



GOD
AND
POWER

COUNTER-APOCALYPTIC JOURNEYS

CATHERINE KELLER

FORTRESS PRESS
MINNEAPOLIS

Contents

Preface: Theopoetic Justice
vii

PART ONE The United States of Apocalypse: Mapping Our Situation

1. The Armageddon of 9/11:
Lament for the New Millennium
3

2. Preemption and Omnipotence:
A Niebuhrian Prophecy
17

PART TWO Of Beasts and Whores: Examining Our Political Unconscious

3. Territory, Terror, and Torture:
Dreamreading the Apocalypse
35

4. Ms. Calculating the Endtimes:
Gender Styles of Apocalypse
53

5. Eyes All Over:
Liberation and Deconstruction
67

PART ONE

THE UNITED STATES OF APOCALYPSE



Mapping
Our
Situation

1

The Armageddon of 9/11: Lament for the New Millennium

Hallelujah. The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.
—Revelation 19:3

The wind is blowing north. As I step out on my twentieth-floor balcony for a breath of sunny autumn stimulation, two months after and ninety blocks north, I am startled to smell it again: that unmistakable, acrid aroma of roasted chemicals. “The smoke of her burning.” Nothing collapses distance like the sense of smell. This “she” of Revelations 18 and 19—the great city, her people, her “flutists and trumpeters,” her “artisans,” her “merchants” who “were the magnates of the earth,” the struggling, many-hued workers, the pale proud elite, those who died, those who live—I breathe them in as I write. “Alas, alas, the great city.” (November 2001)

Pardon my apocalypse. But bear with it. It is not my own.

Apocalypse is going around. As though on cue, we enact a motif, a vignette, a fragment of its narrative: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and secular. Apocalypse has been cycling through for centuries. But still, if one doesn't happen to be some sort of fundamentalist, it is not often that one can quote its primary text with such immediacy:

Alas, alas, the great city,
clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,

with jewels, and with pearls!
 For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!
 (Rev. 18:16-17)

In the wake of that single hour a global economy, long wasteful of the earth and its poor, shuddered portentously. And consider the fourth seal—the pale horse, sickly green, whose “rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence.” (6:8). So the United States claimed military authority over the far reaches of the earth. Famine threatened Afghanistan; the pestilence of anthrax filtered (all too *literally*, Latin: “of the letter”) through our letters. A plane fell from the New York sky. Osama “I love death” bin Laden announced his capacity to release the nuclear horse. With theatrical flair Manhattan even performed a very rare earthquake. A good moment for religious literalists!

The amplifying feedback loop of dread continues years later to encircle the planet. Because the religious right will also continue to exploit the anxiety, it is crucial that people of a more honest faith not abandon the Apocalypse to the fundamentalists. We too must face and name the mythic scale, the planetary drama, of such a moment. Those of us who do not pretend to read the present off the surface of the Bible have all the more responsibility to read—*theologically* if not literally—the “signs of the times.” How else shall we discern within the fluctuations of fear, aggression, and denial an alternative frequency, a pulsation of hope? Hope for us may precisely *not* be about a final omnipotent intervention from above. It may rather inspire a just and sustainable peace process. For now, we are in a war process, a “war on terror” unlike any before in its strangely boundless unpredictability—and so paradoxically more open to the phantasmagoria of apocalyptic prediction. The literal script pushes toward total war: only then, in the end, comes the *pax apocalyptica*. A literalizing apocalypse does not reflect on ancient prophecy—it tries to act it out. It may take secular form as well as religious. Thus, as Edward Said commented a week after 9/11, we are left with gimmicks like “the clash of civilizations” or “Islam versus the West”—“better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time.”¹ These absolute contrasts demonize the opposition; they thus enact an ancient, ever-available script.

A counter-apocalypse suggests another reading of the script of apocalypse. It recognizes that we are within the force field of the narrative, and so it confronts from *within* the self-realizing prophecies of Armageddon.² It faces them in order to make them conscious, to disarm their dangerous oblivion, to make peace in whatever piecemeal fashion is possible, already and always. Christians have two strong traditions of response to war: the pacifism of the early Christian community, in which John's apocalypse formed, and the just war doctrine, which evolved as an ideal of constraint for the subsequent Christian empires. Both are problematic: pacifism tends to settle for an unjust peace, but a just peace is as difficult to achieve as a just war. I leave more abstract discussion of these ethical options aside; instead, I want to locate the present configuration within a micro-history of apocalypse. Nothing defuses the high-strung dualism of apocalypse like history itself. For in the history of the last two millennia, we witness not apocalyptic light versus demonic darkness so much as one messianic force projecting darkness onto another, which does likewise. The apocalyptic absolutes clash with each other in religious and secular struggle—and so the absolutes relativize each other.

Islam and Apocalypse

The terrorists framed the United States, long-time Great Satan of Islamic fundamentalism, as the primary cause of Muslim suffering, humiliation, and division. Targeting the economic power stacked in the Twin Towers, they enacted an apocalyptic judgment on “the great whore” of obscene greed. Yet the representatives of Al Qaeda have not even hinted at an economic analysis or strategy. However one parses their motives, they embrace death as martyrs in an ultimate war of pure good versus pure evil. Hence their stunning achievement has inspired—even from a sober, progressive commentator, to whom we will return—the label “apocalyptic terrorism.” They represent the most extreme production so far in history of what is called, for lack of a better term, Muslim fundamentalism.³

What about the apocalypticism of Islam, however? Certainly in its Christian forms, fundamentalism is by definition apocalyptic, oriented to a final confrontation of absolute good and absolute evil, privileging martyrs among the saved, and bringing the world as we