

Six Hundred Sixty-Six: Some Reflections on that Apocalyptic Number

Colleagues,

Six Hundred Sixty-Six Thursday Theologies. That's a lot of Thursdays. Nigh on to 13 years' worth of them. Six Hundred Sixty-Six Thursdays ago was May 14, 1998, the day ThTh Number One was posted. If curious, here's where you can still find it: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur0514.shtml>

But you readers know that the number 666 has a much more ancient heritage. And not a happy one. It's apocalyptic. E.g., in the last book of the New Testament, "The Revelation [apocalypsis in Greek] to John" (13:18) we read: ". . .the name of the beast or the number of its name . . . is six hundred sixty-six." The scholarly consensus for the number 666 goes like this: "In Hebrew and Greek, letters were used also as numerals. Each name had a numerical value, calculated by adding the numerical value of the letters. 666 is the numerical value of NERO CAESAR." [HarperCollins Bible Dictionary]

But we don't have to go back to Nero for apocalyptic history. Apocalypse is now. Just look at the pictures coming our way from Japan, New Zealand, Northern Africa, the Middle East in the past few days. The tectonic plates bordering the western Pacific are moving with the same catastrophic consequences as John sees in the planetary collapse unfolding before his eyes And the human-tectonics currently unfolding on the surface of the African and the Arabian plates are in their own way as lethal as is the bobbing and weaving of the skin of our planet.

And there's also the unraveling, of social and economic "tectonics" (root word in Greek = building materials) in the USA. They too have their own apo-calyptic [= "take away the veil" in Greek] character, unveiling what's been hidden in our capitalist and democratic way of life, so that all may see—well, maybe not all, but a few more of us—that our nation too is not "heaven on earth."

The major difference between St. John's apocalypse reportage and what we're getting unveiled in today's apocalyptic messages is that John is addressing the Christian community. His message is to Christ-followers living in the midst of chaos. Often because their Christ-confession triggers lethal reaction from others living alongside them on the same tectonic plate. That too is going on right now in our world. See the last In-betweener posted a few days ago to the listserve telling of Christian martyrdom today on the African plate.

John, the Un-veiler, is not intent on showing us "Ain't it awful!," but he speaks as Christ's apostle to Christ's disciples facing persecution, yes, martyrdom, as the social and physical world around them—the human tectonics as well as the planetary ones—go topsy-turvy. And many will indeed die. Bizarre as the images are in that last book of the Bible, it speaks to such a time as this. Bizarre is what's before our eyes too.

During the early years of the Crossings Community Inc.—somewhere around 1983—we offered semester-long courses, every one of them titled according to this formula , "Crossings from [a Biblical book]" —and then after the colon, a phrase pin-pointing a major theme in that Biblical book,. Sample (our first-ever course #501) "Crossings from the Gospel of Luke: Bringing God's Peace to Earth." Each course focused on a significant text from that book—all of them taken from the church lectionary. You can guess what the Lukan "significant text" was from the title, namely,

Luke's Christmas story in chapter two. [Our course numbers got up to 521.]

After we'd been at it a few semesters, we tackled The Revelation to St. John. It was course #513 "Crossing from Revelation: Surviving the Apocalypse." Here is the course description [Bob Bertram's distinctive prose]: "A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Revelation) cosmic calamity and crisis exempts no one, yet survival is open to everyone via the pre-emptive apocalypse of Cosmic Christ; how later in that same tradition (Medieval mystics, 20th Century Apocalyptic artists) survival is celebrated in the very face of catastrophe; how the same Cosmic Christ copes with our apocalypse now."

Course #513 began with the lectionary text for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels (September 29). That text is Revelation 12:7-12. It goes like this: War broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fighting the dragon and his angels. Dragon is defeated, thrown down to earth. Identified with three names: Devil (= "destroyer" in Greek) Satan ("prosecuting attorney" in Hebrew), Deceiver. And then comes the heavenly voice interpreting what happened. "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein. But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

As in all of these semester-long courses, we spent three weeks on the Biblical text analyzing it in terms of its own 3-step diagnosis and corresponding 3-step prognosis. Someday I should dig that up and pass it on to you.

Major "Aha!" was Bob Bertram's discovery that when Luther preached on this text he presented Michael, not as a winged figure, but as Christ himself, God's major "angel" (= messenger) to embattled humankind. And that rendering arises from the very Hebrew word Michael. Mi-cha-el is actually three words, a full sentence, in a question form: Mi (who) cha (is like) el (God)? Answer: For any and every Christ-apostle the answer is: the crucified and risen Messiah, aka Jesus Christ. And the "war in heaven" before the throne of God, where the destroyer-accuser-deceiver is defeated, is Good Friday/Easter. The rest of the Rev. 12:7-12 text is about the consequences. Defeated before God's own tribunal as the sinners' Prosecuting Attorney, the destroyer/deceiver is still active on earth continuing his daily work, challenging their trust in Christ by having his "angels" (=messengers) do the accusation, demolition, deception—the tectonics of apocalypse now.

Remedy? "Conquering the dragon –again and again, day after day–by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Something like this: Though still beset by all manner of sinful left-overs in my life, I'm nevertheless clean by virtue of Christ's sacrifice. This daily "word of witnessing" to my own self and to the world around me is at the core of Christ-coping with apocalypse in any age.

[For a full 24-page essay on Michael, see Bob's "Spirituality is for the Angels – The Angels of St.Michael." on the Crossings website.]

After the first three weeks getting our groundings, we then spent two weeks looking at samples from church history where this text's substance figured prominently. In this case it was the apocalyptic theology of Thomas Muenzer, one-time student of Luther at Wittenberg, who later deserted his mentor (for being a "softie" in the face of the political and social evil of the

day), and with sword in hand joined the Peasants Revolt, which led to his own demise. We also studied Albrecht Durer's woodcuts for the Book of Revelation to learn his theology of apocalypse.

Third segment was two weeks attending to 20th Century Apocalyptic artist Francis Coppola and his blockbuster movie (1979) "Apocalypse Now." We also studied Picasso's Guernica painting from last century's Spanish civil war. Coppola's grisly rendering of the Vietnam War, with its sub-theme of the destruction that this war was doing to the Americans who were engaged in the ghastly destruction of Vietnamese land and people—Agent Orange, My Lai, etc. Coppola retells Joseph Conrad's 1902 "Heart of Darkness" novella with its apocalyptic exposure of the dark side of European colonization while exploring the three levels of darkness that the protagonist, Marlow, encounters: the darkness of the Congo wilderness, the darkness of the Europeans' cruel treatment of the natives, and the unfathomable darkness within every human being for committing heinous acts of evil. Coppola substitutes the words American for European and Vietnam for Congo and lets the cameras roll.

But then comes this add-on: Apocalypse Now for Americans back in the homeland included those 50,000 body bags flown back for burial—and what Coppola didn't know then, but we know now, namely, the more than 50,000 suicides of returned V-N veterans, who ostensibly "survived" and came home uninjured. Watching the movie and crossing John's own apocalypse with it was, as you can well imagine, not light-hearted classroom banter.

That much of the course—Revelation 12, Muentzer & Durer, Coppola's movie—was the first half of the term. For the last half students presented papers wherein they "crossed" the set of texts above with some "apocalypse now" in the culture, the

world, their own lives today. It was an exercise in the standard Crossings paradigm: "Grounding" from Rev. 12 and the other texts we'd examined; "tracking" a current slice-of-life that signaled apocalypse now; finally "crossing" the two into each other.

I remember two titles presented in that first class.

- Crossing Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses" with the Apocalyptic Good News
- Redeeming American Pop Culture from Demonic Possession

And here is the fuller text from one student presentation that I found in the #513 file folder:

APOCALYPSE NOW compared to Apocalypse Then (Rev. 12) Francis Coppola's retelling of Joseph Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS in the film makes one obvious change and one not quite so. Obvious is the move from Africa to SE Asia and the Vietnam war. Kurtz is again the mystery figure at the end of the long, long search up a long, long river into the jungle. The less obvious switch, I think, is that the mystery character Kurtz is not only a figure for the Horror, Horror in the heart of every human. (Reader's Encyclopedia: "The 'heart of darkness' is the jungle, and the primitive, subconscious heart of man.")

Coppola's movie proclaims this to be the heart of our nation, the United States. His movie takes off the veil (apo-calyypse) of a whole people, us, as that people was exposed in the Vietnam war. We are just as jungle-minded as the folks whose home is the jungle. We are worse even, as the VN war showed. Kurtz discovered it with the force of a "diamond bullet through my forehead. They were stronger than us . . . more moral and at the same time able to use their primordial instincts to kill without judgment. It's judgment that defeats us." By which I take him to mean that we judge ourselves civilized, advanced, etc., and them primitive/backward. Here Coppola's Kurtz pushes

back the veil to expose the heart of our darkness. We are righteous (and thus, as with the Pharisees in the N.T. gospels, "need no repentance.")

In that un-veiling the themes of Rev. 12 surface. The four key activities of the Evil One show up: DECEIVING, TEMPTING (maybe), DESTROYING God's creation (diabolos-work), and ACCUSING, even rightfully accusing those whose "judgment" renders them as superior and the others as Gooks.

I say maybe on the "tempting" item, since in the Bible it is usually (or is it only?) believers in God's gospel, God's word of mercy/forgiveness, who get tempted. The evidence is unclear in the movie whether there are any folks who do get tempted to brutal and absolutely insane killing AND are thereby being led by THE tempter no longer to trust the word of their baptism as true for them (Cf. Jesus' own temptation in last Sunday's Gospel pericope).

Might one say: "Now war arose in Vietnam, the US and its agents fighting against the VC/NVN. And the US forces (with umpteen times the advantage over their foes) fought and fought, but they were defeated, and thrown out of VN and there was no longer any place for them in all SE Asia."

Although intrinsically no more evil than the dark hearts of generic humanity, the United States had let itself be deceived into its moral superiority. The US had taken its civilized advances (especially its the high-tech war machinery, and chemistry, used in VN) [Question: is the chopper the high-tech "angel" on the US team in this apocalyptic war?] and thrown them against the enemy. But it was thrown out of VN, as a deceiver, a messenger of that ancient serpent, who is called Diabolos (=destroyer) and Satan (Accusing Prosecuting Attorney) and the Deceiver, doing all three of these before the whole

world.

In VN that one was thrown down and the whole world saw it, but for self-deceived Americans – only rare ones saw it. For Kurtz and maybe most of the soldiers and protagonist Willard, it was sometimes yes and sometimes no.

There is no conquest here by the blood of the Lamb. The best resolution or redemption offered is the Aha! that drives Kurtz, his encounter with more-than-human Horror that deceives the whole world. Kurtz at least saw it and stopped denying it. Willard's long journey to get to this Aha! ends ambiguously, as though Coppola were saying: And you, too, movie viewer, will you join in Kurtz' admission?

No cosmic accuser gets thrown down, Kurtz' protestations about judgment notwithstanding. Nobody conquers the darkness. Rather it's vice versa. People do love their lives unto death, and with the senseless deaths that they inflict and that get inflicted on them, death conquers all. There is no rejoicing at all (just hell-raising USO shows, etc.) and the great wrath persists with no signal that its "time is short," let alone that "he knows it."

Except for the geographical names, how much of this analysis would need to be changed to "cross" Rev. 12 with national life in the USA today?

The response of the mayor of Tokyo to the cataclysm in his country came near to being a Biblical crossing of its own, though I don't know if these scriptures bear any weight for him or not. He may well have been just reflecting on karma (aka in the New Testament "life under the law.") Yahoo! News reported this:

“The outspoken governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, told reporters Monday that the disaster was ‘punishment from heaven’ because Japanese have become greedy.”

Once his words circled the globe and the blogosphere, and he was roundly “accused” of all sorts of things, he promptly retracted them. But too quickly. Apparently he did not have Michael the Defense Attorney at his side to cope with the prosecuting attorneys (maxi-plural!) posting their charges against him. Yet this he could have said, even without Biblical reference: If tectonic plate shake-up and its consequences won’t get us to stop and think, what will? The issue is not “what caused it?” but what message—if any—did we hear coming out of the chaos. Did anything about us or our world get unveiled before our eyes?

To come to closure, take another look at Bertram’s course description for #513.

“A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Revelation) cosmic calamity and crisis exempts no one, yet survival is open to everyone via the pre-emptive apocalypse of Cosmic Christ; how later in that same tradition (Medieval mystics, 20th Century Apocalyptic artists) survival is celebrated in the very face of catastrophe; how the same Cosmic Christ copes with our apocalypse now.”

1. Cosmic calamity and crisis exempt no one. Whether catastrophic or quietly, death comes to all.
2. Yet survival is open to everyone. That is the claim of the Christian Gospel.
3. It comes via the “pre-emptive apocalypse” [one of Bertram’s favorite phrases] of Cosmic Christ. The opening words of the last book of the Bible are NOT “the apocalypse (veil-removal) of world history.” Instead, they

are “The revelation (veil-removal) of Jesus Christ.” Jesus’ “pre-emptive” apocalypse occurs in the cosmic stuff taking place on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Some of the reports in the four gospels even signal a rumble going through the creation at that time (earthquake, midday sun disappearing, dead coming from the graves). It’s pre-emptive quality lies in this, that entrusting yourself to the Jesus engineering this apocalypse, you are already “home-free” from any and all apocalypses yet to come your way. That is survival big time!

4. Christians celebrate this big-time survival in the face of every catastrophe.
5. Needed in order to do just that is practice, help from one another, to use the same Cosmic Christ to cope with our apocalypse(s) now.

“Six hundred sixty-six,” the name and number of the destroyer, deceiver, accuser, are the final words in Revelation 13. The very next words that come as chapter 14 opens are the testimony, mentioned in chapter 12, which trumps that name and number: “Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion.” Good words for survival in every apocalypse. Also good words for bringing ThTh #666 to closure.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder