calls “the self-destructive potentialities of human creativity.”³⁶ Future endeavors in millennial studies must thus be aware of a central paradox of apocalyptic belief: that is, the extent to which millennialism provides an auspicious ideological habitat in which the most extravagant affirmations of human hope can coexist with the most fearsome expressions of inhuman terror and brutality.

Moreover, the blood-curdling rhetoric of many biblical apocalyptic-eschatological texts have frequently provoked strenuous objections on account of their alleged inhumanity and brutality which, it is claimed, have been seized upon by religious fanatics as a warrant for their militant and violent agendas.³⁷ It would be impertinent to reject such criticisms as mere idle remonstrations, for, as Harry O. Maier rightly points out in his following list of thought-provoking questions:

Who . . . does not pale at Revelation’s two-hundred-mile-long river of human blood, as high as a horse’s bridle, pouring out from the winepress of God’s wrath (Rev. 14:20)? Whose stomach

aspects of a pathological condition, which he identifies as “revolutionary millennialism.” This belief, according to Cohn, manifested clear destructive tendencies and Cohn claims to identify instances of it in the Crusades and National Socialism.

35. This claim was made by Fritz Gerlich, in his book, *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom Tausendjährigen Reich*, in which he described Communism as “*ein Kind des neueren Chiliasmus*.” Nikolai Berdyaev likewise maintained that the Soviet communism of his time was “a transformation and deformation of the old Russian messianic idea.” See Berdyaev, *The Origin of Communism*, 228. For a more recent account of the religious dimensions of Communism, see Crossman, *The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism*. Alistair Key focuses specifically on the messianic aspects of Marx’s eschatological conception of history in his article, “Marx’s Messianic Faith,” 101–13.

36. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, 44.

37. A example of such criticisms is D. H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse*, which condemned Revelation in particular as “the most detestable book” of the Bible and the product of a “second-rate mind.” George Bernhard Shaw likewise condemned the book, describing the text as “a curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation”; quoted in Phelan, “Revelation, Empire and the Violence of God,” 66.

does not turn at that vision of birds gorged on the flesh of the dead (19:17–18)? Who can warm to the damned thrown into lakes of burning fire (19:20; 20:14–15)? Who does not cover their eyes in horror upon witnessing this text's history in culture? . . . Who can estimate the apocalyptic sum of all those gulags and concentration camps designed to usher in a Revelation-inspired millennium?³⁸

The texts of biblical apocalyptic eschatology, in particular the book of Revelation, have also been indicted on account of their alleged militant content which is said to provide ideological fuel for the hell-fire sermonising and irresponsible psychological manipulation of religious communities by pathological egomaniacs. The unimaginable terror of the Jonestown episode of 1978 which resulted in the mass “suicide” of 918 people provides us with a vertiginous example of the calamitous consequences which can ensue when a perverted utopian ideology, derived largely from esoteric readings of apocalyptic-eschatological texts, is abused by a charismatic leader.³⁹ The tragic deaths of the Branch Davidians in 1993 likewise illustrate the catastrophic ramifications which can arise from the misuse of apocalyptic eschatology. This deadly altercation at Mount Carmel in Waco, Texas, arose when another charismatic leader, David Koresh, declared himself to be the Lamb of the Apocalypse and gathered together a band of followers who were convinced by his proclamation of the imminent fulfilment of the opening of the seven seals of Revelation 5. The result was a conflagration between Koresh's supporters and federal agents that led to an inferno in which seventy-six men, women, children, and infants were incinerated.⁴⁰ Jonestown and Waco were both (to varying degrees) underpinned by utopian, esoteric interpretations of apocalyptic-eschatological biblical texts, which transpired in tragedy.

The rich and diverse landscape of Northern Ireland evangelicalism during the Troubles is ideally suited to this study of the ways in which apocalyptic eschatology can transform cultures. Like all cultural contexts in which apocalyptic-eschatological themes retained a compelling

38. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 165.

39. According to some accounts, the circumstances of many of these deaths might be more accurately categorized as murder. The theological convictions of Jones and the People's Temple are explicated in Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*.

40. For a detailed, perceptive and sympathetic account of these events and the beliefs of Koresh and his supporters see Newport, *The Branch Davidians*.

contemporary relevance, the history of Northern Ireland during the late twentieth century, although avoiding the same kind of conflagrations as Jonestown and Waco, nevertheless manifested both the light and dark sides of apocalyptic eschatology. For some the biblical apocalyptic-eschatological texts engendered a sense of foreboding and insecurity which manifested itself as cultural pessimism, social exclusion or sectarian violence. For others apocalyptic eschatology was interpreted as a vision of hope and a prototype of the redeemed community and, as such, was used to promote a core ethic of inclusive humanity and compassion in order to surmount the conventional distinctions between “Protestant” and “Catholic.”

The ways in which a community’s interpretation of apocalyptic-eschatological texts illuminates important characteristics of the community itself is one of the issues addressed in the following study. Thus I shall examine the ways in which these texts became embodied in the various evangelical communities. The aim will be to portray the apocalyptic-eschatological beliefs and basic theological convictions of the much-misunderstood cultures within Northern Ireland evangelicalism. My hope is that what follows will contribute to a better understanding of how apocalyptic eschatology influences culture—for better or worse—through an original analysis of its application to Northern Ireland during the Troubles.