

CREATION AND ESCHATOLOGY

- Topic: Revisioning Apocalyptic: the Contributions of Newman and Merton to Eschatology Today
- Convener: Mary Doak, University of San Diego
- Moderator: Natalie Weaver, Ursuline College
- Presenters: Damon McGraw, University of Notre Dame
Christopher Pramuk, Xavier University

This session explored the revival of apocalyptic as an essential aspect of Christian faith and a crucial element in the praxis of Christian discipleship today. The conversation took as its starting point the claim that apocalypticism has for too long been treated as an embarrassment by academic theologians, with the result that apocalyptic has been ceded to fundamentalist predictions of an imminent end while academic and mainstream theologies have developed an overly progressive eschatology. Notwithstanding the fact that the revival of apocalypticism has been envisioned as a necessary interruption and critique of modern academic theology, both presenters argued for greater attention to recent theologians whose apocalyptic dimensions have been overlooked.

In his presentation, “Remembering How to Watch for the Second Coming,” Damon McGraw argued for a retrieval of John Henry Newman’s perspective on the imminence of the second coming. A return to Newman’s understanding of time as no longer running toward but rather along the end could enable theologians to overcome the academic disdain for apocalypticism (which inadvertently contributes to the flourishing of an unchecked popular apocalyptic enthusiasm). During this “extended moment” between the first and second comings, all ages are understood to be equally near the Parousia so that the events of every age foreshadow the last days. Newman thus called for a practice of disciplined alertness to the enemies of God’s reign, symbolized by the apocalyptic images of a deceptive “Antichrist” and an imperialistic “Babylon.” McGraw contended that Newman’s practice of Christian watching results in an attentive detachment that is able to interrupt intellectual totalities and to resist the imperial regimes that are contrary to the reign of God. This apocalyptic watching further eschews the demonization often found in apocalyptic thought by recognizing that every source of light has its dark side.

Also concerned to restore apocalyptic as an important aspect of Christianity neglected (or misinterpreted) in modernity, Christopher Pramuk called our attention to the apocalyptic dimensions in Thomas Merton’s later Christological thinking, in which Pramuk discerned an anticipation of aspects of liberation and political theology. In his presentation, “Christ ‘Held Down to Street Level’: Irony and Apocalyptic in Thomas Merton’s Late Christology,” Pramuk noted that Merton interrupted Christological triumphalism to reflect instead on the meaning of Christ’s lordship of a history that has come apart, finding Christ “behind a veil of humility” in the bombed city and the concentration camp. Merton’s ironic and analogical apocalyptic emphasized the essential oneness of humanity and the

locus of God's presence already among us in the poor, weak, and vulnerable. Thus resisting the sectarian apocalypticism that inspires violence toward all others along with the dualism of an overly dialectical stance, Merton developed an ironic recognition of the coexistence of opposites in all of us, a stance that demands a humble yet prophetic critique of society and an urgent sense of solidarity, intensely aware of Christ's presence now in those whose need is most desperate.

The lively conversation that followed these two presentations was especially concerned with the ways in which apocalyptic functions to critique social injustice as well as with the question of which rhetorical forms and genres are most appropriate to the revised, humble apocalypticism that both presenters advocated.

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