

Radical politics and the Apocalypse: activist readings of Revelation

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The growth of the study of the geopolitics of religion is welcome after decades of neglect. However, the narrow focus upon right-wing American interpretations of end-times theology writes evangelical Christians as geography's 'repugnant cultural other' who constitute us as the modern, progressive, rational subject. Drawing on parallel debates in the anthropology of religion, this article stresses the importance of attending to other readings of the Apocalypse in other places. Using the examples of Dan Berrigan, William Stringfellow and Allan Boesak, it shows how justice and peace activists have read the Book of Revelation as a radical anti-imperial text and found in it a source of resilience for non-violent resistance in the face of apparently overwhelming odds.

Key words: geopolitics, peace, Christianity, Apocalypse, religion

Introduction

21 May 2011 was the date that the US Christian radio broadcaster, 89-year-old Harold Camping, predicted that the end of the world would begin (Tenety 2011). His claim was based on an idiosyncratic reading of Biblical prophecy, and led some of his relatively small number of followers to divest themselves of worldly goods in anticipation. Journalists followed their preparations with a mixture of fascination and scorn, and took obvious pleasure in their bewilderment when the predicted events failed to materialise (Harris 2011).

That media outlets in the US and UK should so widely report a non-story like the world's continued existence, or the predictions of an obscure rich geriatric businessman that it was about to end, is remarkable. The story revisits a certain stereotype of US evangelical Christians as wealthy, other-worldly, conservative and irrational. Reporters barely mentioned that most Christian communities have other ways of thinking about end-times theology that inform very different political engagements.

In this intervention I argue that something analogous is in danger of occurring within the 'geopolitics of religion' literature that has emerged over the past half decade. Although I welcome study of the geopolitical significance of religion, I am concerned at its relatively narrow focus on right-wing militaristic readings of the end-times theology. Following Susan Harding's argument about the field

of the anthropology of Christianity, I suggest that the emerging geopolitics of Christianity is constructing fundamentalist/evangelical Christians as our 'repugnant cultural other' (Harding 1991, 374). Using alternative interpretations of the Biblical Book of Revelation and the text's use by social justice activists in the US and South Africa, I point to more pluriform directions for the future geopolitical study of religion.

A note on my own position is relevant. I am a scholar of geopolitics located both within critical geopolitics and the Christian peace tradition, two elements of my biography that are mutually constitutive (Megoran 2004). I regard the recovery of non-violent theologies of the Apocalypse as important for churches in thinking through how to respond to the violence of our age (Megoran 2007), and for geographers as part of a move towards a broader disciplinary refocus on 'pacific geopolitics' that spotlights how geopolitical visions can resource more peaceful ways of being in the world (Megoran 2011).

Geography's repugnant cultural other?

In 1961 Freeman lamented the 'impatience' of many geographers with religion, even though it was clearly such an important geopolitical factor (Freeman 1961, 206). This same point about the neglect of the geopolitics of religion was echoed by a number of geographers almost half a

century later (Dijkink 2006; Megoran 2006). But it could not be made now. Geography in general, including the study of geopolitics, is taking religion seriously. Dittmer and Sturm's focused, coherent, theoretically informed and empirically diverse 2010 collection on the geopolitics of American Evangelical end-times prophecy belief is ample demonstration of progress.

However, much of the work depicts religion in general, Christians in particular and evangelicals specifically, as indelibly mendacious. This is the case from Dalby's (1990) asides about evangelicals reading prophecy to oppose arms reduction talks, to Dittmer and Sturm's summary in their book that 'Evangelicals often support highly violent foreign policies' (2010, 4). Ó Tuathail (2000) explores the 'Jesuit anti-Communism' of Fr. Edmund Walsh's Cold War 'spiritual geopolitics'. Sturm (2006) and Dittmer (2008) consider interpretations of the Book of Revelation in US popular culture and their significance within right-wing, pro-war constituencies and formal politics. In his own chapter of the edited book, Dittmer (2010) uses internet ethnographies to show how some evangelicals suspected that the 2008 US Presidential winner Barack Obama was 'the Antichrist'. Across the Atlantic, Sidaway mentions how some anti-EU Britons read the union as the beast of Revelation (2006, 2–4). Exceptions do exist (Gallaher 2010; Gerhardt 2008; Megoran 2010), but although each of the above studies represents by itself a valuable and important contribution to our understanding of religious geopolitics, together they present Evangelical Christians as war-like, bigoted, racist, credulous, irrational, conspiratorially paranoid and right-wing. No doubt some are, but Gallaher is at least partially correct in stating that 'most commentators on the evangelical phenomenon (whether in the media or academia) are extrapolating the views of a few well known' figures to the entire movement (2010, 229). Critical geography should be wary about creating new Others. As Kovel puts it in his examination of US apocalypticism, we should heed Marx in seeking to overcome the roots of alienation and helplessness in capitalist society, 'rather than brood on the preachers who exploit the misery of the masses' (2007, 3).

The narrow focus of the geopolitics of religion is of interest not simply because of what it says about a certain group of Christians, but because of what it says about 'us'. Here we can learn from the vibrant field of the anthropology of Christianity. A foundational text was Susan Harding's 1991 article in *Social Research*, 'Representing fundamentalism'. Harding argues that fundamentalist/evangelical Christians have become anthropology's 'repugnant cultural other'. Seen as antithetical to modernity, 'which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant', they constitute us as the modern

subject (Harding 1991, 374). Our study of the geopolitics of religion may be doing likewise. Here the anthropology of religion can point a way forwards. Anthropology has traditionally been alert to the numerous and varied local manifestations of apocalyptic and millennial movements (Stewart and Harding 1999). A recent review article in *Anthropological Forum* shows how this literature may point us forwards, enjoining scholars to attend to diverse local forms of Christianity (McDougall 2009, 188). I suggest that one way to advance the future of religious geopolitics is to do just that with prophecy interpretation, to see how different (geo)political meanings are derived from prophetic scriptures by active agents (Dittmer 2007). I shall sketch out below what this might look like by outlining how three social justice and peace activists used end-times theology and the Book of Revelation to reach geopolitical arguments and inform geopolitical practices quite different from those considered in the geopolitical literature thus far.

Reading Revelation historically

Much of the work on evangelical geopolitics thus far has looked at geopolitical interpretations of the Biblical Book of Revelation. Arranged as the final book of the New Testament canon, it is ascribed to 'John', exiled to the island of Patmos 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'.¹ Revelation is an example of the genre of contemporary apocalyptic Jewish writing. This genre uses extraordinarily vivid imagery and language to depict cataclysmic events, moments that may present substantial ruptures in human history. All texts are open to multiple interpretations; but history has shown that Revelation is more so than others.

The geopolitical analyses cited above have largely considered how Revelation is mapped onto present geopolitics by evangelical Christians using the theological paradigm of 'Dispensationalism premillennialism' (or simply 'premillennialism'). Although its antecedents are in the earliest Christian times, dispensational premillennialism was developed in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby. It is a highly literalistic interpretation of texts like Revelation and holds that at the end of the present 'dispensation' the church would be 'secretly raptured', or safely removed to heaven in an instant. Following this, earth's remaining inhabitants would be subject to the great 'tribulation' (including disease, war and famine), before the salvation of the Jewish people and Christ's return to rule the earth from Jerusalem for 1000 years of peace. The end of this 'millennium' would witness a final decisive battle with evil in the form of 'Babylon' and its minions (Boyer 1992, chapter 3; Weber 1987, 1–27). Premillennialism understands many passages of the Book of Revelation as literal predictions

rather than symbols. It thus lends itself to the identification of specific events in our time with what are understood to be Biblical predictions, and to the Harold Camping school of precise anticipation of the beginning of the end times. It is premillennialist circles – and often extreme and marginal elements of them – that have been the focus of most of the scholarship on geopolitics and religion cited above.

In contrast to premillennialism, Kovacs and Rowland's (2004) illuminating compendium of readings of Revelation over Christian history shows that this idea of seeing Revelation as coded references to specific future events and people is only one of a broad range of approaches. Premillennialism has been rare in the Reformed churches, those conservative evangelical congregations that trace lineage to the Calvinistic and Lutheran Reformation. The authoritative US Reformed text on the topic of the end times is Loraine Boettner's *The Millennium* (1957). Boettner gives short shrift to premillennialism. He regards it as a doctrine that thrives on anxiety 'in time of war or of national crisis' (1957, 8) and is fatally flawed by the inconsistent literalism of its interpretational strategy. Evangelicals have commonly read Revelation as representing general spiritual principles, namely that Satan is always trying to lure people into sin but that Christians can successfully resist this by virtue of Christ's defeat of Satan at Calvary. Brookes take this approach in his volume on Revelation for the conservative Welwyn Commentary Series. He sees Babylon not as a particular state or geopolitical actor, but as 'the world with all its seductions and charms' against which the Christian must be vigilant (1986, 153). In this apolitical reading, Revelation is detached from its historical coordinates.

Kovacs and Rowlands show that another alternative interpretational strategy that was very significant in the early centuries of Christian history, and that has enjoyed a resurgence over the past century, is to pay careful attention to Revelation's historical specificity. Richard Bauckham, an extremely influential scholar of Revelation, is of this school. He dismisses both the approaches that see Revelation as coded future predictions and timeless spiritual symbols. Rather, he argues, we need to understand the social, political, cultural and religious resonances of its symbols (Bauckham 1993, 19). These, he posits, are primarily Roman: and particularly the Roman empire of Nero and Domitian that was brutally persecuting Christians. In Bauckham's interpretation, the strategy of Revelation, he suggests, is to create a symbolic world for its readers to enter in order to 'redirect their imaginative response to the world', and thereby break the bounds which Roman power and ideology set on the world (Bauckham 1993, 129).

Ben Witherington's respected commentary on Revelation fleshes this out. For example, Revelation chapter

17 depicts 'Babylon', mother of harlots, as a woman on a city built on seven hills, deceiving the world, draining it of wealth, and drunk on the blood of the saints. Rome was, famously, a city built on seven hills. Witherington observes that a coin minted under Vespasian, and still in circulation under Domitian (when Revelation may have been written) depicted the female divinity Roma sitting on seven hills. Witherington writes that

John's depiction may owe something to this coin, but one must bear in mind that he is doing a deliberate parody of such images that involves comic exaggeration of features, such as we see today in political cartoons. (2003, 218–19)

Numerous such references can be drawn from Revelation, by particular attention to the textual and visual discourses of Roman imperial propaganda and emperor worship. The cult of the worship of Caesar as emperor, as 'the son of god' who had brought 'peace' and 'salvation' to the earth, was increasingly seen as integral to Roman life and welfare. Witherington thus asserts that Revelation's proclamation of Jesus (rather than Caesar Domitian) as Lord is a profoundly political act (2003, 162). This is an articulation of a politics of resistance that is non-violent because 'conquering takes place through dying not killing' (2003, 174).

This idea that Revelation is not merely an anti-imperial text but one that posits *non-violent* resistance to empire is gaining increasing currency. Patricia McDonald reads Revelation's battle scenes between angelic and demonic forces as examples of 'nonviolent conquering' (2004, 265). Thus Mark Bredin argues, 'The Jesus of Revelation is a Revolutionary of peace', who defeats his enemies by dying at their hands, who fights violence with non-violence, and who stands for all humankind rather than projecting violence against the evildoer who must be eradicated (2003, 223). Mennonite scholar John Yoder's key text *The politics of Jesus* (1994 [1972]) has proved particularly influential in evangelical Christian circles. The same interpretation of Revelation as a non-violent, anti-imperial text, albeit with less explicit radical readings of politics today, is found in the popular commentaries of the influence British evangelical leader, Tom Wright, formerly Bishop of Durham (Wright 2011).

In his attempt to 'aid the recovery of a spiritual reading of geopolitics in our time', Michael Northcott argues that contemporary premillennialist right-wing US readings of the apocalypse are a product of the Constantinian shift in the fourth century when 'Christianity was turned from its non-violent and anti-imperial origins into an imperial cult' (2004, 13). The task, then, is 'saving Christianity from empire' (Nelson-Pallmeyer 2005).

Reading Revelation radically

Witherington observes that, because it is borne out of the traumatic experiences of exile and subjugation, 'Apocalyptic literature is, by its very nature, resistance literature' (2003, 160). Here I will discuss two influential US activist theologians who have pioneered reading of Revelation as an oppositional, activist text for our times: Catholic priest Dan Berrigan (born 1921) and protestant lawyer/lay theologian William Stringfellow (1928–1985).

Dan Berrigan is a radical Catholic priest in the Dorothy Day tradition of Catholic Workers' houses (see for example Egan 1999). A veteran peace and anti-war activist, much of Berrigan's best writing was penned while in prison, for example his unusual and eloquent commentary on the Hebrew Bible's Book of Jeremiah, *Jeremiah: the world, the wound of God*. Berrigan depicts the prophet as a lonely voice for peace decrying the violence of an unjust society bent on war whilst utterly blind to the truth that God is not for their wars, but against them. Dan Berrigan's Jeremiah looks uncannily like Dan Berrigan the anti-Vietnam war activist. In the 26th chapter of Jeremiah, the priest and prophets of the royal court of Judah murder an ally of Jeremiah's and seek to kill him too, because of his message that God is against their foreign and domestic policies. Berrigan moves seamlessly from this incident in Jeremiah to guided school tours of the Pentagon and CIA headquarters, institutions that he decries as 'manifestly wicked, dedicated as they are with seemingly endless and persistent ingenuity to works of death' (1999, 112). Using the imagery of Revelation, Berrigan adds that in these tours 'A chief principality is horribly, boldly on display: obscene, unashamed, up front, the cosmic whore of Revelation bedizened with her resources and wares' (1999, 112–13).

Berrigan thus reads Revelation as the unveiling of imperial power. This power is unveiled not only as violent, but also as arrogant in deluding itself that it plays a beneficent, even divine, role in human history. In terrorising the world's poor by its foreign policy, and in claiming an exceptional role as a divine agent in spreading liberty, it is the USA *par excellence* that represents Revelation's Babylon today.

This argument is developed in Berrigan's 1983 book about Revelation, *The nightmare of God*. A core theme is how the American empire remains oblivious to its identity as Babylon. He draws out how Revelation depicts the continued inability, the refusal, of Babylon to learn from the judgments of God:

Babylon's moral life is not a passage from crime to repentance, but only from crime to crime. Ourselves? From no-one do we hear, after Vietnam, 'Remember, and repent.' Only, 'forget and forget.' Thus our history becomes a progressive breakaway from all restraint. The

empire rides and flogs the four horses: death, plague, famine, war in her wake. And we call it civilisation, sanity. (Berrigan 1983, 120)

Revelation unveils the true nature of empire, only the empire itself is unable to recognise its true nature – it regards itself as Jerusalem.

In Berrigan's exegesis, Revelation unveils Rome as bellicose, selfish, self-deluded and absurdly resolute. And it unveils America in that way, too: 'waging war as it does, preparing for ever more lethal incursions, power politicking, carving the earth into blocs, spheres of influence, like parts of a corpse' (1983, 24). Revelation unveils America's geopolitical strategising not as the heroic defence of the 'free world', but as the raging of the beast. For Berrigan Revelation becomes doubly apposite: just as John was in exile in the penal colony of Patmos, so too Berrigan spent years in jail for direct-action anti-war activities. Indeed, *The nightmare of God* was written in a putrid, rat-infested, overcrowded cell in a Washington DC jail, where he was incarcerated for digging graves on the White House lawn as a Vietnam War protest.

Although from a different Christian tradition, William Stringfellow's political sympathies were close to Berrigan's. Indeed Stringfellow was indicted for sheltering Berrigan when he was on the run from the FBI for absconding after arrest for anti-war protests. When Berrigan was apprehended, Stringfellow served as his defence attorney. Stringfellow toured Europe as an ecumenical representative of the World Council of Churches shortly after World War 2, and was profoundly affected by the anti-Nazi Christian resistance movements and the general failure of continental European churches to stand against Fascism (Stringfellow 1994). Following legal training, he worked as a lawyer with Black and Puerto Rican communities amongst whom he lived in Harlem. This experience honed his understanding that America was neither a particular tool of divine action in history, nor even a morally and spiritually neutral political entity. Rather, it was a malign example of the complicated New Testament idea of 'principalities and powers'. As a significant public theologian, Stringfellow's writing on these themes was crucial in sparking a new interest in the political theology of power that has permeated US theology in the influential writings of theologian and peace activist Walter Wink (1998).

Stringfellow's theology of the 'principalities and powers' is presented most forcibly in one of his books on Revelation, the 1973 text *An ethic for Christians and other aliens in a strange land*. Here he writes that he wants to understand America Biblically, not construe the Bible 'Americanly', as has been the norm (Stringfellow 1973). The text majors on the Babylon passages in the book of Revelation, reading them as a parable of the operation of

principalities and powers, primarily states, in any place in human history. Revelation reveals death as the social purpose behind such powers, and represents their traits. For Stringfellow, the conceit that America is the New Jerusalem is Biblical illiteracy: rather, America today stands in the place of Babylon in Revelation.

'Stringfellow's work was not commentary on Revelation, but the reverse: Revelation commenting on "us"', write activists Howard-Brook and Gwyther (1999, 44). Stringfellow elucidates many aspects of contemporary American politics through appeals to the Babylon parable. Crises of foreign war, ecological corruption, racism, urban chaos, unemployment and deception make victims of the poor. But these forces also make victims of elites like Presidents who become pathetically dehumanised as captives to the power of death in the principalities that they work for. For Stringfellow, Revelation does not give 'policy answers': rather, it shows how to live ethically, how to hope and to celebrate human life, knowing that God has ultimately defeated death. This entails resisting the cultures of death, for resistance is the only way to live humanly. But, against much contemporary revolutionism, it is to resist without recourse back to death-dealing.

Conclusion

The recent growth of the geopolitical study of religion is welcome and necessary, for worldwide religious resurgence (Berger 1999) has significant and often disturbing geopolitical implications. However, critical geopolitics' marked focus on right-wing readings of apocalyptic texts like Revelation risks producing evangelical Christians as human geography's 'repugnant cultural other' who constitute us as the modern, progressive, rational subject. To obviate this, it is important to recover the alternative (and historically more mainstream) readings of Revelation in different places at different times. This article has demonstrated that Revelation can be read not merely as a coded future prediction, informing reactionary politics, but as an anti-imperial resistance text unmasking the fraud and violence of empire, informing a non-violent activist stance that struggles for justice and celebrates life.

Apart from broadening the scope of enquiry, this move makes two further contributions to critical geography. Firstly, the activist reading of Babylon as Rome, and the reading of present-day empires through the imagery of Revelation, is useful for broader critical geopolitical analyses and analogical imaginings of post-9/11 US and UK foreign policy. In an insightful 2003 paper, Simon Dalby considers how President Bush scripted 9/11 as an innocent America violated by motiveless, hate-driven evil in the first act of a new war (Dalby 2003). Dalby prefers the scripting of 9/11 through imperial analogies, viewing the Afghanistan war as an edge-of-empire imperial entan-

glement like those Rome had in Palestine and beyond. But his analogy begs the question: even if they accept the analogy, will Americans, Britons and others generally find that a compelling critique? Popular understandings of Rome in the Euro-American world remain informed by an influential strand of classical scholarship that saw *Pax Romana* as a beneficent guarantor of the spread of 'civilisation' and the export of Greco-Roman civic virtue to backward regions. Indeed, although the analogy between Rome and America may be historically untenable (Smil 2010), this is a position used by supporters of contemporary American imperialism such as Boot (2002), Cooper (2004) and Lal (2004). Ironically, Dalby's comparison could backfire as precisely such an endorsement of US empire. However, by reading Revelation as an unveiling of the ghastly workings of all empires, from Rome to America, Dalby's analogy can be rescued for the purpose intended, and used again to unsettle the geopolitical visions of contemporary American Christians and others.

Secondly, this reading of Revelation is a source of *resilience* for struggle against empire in the face of apparently unpromising odds. Kovel (2007, 2) argues that the apocalyptic mindset's ability to conceive of the wholesale overthrow of an unjust order has made Revelation a key text in revolutionary history, from anti-slavery struggles to Communism. This is certainly true of the anti-Apartheid movement. Allan Boesak was a Black church minister in South Africa and an influential anti-Apartheid activist (Ackerman and Duval 2000, 348). His sermons and other written works repeatedly return to Revelation. For Boesak, prophecy is 'much less predicting the future than contradicting the present' (1983, 29), and Revelation contradicts Apartheid as much as it contradicted Rome. For example, in 1978 the so-called 'Information Scandal' plunged the South African government into turmoil when it was revealed that it had been using illegal means to sell the government's Apartheid policy to the outside world. Boesak (1987b) reads this through Revelation as God unveiling and judging the immoral workings of empire.

Boesak's book, *Comfort and protest* (1987a), is a commentary on Revelation, or, perhaps more accurately, a commentary on the Apartheid regime performed through a reading of the book of Revelation. He identifies specific Apartheid policies and official proclamations, comparing them to the Rome/Babylon of Revelation. In closing his book with a discussion of the final chapter of Revelation, Boesak quotes a poem written by Martial praying for the safe homecoming of the Emperor Domitian:

Thou, morning star,
Bring on the day!
Come and expel our fears,
Rome begs that Caesar
May soon appear

'The church smiles at this last desperate attempt at power and glory', writes Boesak (1987a), observing that the final chapter of Revelation hails not Domitian, but the Lord Jesus Christ as 'the bright morning star' (Revelation 22:16). As John surveys the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of justice and peace, descending to earth to reunite symbolically God and humanity, he implores, 'Come, Lord Jesus.' Boesak creates a liturgical prayer from this:

For the pain and tears and anguish must end . . . Come, Lord Jesus
 For there must be an end to the struggle when the unnecessary dying is over . . . Come, Lord Jesus
 For the patterns of this world must change . . . Come, Lord Jesus
 For hate must turn to love, fear must turn to joy . . . Come, Lord Jesus
 For war must cease and peace must reign . . . Come, Lord Jesus. (Boesak 1987a, 137–8)

The apocalyptic mindset says 'Yes the empire (Roman, Apartheid, British, American, Chinese, wherever Babylon rears its head) is bad: in fact, it is worse than we thought. But, for all its might and resources, its claims to represent civilisation or even God's agency in history are nothing but wicked lies. It doesn't have the final word in the human story, indeed, it will be overthrown spectacularly.'

Apocalypticism often produces bizarre and dangerous geopolitical scenarios with real political effects, and must be subject to rigorous scholarly critique – this is the value of existing critical geopolitical literature on religion. But without some version of apocalypticism, we may imperil our capacity to recognise the predicaments that we are in and deform our ability to conceive of radical alternatives. Apocalypse is the ultimate defence against the empire's seductive lie that 'there is no alternative'. There is. One task for critical geopolitical studies of religion is to recover such readings of Revelation and turn them back, like a mirror, on ourselves and on our age.

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Note

1 Revelation 1:9, Bible. All Bible references are to the 1973 New International Version, Hodder and Stoughton, London.

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