Violence and end-time theologies: the search for a responsible eschatology
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Abstract

This paper explores the apocalyptic dimension of eschatology within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In its consideration of the intersection between religion and terrorism, the author finds that under certain conditions of stress eschatological hope frequently yields to apocalyptic fatalism. In particular, those who perceive themselves to be marginalized from significant participation in public life often turn to violent religious ideologies to make sense of their grievances, both real and imagined. When religions provide an apocalyptic lens to interpret social dislocation, the result is despair of the present world and presumption about the manner in which future events will unfold. The religious, apocalyptic lens provides the justification, sanctification, and mandate to resist perceived social ills through the allowance of violent acts on the grounds that violence is permissible in holy war. The context of the alleged holy war allows for violent acts that would otherwise be construed as immoral or unjust. Hence, an outlet is created by the religion for the socially marginalized to find meaning and importance as soldiers engaged in an ultimate struggle of good against evil.

Having established the motivations for violence at the margins of religion, this paper further explores the manner in which the apocalyptic imagination is present in the central belief structures of the Abrahamic faiths. Paying particular attention to the apocalypticism underlying key Christian doctrines, the author suggests that a responsible treatment of violence and religion must look beyond marginalized extremists and take seriously the violent themes that lie at the heart of faith traditions. To this end, the author concludes with a suggestion of several pre-theological precepts that might usefully be employed in responsible and non-violent interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

Eschatology--that area of theology that deals with the study of the end times, the final things, the ultimate purpose of human existence, the end of the world-- plays a major role in the worldviews of the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There is undoubtedly a certain illogic in the study or logos of eschatology in that it attempts to describe what is not yet present. Obviously, from the perspective of the present, there is no empirical means to evaluate the veracity or accuracy of eschatological truth claims. However, this does not impede theologians from these and other religious perspectives from incorporating eschatological or end-time reasoning into their theological systems or investigations. (1) The illogic of eschatology is potentially dangerous because it means that some level of presumption is generally operating beneath eschatological truth claims. In the face of competing claims in a religiously plural context, the danger of presumption can lead to disastrous consequences when it is not properly understood and disarmed. Because an eschatological orientation is central to the worldviews of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the search for a responsible eschatology is necessary in an age of terror and inter-religious violence.

Discussion

Key contemporary Christian thinkers have argued that eschatology permeates the whole of Christian theology. Indeed, theology is eschatology, or to say it the other way, all theology is eschatological. Johannes B. Metz, for instance, in his work Theology of the World suggests that the contemporary context forces us to move away from the ahistorical, doctrinal approach to theology that characterized it in the premodern eras. (2) We are, he argues, politically and technologically engaged in the world, toward the operative building of the future. Any meaningful Christian dialogue with the secular world must as

such move away from mere contemplative theology or anthropological, existentialist appropriations of theological categories. (3) Such classic approaches to theology, while meaningful, too neatly bifurcate the transcendental God from the polis we inhabit and as a consequence render theology a matter of personal, immanent feeling. This, according to Metz, is inadequate for a theology that recognizes its responsibility to the world we live in. As such, Metz argues, we must recognize that the Christian's engagement with the world must take the form of "creative" and "militant" realization of the values of the Kingdom of God in the world. Moreover, as Moltmann reminds us, the principle vision of the biblical Israelites, confirmed and intensified in the good news of the Christian scriptures, is a vision of the future driven by trust in the revelation of God's future promise. The eschatological perspective here is not an addendum to the primary content of revelation. It is the content of revelation, the interpretive, unifying tool that makes sense of the ancestral hope of the Jews and the rejoicing of the biblical Christians. (4)

Contemporary Jewish eschatology maintains in its own right the ancestral hope of the biblical Israelites. The biblical Israelites, who in the division of their kingdom after the death of Solomon in the 10th century BCE, were separated into the two lesser kingdoms of Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). Through the forces of the Assyrian and Babylonian world powers, these kingdoms met their demise in respectively the 8th and 6th centuries BCE. Scattered and exiled, the remnants of Israel dreamed of a time when their land would be restored to them, a land which they believed to have been promised to them by the very person of God. Indeed the issue of the Israelite's God's interest in the conquest and domination of the land of Canaan is a major way in which the Hebrew Scriptures characterize the deity. (5) The hope for a return to the land and its glory as in the period of David largely defined the Hebrews of the post-exilic and restoration periods. Especially in light of successive and often brutal foreign occupations by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, and Romans through the close of the era, a Jewish apocalyptic imagination was born. This imagination fueled the two failed Jewish rebellions in the 1st and 2nd centuries of the common era, resulting in the second destruction of the temple and the slaughter and scattering of the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Although the Jewish presence in the land was severely diminished by the 2nd century CE and overwhelmed by Christians in the 4th century and Muslims in the 7th century, the hope for a return to the land was never lost. This hope is the very hope of Theodore Hertzl's Zionist movement in the 19th century that motivated widespread Jewish immigration to the land of Palestine. After the termination of Britain's mandate over Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Zionist movement had renewed energy and even today characterizes the philosophy of Israel's politically and religiously extreme conservatives. The vision of an ingathering of Jews in the present day to the land of Israel is an essential part of the Jewish eschatology. Upon the defeat of Israel's enemies and the reconstruction of the third Temple, the period of resurrection of the dead and the advent of the Messiah are anticipated, to be followed by an age of peace, tranquility, and spirituality.

The forthcoming end of normal history hoped for in Christian and Jewish apocalyptic eschatologies is mirrored in Islamic claims about the end of time. Varying Hadith traditions describe the events that surround the end times in a number of ways, and as such there is no single consensus within Islam about the chronology or manner of events that the last day will entail. Nevertheless, Jane Idelman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad unabashedly affirm the centrality of eschatological thinking in Islam in their study of the issue in The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection, where they state:
 The promise, the guarantee, of the day at which all bodies will be
 resurrected and all persons called to account for their deeds and
 the measure of their faith is the dominant message of the Qu'ran as
 it is presented in the context of God's tawhid. One can find
 testimony of this assurance on almost every page of the Qu'ran ...
 All of the events from the signs of the Hour to the final assessment
 and determination, support two basic themes central to the

understanding of Islamic eschatology: (1) bodies will be resurrected and joined with spirits in the reunion of whole , cognizant, and responsible persons, and (2) there will be a final judgment on the quality of lives lived on earth and a subsequent recompense carried out with absolute justice through the prerogative of God's merciful will. Upon these realities, there is nothing in the Qu'ran or in any other Islamic writings- scholastic or devotional--to cast the slightest shadow of doubt. (6)

Why is eschatology so essential to these faiths? Perhaps the answer lies in the linear perception of time they embrace. In the call of the patriarch Abraham to an unknown future, a story common to all three faiths, a new awareness of time as a measure of movement toward one's destiny emerges. This perspective of time brings with it enormous hope, because it means that one's own individual life can now be meaningful and purposeful. (7) The historical downside to this sense of direction, however, as a wide range of feminist theologians have observed, is the loss of value attached to the mundane, repeatable, cyclic aspects of life. (8) Goals, progress, futurity, and novelty become driving impulses that shape the theological anthropology and understanding of history in these faiths.

The problem with eschatological thinking arises when our expectations, hopes, and imagination for the possibilities of this life are never fully realized. In sadness we come to discover the painful reality of limit to even our most noble of endeavors. Frustration and despair, which rage in the face of radical evil, render us ultimately impotent in this world. The hope for a meaningful future in this world gives way to a different kind of hope--namely hope that there is something beyond this world that will right the wrongs of this one and in which the fullness of human aspirations will be totally realizable. This core hope-- which we might also identify with the being of God brought fully to reign in the world--is essentially the seedbed for the apocalyptic imagination.

The apocalyptic imagination is a form of eschatology that functions as the primary rhetoric by which the ultimate end of religious systems is communicated and popularly understood. The apocalyptic imagination is one that dualistically separates the present from the future, the corporeal from the spiritual, the righteous from the infidel, and this world from the next. Such an imagination need not be the exclusive form that eschatology takes, but to our misfortune, it is a powerful vision that psychologically mitigates the suffering of the world. Moreover, the apocalyptic imagination is fueled by the sacred texts of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. When interpreted through literalist readings, the apocalyptic imagination comes to justify extreme acts of violence as prescribed, necessary, and sacred actions that serve to usher in the new era.

The apocalyptic imagination draws its strength from the desire to redress past wrongs, right imbalances, and justify present suffering. The enduring appeal of apocalyptic visions is that time and again they energize those who suffer to resist, to withstand, and to hope beyond the present context of pain. The danger of apocalyptic visions is that they promote presumption about the way in which future events will unfold, and they lead us to despair of this world. Always appealing to the dualistic language of cosmic world battles, the apocalyptic imagination diametrically opposes the present and future worlds as well as the righteous believer and the evil infidel. Apocalyptic visions about the future are otherworldly, absolutist, exclusivist, and grounded in literalist readings of sacred scripture. In them, a corollary of hope for the future becomes despair of the present. Herein lies the ideological relationship between this irresponsible type of eschatology and religious violence.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all fall prey to the distortion of conflating eschatological hope with an apocalyptic imagination. Practitioners of these faiths, in varying levels of extremism, rely upon the

apocalyptic imagination to support their hope for a better future for themselves in a fractured world--but at no small cost. For Jewish apocalypticists, a messianic age is envisioned, and extremists seek to "force the end" of last day events by engaging in destructive behaviors in the present. (9) Political extremists and activists, such as Yehuda Etzion, Yoel Lerner, and Avigdor Eskin collect funds through their Temple Mount Treasury for the rebuilding of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. When asked by Jessica Stern in her book Terror in the Name of God about the problem of rebuilding the Temple on the Temple Mount--now the home of Islam's Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, Etzion replies: "The one thing I am sure of is that the Dome of the Rock is a temporary building. It must come to an end. Exactly when and exactly how I cannot say. But as a principle, I am sure its end is near." (10) The presumption that the consequences of destroying the mosques are acceptable or even desirable reveals the danger of this myopic type of end-time thinking.

For Christians, the rhetorical power of an apocalyptic imagination has held strong appeal throughout history. Beginning with the persecutions of Nero and Domitian, during whose respective reigns scholars place the writing of the Christian apocalyptic Book of Revelation, Christians who were politically threatened or marginalized from mainstream Christianity have taken comfort in the book's promise of a new world to come--a world in which the powers of good overcome the tangible evil of this world once and for all. Rosemary Radford Ruether recounts this history from the first persecuted Christians under the Roman Empire through present -day Christian groups that interpret political and societal events through the lens of the Book of Revelation. Picking up on the Jewish Zionism mentioned above, Ruether describes how these events are interpreted through one of the many variations of the apocalyptic Christian lens:

When Jews began to emigrate to Palestine under the inspiration of Zionism in the late nineteenth century, and established a Jewish state in 1948, many Christian premillennialists saw [their] predictions being fulfilled. However, since these Zionist Jews were not becoming Christians, this aspect of the apocalyptic timetable had to be revised. It was now said that the Jews must return to the Promised Land in an "unbelieving" state (that is, unconverted to Christianity).

When this ingathering was completed, the final events of redemption would unfold. One hundred and forty-four thousand Jews would be converted to true (that is, fundamentalist Protestant) Christianity, the Temple would be rebuilt, and the war of Armageddon between God and Satan would wipe out all unbelievers: false Christians as well as Jews, Muslims, pagans, and Communists. The true believers would be raptured up to heaven and thus kept safe during this war. (11)

Muslims, for their part, in attempting the proper societal and personal preparation for day of judgment, have engaged in the struggle toward the goal of submission to God--a multiform notion that involves spiritual, mental, and social disciplines communicated by the term jihad. Among the types of struggle, of course, is military clash of arms--a struggle sanctified in the Qu'ran and exploited by marginalized Muslims today. Samuel Shahid explores the tensions between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim claims about the end of the world in his work The Last Trumpet. (12) In this most comprehensive, English-language, comparative treatment of Islamic and Christian eschatologies, Shahid considers the violent consequences of personal, eschatological hope driven by fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur'an. His goal is to demonstrate that the Islamic sacred texts were influenced by cross-cultural and religious pollination between Judaism, mainstream and Gnostic-Christianities, and Zoroastrianism.

Shahid's agenda is to demonstrate for Muslims that a historical and contextual reading of sacred literature is requisite for a good understanding that does not lead to disastrous and violent ends. Shahid's concluding thoughts on this are provocative and challenging. He says:

This comprehensive study documents that the eschatological data the Qur'an borrowed from the various authentic sources, whether revealed, apocryphal, or legendary, are in direct contradiction to the Islamic claim of revelation. The high esteem by which Muslims regard the Qur'an is based on the infallibility and verbatim revelation as it was exactly preserved in the Mother of the Book from eternity. The cogent historical facts as well as other documented material are irrefutable testimony against the Islamic claims of the source of the Qur'an ... Employing euphemistic expressions, in this case, are not helpful in affirming the truth. Objectivity, not prejudice, is the path conducive to the truth. This fact has led the author (Shahid) to be honest with himself in presenting his findings, since some of these findings have a fateful impact on the views and lives of many radical Muslims, thus having tragic consequences on the world. To illustrate, the suicidal activities of radical Muslims are basically inspired by the rewards the Islamic paradise offers that are not available to them in this life. This incentive was and is still the force behind this suicidal impediments, as Muslims believe in a literal description of the Qur'anic paradise; the utopia that is yet to come. Yet the majority of Muslims do not realize that the images of their paradise are reflections of the Zoroastrian paradise and the appealing of the sensual pleasure inflames their desire to die for the cause of Allah. What will be the reaction of these radical Muslims if they realize that their paradise is just an echo of the Zoroastrian paradise? Would they sacrifice their lives for a mirage or an illusion? Undoubtedly there is a heaven, but of a different type. It is a righteous and not a sensual heaven that perpetually enkindles the passions and desires of the flesh." (13)

A comparative study of religious violence reveals that an apocalyptic imagination lies at the heart of religiously motivated violence across the board. In his article "Is Religion the Problem?" comparative religions scholar Mark Juergensmeyer addresses the issue of the relationship between religion, violence, and eschatology. Juergensmeyer suggests that religion cannot neatly be considered the cause of violence nor its innocently co-opted victim. Rather, he argues, religion is imbedded in public life, invariably finding itself situated in an economic and political context. The interface of religion with its broader social situation is often problematic; while it hardly could be considered an exclusive motivation, it is often a contributor to violence. Juergensmeyer concludes this after considering the social and economic disenfranchisement of people, whose identity and participation within public life is limited, from the Palestinaian Hamas movement to the Christian militia. The sense of alienation such groups experience, accompanied by often legitimate grievances, is met with a rejection of the secular ideologies that define the limited parameters of their social participation. The religious medium steps in to provide a hermeneutical lens that resonates with their sense of alienation, providing an alternative worldview, wherein their social engagement would be ideal and meaningful. (14)

In addressing how religion functions as a motivator toward violence, Juergensmeyer identifies a number

of factors, in which one can see how profoundly individual as well as communal apocalyptic thinking supports and justifies religious violence. Among the more salient conclusions Juergensmeyer draws is that individuals justify violent acts by the belief that they are religious soldiers engaged in a cosmic battle that intersects with the present world. Their actions are not only justified by their religious worldview but--to the other pole--rewarded by the heavenly promise of an excellent afterlife that far exceeds merits and rewards that could be attained in the present world. Moreover, individual acts are attached to the narrative of a cosmic battle in which absolute good and evil are clearly demarcated. The present violence is an instance of the cosmic battle playing out a scripted scenario. The drama of the battle is understood to be moving along a sacred, temporal trajectory in anticipation of a final victorious and apocalyptic end. As such, those so motivated by this drama seek not only the personal reward of redemption through participation in the cosmic battle but also to realize or enact the end of time which they believe to be unfolding through their actions.

These factors correlate with the five warnings signs that religion has become evil, which Charles Kimball defines in his text, When Religion Becomes Evil. (15) Here, Kimball looks comparatively at the religious causes that motivate violence. Kimball, like Juergensmeyer, acknowledges that religion is neither the sole motivator nor the blameless victim that underlies religious terrorism. Despite the very human need for religion, which he affirms as essential to our sense of meaning in the world, Kimball nevertheless recognizes that religion can become evil and motivate us to enact evil. How do we know when religion has become evil? Kimball argues it is when religion:

1) makes absolute truth claims;

2) requires blind obedience to texts, leaders, and doctrines;

3) establishes an ideal time;

4) allows the ends to justify any means necessary; and

5) declares Holy War.

Using a comparative approach, Kimball identifies these elements as underlying motivations for religious violence present in plural religious traditions. As before, we can see how each of these indicators intersects with visions of the future. Kimball attaches his discussion of absolute truth claims to fundamentalist interpretations of scripture. Particularly when apocalyptic literature is read literally, it provides a terrible mandate for people to engage in present-world violence. This violence is often required by charismatic religious leaders, to whom followers owe their unwavering obedience. Again, in his discussion of blind obedience, Kimball describes a distinctively apocalyptic note. The more such leaders become marginalized from mainstream religion and society, the more they perceive themselves and their causes in apocalyptic terms. The manifestation of the apocalyptic scenario which results from the real or perceived feeling of persecution is the explicit focus of Kimball's last three points--the ideal time, the justification of violent means, and the declaration of Holy War.

The apocalyptic impulse in factors that motivate religious violence, considered by Juergensmeyer and Kimball, is reiterated in somewhat different language by Bruce Hoffman, in his work Inside Terrorism. Hoffman here looks at the differences between secular terrorism and the competing religious imperative for terrorism, the latter of which has been increasing steadily since the 1980s. In his analysis of the causes of religious terrorism among Jews, American Christian White Supremacists, Islamic groups, and cults, Hoffman arrives at three core characteristics, which define all of them. The first characteristic is that religious terrorism is understood to be a response to a divine imperative. As such, Hoffman names terrorism a "sacramental act." Moreover, Hoffman explains that the sacramental act requires the

legitimizing force of sacred texts on the one hand and clerical blessing on the other. These two factors resonate with Kimball's first two indicators, namely absolute truth claims vis a vis scripture and blind obedience. Secondly, Hoffman argues that religious terrorism is undertaken by individuals who see themselves as participants in a total or cosmic war. As a result, their actions are not limited in scope but unlimited, and the lines demarcating the righteous and the unrighteous are absolute. Hoffman says:

 The restraints on violence that are imposed on secular terrorists
 by the desire to appeal to a tacitly supportive or uncommitted
 constituency are not relevant to the religious terrorist. Moreover,
 this absence of a constituency in the secular terrorist sense leads
 to a sanctioning of almost limitless violence against a virtually
 open-ended category of targets: tat is, anyone who is not a member
 of the terrorists' religion or religious sect. This explains the
 rhetoric common to 'holy terror' manifests describing persons
 outside the terrorists' religious community in denigrating and
 dehumanizing terms, as for example, 'infidels,' 'dogs,' 'children
 of Satan,' 'mud people.' (16)

Finally, and most poignantly, Hoffman notes that religious terrorists have no stake in preserving this world. Because they see themselves as engaged in a total war, their goal is not for reform of this world but to usher in the coming world. Their sense of social alienation runs so deep that they are willing to use even world-destroying, i.e., nuclear, means against an almost boundlessly construed enemy.

In each of these authors, we see quite clearly the apocalyptic variant of eschatological thinking that underlies religious violence. In short, they argue that people who despair of this world and seek an alternative to it find in their religious traditions not only the justification but also the mandate for enacting extreme violence toward the hoped-for apocalyptic end. These authors have not argued that all eschatological thinking is violent or is the fertile soil of terrorism. However, what they have powerfully demonstrated is that apocalyptic, eschatological thinking consistently justifies, sanctifies, and even mandates religious violence. When an eschatological-apocalyptic imagination becomes the absolutist lens through which the polis is interpreted and negotiated, and when such an imagination is supported by fundamentalist appropriations of sacred texts, a genuine threat of catastrophic violence ensues.

The certitude of the apocalyptic imagination based on literal readings of sacred literature is easily enough punctured by contemporary scripture scholarship and the fruits of historico-critical hermeneutics. However, we encounter a more troubling problem when we discover an apocalyptic eschatology underlying the very foundations of our understandings of creation, theological anthropology, and redemption. Taking as an example the work of ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, we see what is at stake when we attempt to address the depths of the apocalyptic imagination as she unmasks it deeply embedded within the western, Christian theological tradition. In her profound study Gaia and God, (17) Ruether analyzes how the early Christian synthesis of Platonic and Hebraic models of creation bequeathed to its heirs a dualistic model for interpreting human life and the hope for redemption. Through the Christian appropriation of the Greek notion of a primary soul that inhabits an ontologically inferior material body, Christians have historically manifested a poisonous attitude toward our own corporeality as well as non-human nature. This legacy is in logical conflict with the naturalistic Hebraic model of understanding God's creation as good derived from Genesis 1. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has historically favored the Greek position, which consequentially led to the denigration of women (perceived to be more closely related to the body) as well as to all the rest of non-human nature. Why? We have essentially believed that the saved human is properly a spiritual soul, destined for personal immortality with God after our individual human, bodily deaths. There is, of course, no unanimous Christian understanding of what happens to the soul immediately after death and before the second coming of

Christ; it is merely sufficient to hope for the continuation of the personal ego in some spiritual state.

Because we have believed that our future is not ultimately attached to this world and, moreover, that each of us individually will survive this world, we have become both arrogant and irresponsible with respect to this world. This survival of death for personal participation in the future Kingdom of God, which is arguably the foremost Christian hope, is according to Ruether the foundation for radical ecological irresponsibility.

A whole range of problems has arisen from this hope--both inherently eschatological in its future orientation as well as apocalyptic in its presumption and despair of this earthly existence. We do not recognize our kinship with other creatures or the biosphere itself because we see non-human nature as lacking a rational soul and not sharing our privileged status among God's creatures. As a result, we abuse the resources of our planet to an unsustainable degree, creating deadly imbalances among human communities as well as human and non-human nature. Human population growth and the costs of feeding, fueling, and maintaining this growth put the rest of nature in a precarious state as we encroach ever more on the land, air, and water that are the habitats of other creatures. Systematically, we destroy the delicate balance of nature, and as we exploit her resources, we also create social and economic tensions between human communities. The outcome of this tension is the escalation of militarism and war. The threat of nuclear weapons exchange marks the nadir of our dualistic ideology. Here, where we find the bald presumption that nuclear destruction would be the apocalyptic gateway to God's reign. Deep human despair perverts our sincerest hope for justice and righteousness, transforming it into a necrophilic justification for global annihilation.

Ruether is not alone in her analysis of the ecological crisis we face at the turn of this new century. However, as a Christian theologian, she painfully reveals to us what is at stake with respect to our faith. It is not merely a difficult, ancient narrative of destruction in the Book of Revelation that we must contend with if we wish to be responsible to one another, to the world itself, and to future generations. The far more challenging task is the eradication of spirit-matter dualism from our theological anthropology and notions of redemption. If we reconsider the belief in an immortal soul and embrace human finitude as a totally natural state, then we must also reconsider the fundamental claims of Christianity. What exactly does Jesus save us from if not from death? What happens to resurrection? How does God's justice prevail if there is not final judgment of souls? To these and related questions, Ruether admits that we must remain agnostic--an admittedly unsatisfying stance.

But this is the crux of eschatology. It is about the future and consequently unknowable, yet we attempt to speak to it meaningfully from a committed hope for the present. Perhaps the most responsible way to speak eschatologically is to do so rhetorically through the tripartite commitment to resistance, attentiveness, and solidarity. These three commitments are present commitments, which nevertheless draw their strength from future possibilities. Unlike the apocalyptic imagination, true eschatological hope is not defined by its obsession with the injustices of the past or the inadequacies of the present. It is open to the creation of the purely novel future, and as such should be expansive, inclusive, and driven by a commitment to sustaining life and human dignity in a religiously plural context.

Conclusion

Any hope about the future that is ultimately disconnected from this world must be abandoned. Hope for a future that despairs of this world is a hope likely to both condone and mandate a suspension of normal moral reasoning. When this occurs, great evil may be tolerated and justified by the holy wartime rationale of ultimate good fighting ultimate evil. Whether this dangerous and dubious line of thought is founded upon fundamentalist interpretations of apocalyptic scriptures or imbedded more subtly within theological doctrines, the interruption of ethics that it condones must be resisted. If one of the costs of our

commitment to resistance is to look anew at our traditions, then that must be one of the painful lessons of growing up in a world of religious pluralism. No longer can we allow elements of our traditions that justify exclusivity or fundamentalism to define what it means for us to be persons of faith. For an eschatology to be responsible, it must work toward building the future through the present commitment to resistance, attentiveness, and solidarity. Its ethical cues must be derived from realizable hopes for the future of this world. What is irresponsible is the suspension of ethics in the present based upon presumptions about the future, which are derived from a despairing attitude about the present world and a retaliatory hope for redress of the past.

Whether of hope or of despair, eschatological language is rhetorical language meant to persuade its adherents to action. Given the competing religious claims of a religiously pluralistic context and the ambiguity with which we often must approach even the most sacred elements of our own faith traditions, it seems that a wise rule of thumb for eschatological thinking would be to allow the present to unfold into the future rather than for the presumed future to unfold in the present. As instances of religious terrorism and terrorist groups have increased to account for nearly fifty percent of all known international terrorist organizations, (18) people of faith are required to give an accounting of our beliefs in light of the undeniable fact of violence carried out in the name of religion. In particular, persons of faith must face the challenge of arriving at a responsible eschatology that avoids the dangerous escapism, presumption, and despair of the apocalyptic imagination. We must take seriously staunch critics, such as Sam Harris who in his book The End of Faith makes a sharp point when he says, "Once a person believes--really believes--that certain ideas can lead to eternal happiness, or to its antithesis, he cannot tolerate the possibility that the people he loves might be lead astray by the blandishments of unbelievers. Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one." (19) This is really the heart of the matter. To find tolerance, to be plural, to avoid presumption, to be truly open to the future--these are the measures and judge of a responsible Christian eschatology, understood as a rhetoric of hope, for the present context. In conclusion, I suggest the following guides for our thought and discussion about the future of eschatology:

* It must resist presumptions about the way in which future events are scripted to unfold, even when-- perhaps especially when-- these presumptions are derived from interpretations of sacred scripture.

* It must resist understanding the future as disconnected from the present in any dualistic way--whether spatially or temporally or ontologically.

* It must further resist dualisms in how we see one another and firmly disavow a stance of ultimate religious exclusivity that justifies any use of present violence on religious grounds.

* It must be attentive to recovery and re-appropriation of the religious [Christian] sources and symbols in new ways that empower us in our resistance toward religiously motivated violence.

* It must recognize our solidarity as a human and biotic community responsible to one another in the collaborative effort to build conditions sustainable into the future.

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(1) For an investigation into how this thinking is played out in religious sects and cults, consider Catherine Wessinger's How the Millennium Comes Violently (New York and London: Seven Bridges Pres, 2000), in which she looks at the role eschatological-apocalyptyic thinking plays in the disastrous outcomes of a number of religious cults, including Aum Shinrikyo, Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Branch Davidians, and others.

(2) Johannes B. Metz, Theology of the World (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

(3) Such as in Rahner's anthropological approach to theology in his magnum opus Foundations of Christian Faith (New York: Crossroad, 1978).

(4) Jurgen Moltmann, The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

(5) For a careful exploration of this thesis, see Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's Is Religion Killing Us? (New York: Continuum, 2003).

(6) Jane Idlemann Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63-4.

(7) Thomas Cahill develops this notion at length in his text The Gift of the Jews (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

(8) Rosemary Radford Ruether is particularly good in her treatment of this subject in Gaia and God: Toward a Theology of Earth Healing (Harper San Francisco, 1994).

(9) More detailed discussion of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic terrorism as it is fueled by end-time thinking may be found in Mark Jurgensmeyer's Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000).

(10) Jessica Stern, "Talking with Jewish Extremists," www.pbs.org/wbgh/pages/frontline/shows/israel

(11) Ruether, 80-81.

(12) Samuel Shahid, The Last Trumpet: A Comparative Study in Christian-Islamic Eschatology (Zulon Press, 2005).

(13) Shahid, 251-3.

(14) Makr Juergensmeyer, "Is Religion the Problem?" (Hedgehog Review, Spring 2004): 29.

(15) Charles Kimball, When Religion Becomes Evil (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

(16) Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 95.

(17) Rosemary Radford Ruether, Gaia and God (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

(18) Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91.

(19) Sam Harris, The End of Faith (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 13.