CHAPTER I

Apocalypse and the Breaking-Open of Dialogue: A Critical Negative Theology of Poetic Language

i. Being at the Mercy of Others

In this current millennial transition, frequently there are dialogues that draw upon and display our basic beliefs about the world, about what it is all for, if anything, and where it is going, if anywhere. Particularly striking about such dialogue is the extent to which apocalyptic thinking puts to the test our ability and willingness to listen to and understand each other. The possibility of mutual understanding and acceptance, which includes also the responsibilities to respond and criticize, emerges as the most difficult and important thing needing to be learned in our not just academic world for the future: in fact, that there be a future at all may depend to a sobering degree upon it. For, in the world at large, we still do not know how to manage the clashes between our divergent beliefs so as to avoid war and terrorism against one another. I think it is no accident that the impasses to understanding inherent in any exchange among different individuals with diverse interests, ideals, and ideologies become starkly evident on precisely this topic, that of apocalypse, concerned with claims to the unveiling of an ultimate, absolute truth and a transcendent destiny or dimension of existence. Perhaps all fundamental impasses to understanding—beyond those arising from inevitable conflicts of interest, which can in principle be reasonably negotiated and fairly resolved—devolve, at least indirectly, from beliefs of this rationally intractable type.

There is a temptation, especially appealing to articulate, dialectically skillful academicians, perhaps particularly in the postmodern climate where "deconstruction" has become as much a common denominator as a radical challenge, to say that every party to the discussion must simply avoid assertions presuming to any final disclosure of truth, or, in other words, that we must all learn to avoid "apocalyptic" discourse.[1] But the viability of precisely this solution seems to me to have been belied by discussions even in purely academic contexts, such as an interdisciplinary seminar among humanities scholars.[2] For this solution draws the boundaries of acceptable discourse in a tendentious and exclusionary way: it in effect makes a rational, pragmatic, relativistic approach normative for all. And to that extent, so far from overcoming the arbitrary and dogmatic method of absolutistic religious belief, it risks becoming just one further manifestation and application of it, the imposition of one's own apocalypse, however liberal, enlightened, and philosophical it may be, on others. Indeed, any drawing of boundaries by us—that is, by certain of us, however the claim to being representative may itself be drawn—cannot but be tendentious and exclusionary. That is why we have no right to shut out the final judgment from above or beyond us—though, of course, also not to appropriate this judgment in order to use it, in the name of God or truth or the facts or the future, in our own biased way against others.

The problem here is that an "anti-apocalyptic" position belongs to a system of oppositions with apocalypticist positions, and so can do no more than turn their violence in the opposite direction. The bracketing or banning of apocalyptic discourse, even when only by ostracizing it, does not solve the problem posed by this form of communication so difficult to ac-

1. Such a counsel, together with the impossibility of following it, is in play in Jacques Derrida's *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), translated by J. Leavey Jr. as "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. H. Coward and T. Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

2. My own most concentrated experience of such dialogue was in a seminar on the Millennium at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. For the stimulation of their contributions I thank each of the other participating fellows: Kathryn Babayan, Myriam J. A. Chancy, Margaret A. Doody, Janet Schrunk Ericksen, Jay Geller, Michael P. Hodges, Ellen Konowitz, Frank W. Wcislo, and David Wood.

commodate alongside others in an open, neutral forum of debate. It shifts the imposition of an absolute from the level of the expressed, the propositions affirmed, to the unending, free, unjudged and unjudgeable status of the conversation itself: anything may be said, but nothing must be said that would call into question this activity of unrestricted discourse and mark its limits against something that could perhaps reduce it to vanity and, in effect, end it. That would be a threat to the dialogue's own unimpeachable power of self-validation. Higher powers, such as those revealed, at least purportedly, by apocalypse, must be leveled in the interest of this power of our own human Logos that we feel ourselves to be in command of, or that is, at any rate, relatively within our control. Of course, the "we" here depends on who is the most dialectically powerful, and it is established not without struggle and conflict.

Learning to really relativize one's own position and conviction—not to impose it on all as if it were a final truth "apocalyptically" revealed—requires something else besides renouncing assertions of a certain too extreme and final type that offend the decorum of rational self-conscious and self-ironic reflection. It involves the frightening experience of actually being at the mercy of others. Ultimately, this is what is at stake in apocalyptic thinking and what is refused in the refusal of apocalyptic modes of expression. As long as we are unwilling to accept being at the mercy of others, of one another, and potentially of an absolutely Other, we will be predestined by our own choice, with its logic and consequences, to arm and defend ourselves to the bitter end. In other words, this means war, even if the strategy used is no more—and no less—than that of marshalling arguments and mustering a common consensus against a discourse that appears to be recalcitrant and even threatening to our dialogue.

Admittedly, this unwillingness to be at the mercy of others is also exactly what is being expressed, in another way, by the prophets of hellfire and damnation, who dilate prodigiously upon the awesome chastisements in store for others, those who do not heed the truth that the prophet himself is revealing and preaching. But we are quicker to perceive this and to align ourselves against the other person, the "prophet" who is telling us how it will all end, and whose blasphemous presumption is all too patent to us, than to see to what an extent we ourselves—despite all our good intentions to the contrary—are in fundamentally the same position, grasp-

ing after an oracle or a formula to rationalize all others in a dispensation based on our own Logos, where our values and virtues are the decisive ones on the basis of which, we assume, all others ought to be judged.

Apocalypse, as the act of God that levels all human distinctions and justifications, on the principle that no one is justified before God ("There is none righteous, no, not one"; Romans 3:10–18, harking back to Psalm 14:3), stands in principle—though, admittedly, very often not in practice—for the denial of precisely this arrogation of being in the right to oneself, of the prerogative of having the final judgment over at least oneself, and perhaps others too. It relativizes every form and instance of our relativistic Logos—"our" rules for discourse and dialogue. In the face of apocalypse, it is not even "being right" in any human terms that decides what is right in the end, but something else entirely, something that cannot be judged definitively by any standard of our own. It is a disclosure that transcends our own comprehension but involves all who are living to the same absolute degree of deciding their life and death. Paradoxically, it is precisely apocalyptic discourse, by a logic or *ill*ogic of the *pharmakon*, that has the potential—and is indeed highly necessary—to inoculate us against an otherwise all too inescapable appropriation of a pseudo-apocalyptic pretension to possessing a truth with final validity ourselves.[3] Such a final truth could be one that even in accentuating its own infinite revisionability nevertheless refuses to be subject to any standard of an altogether other, higher sort than itself, an altogether new truth that could undermine the very basis of its validity.

To live with this sense of not being God, of not having within one's own power the final judgment over the world, or over anything or anyone belonging to it, has proved itself throughout history, as well as to my mind in the course of current academic discussions of apocalypse, to be a necessary premise for genuine dialogue. This is what apocalyptic thinking should serve to teach and remind us. This may not be the lesson readily to be gathered from the phenomenon of apocalyptic preaching as it assaults us in the mass media, but I propose it as the deeper meaning of the apocalyptic strain so pervasive throughout Western culture, an element that

3. The notion of the *pharmakon* as a poison that is at the same time its own cure is developed by Derrida in "La pharmacie de Platon," in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

needs to be understood and appropriated (and so creatively transformed) if we are going to understand ourselves and accept our human condition as it is indeed disclosed to us by our history, as well as by our own contemporary experience of the conflicts engendered by a multiplicity of cultures. It is necessary above all to learn how to dialogue with discourses of apocalypse—in spite of, and in fact just because of, their own apparent refusal of dialogue. And first *then* will we achieve genuine dialogical capability ourselves, even though this means being drawn irrevocably beyond all powers and capacities that can be called "our own."[4]

I emphasize that the merits of and motivations for apocalyptic vision and discourse must not be judged narrowly on the basis of television preaching and scare-tactic pamphlets that probably reveal more about the unreflective immediacy of these media than about the nature of apocalyptic thought and reflection as it has developed over many centuries, indeed more than two millennia, in confessional contexts and communities and in their literary traditions. There is something extreme about the apocalyptic viewpoint, but precisely for that reason it cannot bear, without grievous distortion, to be too baldly exposed and confidently handled in the more officious public arenas of representation. We need to return behind the immediate and aggressive images to sources, in the first instance biblical, and then, literary—the quasi-religious tradition of prophetic poetry—in order to make out the drift of apocalyptic as a perennial moment and, I contend, an indispensable impetus to the dialogue in which Western cultural tradition distinctively consists.

4. See, for example, the dialogical approach to study of the phenomena of apocalyptic beliefs among fundamentalist sects in the interview-based work of Charles B. Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): "I do feel that there is generally something unsteady about fundamentalists and there are some worrisome aspects of the apocalyptic within fundamentalism. But my larger purpose in this book is to argue that we are all unsteady in an age of ultimate threats to existence; fundamentalism is simply one form of response, and a more interesting one than has been appreciated, to what can only be understood as a kind of collective illness in our contemporary culture" (3).

ii. Apocalyptic Genres in Biblical Tradition

Apocalypse, in biblical tradition, involves the end of the world, yet not simply an end but rather a finale, a consummation and—not to be forgotten—a fulfillment. Not just death and destruction, but salvation and everlasting life belong essentially to the concept and imagination of apocalypse that originally grow out of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Isaiah 24–27, together with chapters 34–35, sometimes called, respectively, the "great" and "little" apocalypses of Isaiah, as well as Ezekiel 38–39, mark transitions from prophetic visions and oracles to apocalyptic. The prophetic interpretations of contemporary history and tradition, animated by a call to turn back to God and by denunciations of the evil social powers that have led a people astray, modulate into apocalyptic based specifically on revelations of the end-time at the furthest limits of history and even beyond. The "new heavens and a new earth" evoked by Isaiah (65:17; cf. 66:22) reappear at the climax of St. John the Divine's vision of the apocalypse: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Revelation 21:1).

The essential matter of apocalypse is the revelation of the end of the world and the advent of eternity. This is tantamount to a glimpse of the divine vision, since the prophet assumes a supra-human viewpoint and in effect "speaks for" God—"pro-phetes," from *fateor* (confess, bear witness to, acknowledge, reveal) plus *pro* (for, on behalf of, instead of). Apocalypse, ἡ ἀποκάλυψις in Greek, is literally an emergence "out of hiding." The English translation "revelation," based on the Latin *revelatio*, suggests an unveiling. "Apocalypse," then, as the extreme development of prophecy means a disclosure of the end of human life and history. And, as a final disclosure, it is envisaged from the point of view of God. The full disclosure of true values and their morally necessary final consequences is naturally represented in images of judgment and reward or punishment. Still within the Old Testament canon, though extremely late (167–64 B.C.), the book of Daniel most explicitly represents a Last Judgment, with separation of the damned, condemned to everlasting contempt, from the good, who are destined to shine like the brightness of the firmament for ever and ever (12:2–3). Zechariah, chapters 9–14, and Joel are also prophetic works turn-

ing apocalyptic by climaxing in descriptions of a day of final reckoning, "the day of the Lord."

The inter-testamental period sees the rise of the so-called "apocalypses," the apocryphal works dedicated integrally to theological visions of the end that, together with the canonical books just mentioned, belong properly to the apocalyptic genre. They flourish from 200 B.C. to 100 A.D., an age in which Jewish prophecy as such was practically extinguished. During this period of domination of the Jews by foreign powers, first Hellenistic and later Roman, a more despairing and dogmatic tone sets in, and the vision of history turns deterministic. The book Fourth Ezra (2 Esdras 3–14) and the Apocalypse of Baruch, among the most notable of the apocalypses, are written in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Emperor Titus in 70 A.D.[5] Filtered through this contemporary catastrophe, the 587 B.C. destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent deportation to Babylon is bitterly ruminated. Such works constitute apocalyptic literature in the strict sense, but they do not necessarily represent the high-water mark of apocalyptic as a type of vision and faith focused on a revelation of the end. It may well be rather the spontaneous eruptions of the apocalyptic mode in the prophetic books, together with its applications in the New Testament writings, that demonstrate the purport and religious significance of apocalyptic as a genre at its strongest. Indeed, the inter-testamental apocalyptic writers themselves are oftentimes ruefully self-conscious about having fallen away from their own originally prophetic inspiration.

The prophetic books invite to a change of heart: rather than implacably dealing out unconditional destruction, they are animated by appeals for repentance and conversion. Their chief concern is not simply foretelling events in a mode of fully objectified representation, but rather shaping the future and, above all, seeking to reestablish and renew the fundamental relationship of their people with God. Prophetic visions, with their appeals for repentance, rather than just giving previews of a fate to be passively awaited, adumbrate guidelines for action to be carried out urgently in the present. The prophet himself is typically an integral part and a pivotal fac-

5. This was first established by Emil Schürer (see *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, 4th ed. [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909], 3:23). An updated discussion is found in the introduction to *Fourth Ezra*, ed. Michael Edward Stone (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 10.

tor in the drama he represents. The apocalypses, on the other hand, have a tendency to represent a series of purely futural and absolutely irrevocable events as acts of a God who does not condescend to dialogue with human beings, while the apocalyptic seer himself has in many cases become just a passive spectator.

This sort of contrast between prophecy and apocalyptic oftentimes informs a generally negative judgment against apocalyptic. Martin Buber, for example, writes:

> Prophecy originates in the hour of the highest strength and fruitfulness of the Eastern spirit, the apocalyptic out of the decadence of its cultures and religions. But wherever a living historical dialogue of divine and human actions breaks through, there persists, visible or invisible, a bond with the prophecy of Israel. And wherever man shudders before the menace of his own work and longs to flee from the radically demanding historical hour, there he finds himself near to the apocalyptic vision of a process that cannot be arrested.[6]

To these indictments is often added the charge that a jingoistic nationalism expressed in bitter vindictiveness against all gentiles, rather than anything more akin to the universally emancipatory vision of the later prophets, all too often inflames the apocalyptic scenario.[7] Buber does also include a redeeming note on apocalyptic, when he admits that its ultimate aims and intentions may, after all, be good: "Yet in a mysterious manner, *its* goal, too, is the perfection, even the salvation of the world."[8] But its heavy-handed and often desperate means are nevertheless suspect.

Paralleling the negative evaluations of their content, the style of the inter-testamental apocalypses is frequently assessed as being highly conventional and artificial and, at the same time, esoteric and obscure. Indeed, these apocalypses have abandoned the orality of the prophetic oracle, which is announced in a public forum, for what is clearly a scriptural and often predominantly hermetic mode. They are not infrequently taxed with being to a large extent compilations and even congeries and pastiches, gathering together indiscriminately materials from legend, allegorical

6. Martin Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour," in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum M. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968), 183.

7. Cf. Antonino Romeo, "Apocalittica, Letteratura," in *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1948).

8. Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour," 181.

exegesis, myth, and popular preaching, and forcing external interpretations upon such materials in disparate, incongruous styles. Of course, the charge of their lacking any unifying aesthetic sense perhaps expresses more the narrowness and prejudices of many modern readers. The apocalypses can certainly be engaging reading. Nevertheless, the poetic power of the prophets is often severely attenuated if not outright supplanted by a certain objective, fact-stating mode. To this extent, the apocalypses seem to entirely miss the sense of the mystery of dialogue with the absolutely Other. And their oftentimes crudely detailed and direct representation of the future can tend to discredit their attempt to express a truth and reality transcending human conception and representation. Hence scholars speak of a loss in apocalyptic of the productive, challenging tension between the vision of a world to come and engagement with present realities that is the characteristic strength of Old Testament prophecy: "Prophecy became transformed into apocalyptic when the tension between vision and reality was relaxed and then broken, and the attempt to relate the cosmic vision to the realities of contemporary life was abandoned."[9]

The apocalyptic discourses of the synoptic gospels (Mark 13:1–31; Matthew 24:1–44; Luke 21:5–36) breathe generally a different atmosphere from that of the inter-testamental, apocryphal apocalypses. The same can be said for the explicitly apocalyptic passages in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15. In the gospel texts, Jesus describes the end of the world and the Last Judgment in the breaking light of his overall message and ministry, while the epistolary descriptions are, in the first instance, Christological: they envisage a scenario of the end that is congruent with an unlimited relationship with Jesus. But it is especially in the Apocalypse of John, which closes the biblical canon, that the genre again reaches a peak of imaginative creativity and intensity worthy of its prophetic sources and forebears. It is not, as the apocalypses so often are, a collection of sup-

9. David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 113–14, based on research of Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). A related view of the apocalyptic genre as a degeneration of prophecy, as well as of wisdom literature, was propounded by Gerhard von Rad (see *Theologie des alten Testaments*, translated by D. M. G. Stalker as *Old Testament Theology* [New York: Harper & Rowe, 1965], vol. 2).

posedly infallible predictions of events leading up to the end of history. It is rather, as its incipit states, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." All possible knowledge of the destiny God has prepared for the world is absorbed into the mystery of the person of Christ. It is this relational and moral knowledge, which is symbolically expressed, and not purported facts about the future, that lies at the core of the meaning of the Book of Revelation.[10]

It is, then, not only, nor even primarily, in representations of the end, the Last Judgment, Armageddon, etc., that the essential outlook of apocalypse is expressed. We must cast our nets far beyond just the thematic material of apocalypse. For apocalypse is rather a moment pervading the whole of history as represented in the Bible, and in particular, with a new urgency, in the New Testament's eschatological vision of history. In fact, Jesus is presented in the gospels as the eschatological prophet announcing the eruption of a new and definitive time of salvation. His essential message is, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). Even in his human life on earth he seems to have been identified with the "Son of man," the eschatological figure who comes at the end of time, according to the book of Daniel (7:13–14). That Jesus is the one who was and is to come belongs to his very identity as Messiah, the anointed one, Χριστός (Mark 2:17; Luke 12:49; Matthew 15:24). His baptism and transfiguration are presented by the evangelists as further confirmation of his being sent on an eschatological mission (Luke 4:16–30; Mark 6:4; Matthew 13:57; Luke 4:24).

Indeed, in the Christian understanding of history, the end-time has already been reached and is inaugurated by Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead that figures at the center of the events expected finally to culminate in the apocalypse (1 Corinthians 15). The Lord's Resurrection sets into motion a movement that is to be consummated with his Second Coming. But what is revealed

10. It is also possible to find the most oppressive features of apocalyptic expressed in the Apocalypse of John, as did D. H. Lawrence in *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (ed. Mara Kalnis [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980]). The antidote to such literal reading is to read the text for its visionary capacity of infusing new meaning and life into traditional images, as is done magisterially by Austin Farrer in *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John's Apocalypse* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1949). Farrer later refined his interpretation in *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).

openly by the resurrection of Christ is in fact already realized in every step of Jesus of Nazareth's earthly life as an eschatological figure living the perfection of the end immanently in the midst of history. This anticipatory mode of living and acting then becomes what every Christian is called upon to realize through following Jesus. The Church, consequently, by following in Christ's footsteps, exists as an eschatological community. It is actively working in the world, yet it lives already the life to come as given from God through the Holy Spirit. By divine grace it is possible here and now to realize, at least in a preliminary, proleptic way, the life to which human beings are called in eternity. The implications of this existence projected upon the end of history are revolutionary. No longer need or ought one to live in a way conforming to *this* world, but rather in accordance with the new and fuller life to come.

Apocalypse, then, as revelation of the end of history, is achieved already in embryo, and in fact in its most crucial and revealing form, in the Christ event. This event is an apocalypse that has already occurred, and it becomes the basis for the Christian's life in history. To this extent, apocalypse does not simply stand outside of history as awaited beyond its furthest limit, at its end. The Christ event as apocalyptic model indicates that apocalypse comes about as the in-breaking into history of a radically other order of existence, the event of the divine, and therewith the revelation of the final truth and judgment that otherwise eludes humankind in history, throughout which we are confined within an incomplete and uncompletable succession of temporally delimited, fragmentary moments. This event can be conceived of as imminent in every moment and as immanent to human experience as such, so far as it is turned toward its own ultimate possibilities. Precisely this conception is clearly intimated in the Bible, and pervades particularly the New Testament, being expressed explicitly, for example, in such statements as, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, *and now is*, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25), even to the point of the declaration that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

Two views of the articulation between history and apocalypse, time and the end of time, may be distinguished within this generically Christian framework: they tend to be identified broadly as Protestant and Catholic, even though complicated reversals and crossings-over come about in

the course of theological history. In one view, apocalypse entails the annihilation of history, and in the other, history's fulfillment. Indeed, in the Latin *finis* and the Greek τὸ ἔσκατον—to think in terms of just these two ancient sacred languages—both senses of "end," that is, as "finish" and as "fulfillment," are simultaneously present. In the first view, the emphasis falls on how history and "this present evil world" are going to be swept away by the advent of God, on the day of his coming: apocalypse reduces all that is human to naught, and only the saving grace of God, with no merit of any human being, will manage to salvage some remnant from the destruction. The other view emphasizes the redemption of history already underway, even before the final, inevitable catastrophe, by virtue of the cooperation of the Church as eschatological community. It envisages a progressive realization of apocalypse as already decisively inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection.

Whichever view is taken, the point of apocalypse is to read history as a whole, to understand its meaning in the light of its final end. To this extent, apocalypse aims at or intends a higher degree of truth than is, or ever can be, reached from a point of view within history. And yet, as modern theologies like Rudolph Bultmann's have emphasized, apocalyptic springs essentially out of history in the making. It is necessarily engaged with the history of its time and expresses a total vision of universal history, but always from a particular angle and on the basis of its interpretation of the times rooted in its own historically specific experience. Hence the ineluctable ambiguity of this "final" vision of the end of history that is, nonetheless, still leveraged from within history.

Apocalyptic turns essentially on the application to—and from within—present historical reality of a revelation of the end. It is to this extent a hermeneutic phenomenon, an irreducibly contemporary interpretation of history in the light of a theological revelation specifically of "the end," which symbolically means total revelation. This is a revelation of what remains always veiled from any perspective within the world and for so long as the world endures. This disclosure of truth is an event within history, and yet also beyond history, closing it and giving it its final, "true" sense. So far as it can be understood at all, apocalypse is, to this extent, an inextricably historical category: its essential content remains the interpretation of history and, moreover, as interpretation it is enmeshed in its own his-

torical moment, even while straining to peer beyond it, to see the final end revealed already within it.

Oftentimes apocalyptic seems to impose the procrustean plan of a transcendent God on all of history. Indeed, it typically offers just this kind of representation. But, in application, apocalypse can and should work for the opening rather than the closure of the adventure of history, and for open engagement with the burning issues of the moment. Its envisioning of the end ideally is deployed in the service of clearing away the actual impasses of the present, breaking out of the patterns of conflict and oppression in which history becomes entrapped, even when only by representing them as played out *in extremis*. As the application of a vision of the end—the revelation of a definitive meaning for the whole of human life—to history and its challenges here and now, apocalypse remains rooted in the moral-prophetic, biblical milieu in which it originates. Its vision of the end, if taken seriously, is a challenge first of all to the ongoing cultural process and play of interpretation of history that aspires to influence what is realized pragmatically in world-transforming action.[11]

It can hardly be overemphasized that the very soul and inspiration of apocalyptic is the application to contemporary history of a theologically revealed vision of the end. This intrinsically hermeneutic dimension is the element in which apocalyptic springs to life, and it must be heeded if we are to understand apocalypse at a deeper level than that of its surface imagery. This imagery, admittedly, is meant to horrify and appall, yet only as a means of pointing out what is horrifying and appalling in the realities being actually lived through in current history. The extreme imagery of apocalyptic is undoubtedly an expression of despair, but it is a despair that is connected with hope, a despair in the historical order that is continuous with a hope for its transcendence into a radically new order of existence. Not the images themselves, but their impact on the present in opening it to the future by interpretive projection, constitutes the final import of apocalyptic representations.

It was indeed an exegetical work, Karl Barth's commentary on Romans (*Der Römerbrief*), that gave the decisive impulse to the rediscovery of the fundamentally apocalyptic bearing of Christian revelation that

11. Cf. Ernesto Grassi, "Apocalisse e storia," *Apocalisse e insecuritas* (Milan–Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1954).

determined some of the defining motives of twentieth-century theology. Leaving behind an age of progressive liberal theology that had no use for eschatology but equated redemption with the incremental realization of a moral ideal of human perfection through following Christ's teaching and example, Barth maintained that Christianity is wholly eschatological in outlook, without remainder. Following Romans 8:24—"in hope we are saved. Now hope which is seen is not hope"—he maintained, furthermore, that the hoped-for redemption is necessarily invisible and intellectually inaccessible: "Redemption is the unseeable, impossible, that meets us as *hope*" (Erlösung ist das Unanschauliche, Unmögliche, das als *Hoffnung* uns begegnet).[12] The end and its perfection cannot be represented within the present parameters of the world.

This emphasis on the unrepresentability and intrinsic openness of apocalypse has been pursued further, particularly by Jürgen Moltmann in his "theology of hope," likewise predicated on restoring the absolute centrality of apocalypse and eschatology to Christian faith: "The eschatological is not merely an attribute of Christianity, it is rather the very medium of Christian faith, the keynote to which everything is attuned, the tint of dawn of a new, awaited day in which everything is immersed" (Das Eschatologische ist nicht etwas *am* Christentum, sondern es ist schlechterdings das Medium des christlichen Glaubens, der Ton, auf den in ihm alles gestimmt ist, die Farbe der Morgenröte eines erwarteten neuen Tages, in die hier alles getaucht ist).[13] Alluding evidently to Saint Augustine's *cor inquietum*, Moltmann maintains that it is the apocalyptic promise of hope that keeps the experience of history open, preventing it from being reduced to a representation closed in on itself: "It is the *promissio inquieta*, which does not let human experience of the world become a cosmic picture of divinity closed in on itself, but rather holds the experience of world and history open" (Es ist die promissio inquieta, die die menschliche Welterfahrung nicht zum in sich geschlossenen Kosmosbild der Gottheit werden läßt, sondern die Welterfahrung der Geschichte offen hält).[14]

12. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed. (1922; repr., Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1954), 298.

13. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie* (München: Charles Kaiser, 1964), 12.

14. Ibid., 78.