



Apocalypse After All?

Catherine Keller

Apocalypse After All? asks the American philosopher and theologian Catherine Keller. The revised manuscript of her lecture at the University of Zürich sets forth Keller's «ecofeminist theopoetics» combining ecological and gender politics, process cosmology, post-structuralist philosophy and religious pluralism.



I am beginning a book called *Apocalypse after All?* So why on earth am I now writing on the Apocalypse—again? Since I am an American and it is 2018, I could blame it on the new president. Making him anti-Christ or Whore of Babylon is, after all, tempting enough. But it grants him a kind of demonic or fascist coherence that he lacks. He is an extreme symptom, not a first cause. So I will not dignify him with any such title. Certainly, his gift to the religious right for their total support of him—the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem—is a great recharge of their hopes for the Lord’s return. The horrific violence surrounding the opening of the embassy only proves to them that we are approaching Christ’s Second Coming.[1] [/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote1]

For these folk it doesn’t matter that Trump cannot talk or act Christian, indeed has held no church membership. As for his porn-star problem, the old leader of the fundamentalist right, Jerry Falwell, defends Trump: «God called King David a man after God’s own heart even though he was an adulterer and a murderer.»[2] [/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote2]

[/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote2]But, to be honest, it was in fact before the national election that I had decided upon *Apocalypse After All?* as a next project. Warum? Well, because of the creation. While the creationist, anti-scientific religious right pumps on toward their end-time, scientists are sounding more and more apocalyptic. In one widely circulated article from summer 2017, David Wallace-Wells sketches the bleakest possible scenario for global warming. He warns of a «planet so awash in greenhouse gas that Brooklyn’s heat waves will rival Bahrain’s. The breadbaskets of China and the United States will enter a debilitating and everlasting drought, he says. And millions of brains will so lack oxygen that they’ll slip into a carbon-induced confusion.»[3] [/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote3]

Unless we take aggressive action, «parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century,» he writes. «No matter how well-informed you are, you are surely not alarmed enough.»

A cartoon that has been posted on the refrigerator in my kitchen for 15 years depicts two guys with wild hair both carrying identical signs that say, «The End of the World is Coming.» One of course has a bible—and the other a book titled *Climate Change*. The caption? «Science and religion finally agree.»

Scientists are, in fact, usually reserved in their language: Is «the entire scientific community [in] emergency mode?,» asks one climate scientist, Tamsin Edwards. «We are cautious, and trying to learn more. Climate prediction is a strange game. It takes decades to test our predictions, so society must make decisions with the best evidence but always under uncertainty. I understand why a US-based climate scientist would feel particularly pessimistic. But *we have to take care not to talk about the apocalypse as if it were inevitable.*»[4] [/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote4]Well, that captures it: An inevitable doomsday rhetoric does not help. It becomes self-fulfilling prophecy; it feeds the apocalypse habit. Yet I think that some language of apocalypse has at this hour of history become unavoidable. Not because of a predetermined end of the world, willed by God or locked in by fate. Not because of hysterical rhetoric. But because, year by year, the data on ice-melt, sea-rise, spreading droughts... gets scarier as it gets more precise. For all of us earthlings, it is a strange slow speed of looming planetary doom, of coming catastrophe—slow by the temporality of daily news dramas, but speedy in geological time. So we inhabit a fitful transition from the eleven-thousand-year Holocene to what is now called the Anthropocene.

And yet the Christian right, unlike the doomsday prophet of my kitchen cartoon, just denies the climate apocalypse: After all, only God can affect the climate. Denial in the U.S. is now the order of the day. In fact, all mention of climate change was erased from the government

website the first day of the new presidency. This official climate denialism is often met with a growing and unofficial nihilism: «What's the point? Too late.» And it may be—especially if such nihilism spreads. Because, really, there is not much time left to get off our greenhouse gas addiction. (Perhaps a decade?) The smaller our mitigations, the greater must be our adaptations, and what Donna Haraway calls «staying with the trouble» will get ever more challenging for ever more of the population—beginning with its most vulnerable, its poor, and of course its nonhumans, who remind us that our Anthropocene civilization is already engulfed in «the sixth extinction.»^[5] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote5\]](#) Even if we use instead Haraway's more inviting «Chthulucene»: a time of *chthonic* (earthy) manifestation, in which humans will have to come to terms with our interdependence with the organic and inorganic creatures of the planet. Not the end of the world, not even of the earth, but of the multiple endings of a spiraling proportion of us creatures.

(I say «us», but isn't this «us» really... the U.S., the primary saboteur of the Paris Accords? Whereas Switzerland was the first nation to sign onto Paris—and you are not even one of the more vulnerable populations! Late in the century, a city like Zürich will be, I suspect, the envy of the world's big coastal cities, like New York, where I live....)

Responsible climate discourse participates not in nihilism or denialism but in a third zone of apocalypse, bringing the unspeakable into speech: dis/closure. For that is the meaning of *apokalypsis*, after all: uncovering, revealing. And so too is any responsible theology, which means a perspective that shares something of Bullinger's hermeneutics of figures, visions, parables. Nowadays some of us are calling it «theopoetics.» For the *logos* of *theos* has in our time lost its certainty. And certainty—with that direct and clear speech Luther preferred—always seems to perform its own closure. I propose instead that a certain reading of the Apocalypse helps to open up a meditative space, a threshold both religious and secular. In this space, figures and images work like dreams, sometimes nightmares. The context poetically supports a collective grief-work for the human and nonhuman losses yet to come, and it therefore can also sustain the possibility of collecting ourselves, recollecting ourselves, in and into a new planetary public.

So the practice of theopoetics performs what I call a *dream-reading* of the Apocalypse. My new book will move through seven key visions of the Book of Revelation, in the same sequence as John's. But the present reading will address the troubles of our time, not his. John's visions are not predictions of our future: they are prophecy, which may translate instead as visionary critique. Let me repeat: Prophecy is not prediction; the self-destructive pattern of human history has never been pre-determined. But it is legible, readable—like dreams and nightmares, not certitudes, in metaphoric manifestations and ambiguous compensations of the «collective unconscious» (a Swiss notion).^[6] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote6\]](#)

The dream-reading starts in a cloud—this is its first sign. There's a cloud floating in, disarmingly fluffy and bright. It curls sun into radiant shadow, bleaching puffs of opacity into a grey-white-gold crown upon its darkness. As you stare, the cloudy mass shifts majestically. Now the cloud morphs into a white wooly head, all cumulus hair and beard, bronze shining through like skin, then piercing. As the cloud expands, the curls broaden to become women's breasts, leaking milk white. And then it is all one great wooly sheep.

Did you notice I just summarized the first three appearances of the apocalyptic Messiah? The Book of Revelation opens with a «Look! He is coming with the clouds...» Then there is the figure «like a human» with white wooly hair and female breasts; his tongue sticks out in the form of a double-edged sword. Then the wooly hair, a shockingly white afro, appears in the throne-room scene as the lamb with the marks of slaughter. Much bloodier than the usual icon of the white sheep with the cross. But first there appear the other nonhumans: the divine

crystallized on the throne as a hybrid gemstone and around it the four creatures, eagle, ox, lion, one «with a human face,» each with six wings. Then, the speechless lamb, which will be the mode of messianic apparition right through the book, the very opposite of lordly omnipotence. No wonder Luther saw no Christ here. But we might see instead an epiphany of what Jacques Derrida has called «divinanimality.»^[7] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote7\]](#) Second testament scholar Stephen D. Moore finds in the lamb an unexpected ecological signifier.^[8] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote7\]](#) So the vision conveys, no doubt alien to John's own intention, a hallucinatory pastiche of malefemale divinehumananimality.

To dream-read this opening sign is to frame the whole book in the cloud. Its ancestor is the cloud surrounding Moses' encounter with the nameless one on Mount Sinai, which will later become the cloud of all negative theology, of what is called apophysis—the unsaying, the shining darkness of the cloud of unknowing. To dream-read the cloud is to respect the unknowable and so to know where our knowledge fades out. Our knowledge fades out into a shadow of nightmare, an edge of dream, warning, and promise, not of prediction or guarantee.

The second sign: The lamb opens the seventh seal, and there a «silence for half an hour throughout heaven»—the *apophysis* of *apokalypsis*. Then we hear that one third of the trees of the earth will burn, one third of the grasses. (In California last year, 129 million trees were destroyed by fire.) Then a burning mountain drops into the sea and a third of the life of the sea dies. (We are almost there, aren't we? The world has lost half of its coral reefs in 30 years. Reefs are essential to the life of the sea.) John was not predicting global warming, the melting of the arctic ice, the dying of reefs, the doom of endless fisheries; he wasn't *knowing* our reality. He was, however, dream-reading a tendency of collective human behavior eventually to poison its nonhuman environment, something inconceivable in his own time.

The third: Way up and out beyond the clouds, a woman clothed in the sun, moon at her feet, is in labor pain. The mouth of her womb is opening, and then—what a picture—a dragon's mouth opens waiting to swallow the baby. The newborn is rescued from above, and the woman plunges to the earth, the dragon in hot pursuit of her, spitting toxic pollutants all around. (No, sorry, the bible calls the substance «bile.») The earth swallows the bile and rescues her, as it did Siddhartha Gautama when the demon-lord came after him. The woman goes on wilderness retreat. How strained, that the church could only interpret her as Mary though this woman clothed in the sun bears no resemblance to the gospel story. You might instead dream-read the sun-woman as the spirit of the universe—also intuited in Paul's figure of the creation in the agonies of birth. A hopeful image for current eco-trauma—though we can always miscarry.

Vision four: Now the clouds disclose the great red dragon, the beast, and then another beast with ten horns, to represent the nations, and seven heads. *Now you are talking*, mutters the U.S. right; onto the beast they project anti-Christ, United Nations, Islam, liberal Christianity... take your pick. Scholars also read the beast as global power, but differently: as the Roman Empire of John's time, and so, in the citation of Daniel, as one empire after the next: after Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persians, and Greeks consume Israel, subsume Jerusalem, exiling a people, devouring the known world. John however was foretelling imperialism as yet to come—and come it would indeed, with the morph of Christianity into the Roman Empire, which would have been unimaginable to him. The beast continues to trump the life of the earth. We went from what Derrida calls the globalatinization of the world to the Anglobalization of the world. And so here in your trilingual land you sit and listen to me in English.

The fifth cloud-vision delivers the Great Whore herself, the most insulting satire of the Roman Empire. The Greek term here is *porne*, the slave or street prostitute, not *hetaira*, the

courtesan. Yes, the image is also insulting to women—the deployment of female sexuality as filthy always is.^[9] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote7\]](#) But as a feminist I need not ignore the fact that scholars consider the Book of Revelation the most anti-imperial propaganda literature of its time. The Great Whore is not simply an avatar of the beast; their relation is more complex. They mate, but he eats her alive and burns her. For current political theology, I dream-read her as the imperial city, civis, civilization, particularly as shaped by the voracious global economy. The figuration of Revelation is exact, with the merchant sea-captains of the Roman-global economy lamenting the Whore's death, and with the list of 26 items of luxury cargo—from wine, olives, spices, gold, and silver, to slaves, «all your dainties and your splendor.» Again: No, John was not predicting neoliberal capitalism; he was dream-reading the tendency for the union of empire and economics to exploit the world lasciviously, to the point of mass destruction. Tempting as it is, I will not identify the sitting president as the great *porne*, given his Stormy problems, nor with her patron, the beast. But his hypercapitalism combined with populist mixed-messaging about trade treaties and other global deals does dream-readingly suggest the volatile and violent beast/*porne* tension.

So then the sixth vision unleashes at last the answering blast of messianic violence: There appears the one on the white horse. On his robe a name is written in blood, the Word of God, and on his thigh is tattooed King of Kings, Lord of Lords. No lamb, this one. He leads the great slaughter and a bloody cannibal meal devouring all the unrepentant—slave and free, horse and rider. Then comes the defeat of beasts and kings, then the thousand-year reign. This Word of God is not named Christ, but, drenched in the glory of Händel's messiah chorus, this King of Kings, Lord of Lords, became indistinguishable from Christian hope for final victory. In other words, the Word of God got weaponized. Müntzer had his army of peasants waiting for backup from this Word. But already the armies of Byzantium had incarnated this sovereign violence; as the philosopher Whitehead puts it, «The church gave unto God that which belonged exclusively to Caesar.»^[10] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote10\]](#)

Over and over, Christians have mirrored precisely the imperialism that John's anti-imperialism is anti-. And so have the great secularized apocalypses, the democratic and communist revolutions in their violent triumphs. It is the tragic self-contradiction of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Apocalypse. I dream-read it as nightmare. But not as the end of the world.

At the book's end, the lamb is back. New Jerusalem descends as his bride. In chapter 21 we read: «The nations will walk by its light, the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.» In other words, this is still our world with its multi-nationality. But now with God as its immanent luminosity: «for the glory of God is its light.» (21:23) (Aesthetically, that «glory» is described in the city as «the radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper;» (21:11) earlier the non-anthropomorphic Being on the divine throne had been described mineralogically as «jasper and carnelian.» (4:3)) «The leaves of the tree are for the *healing* of the nations,» (22:2) not for their disappearance. Now emphasis is laid on the water «free for all»: «Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.» This will have new meaning in a climate-changed future of water wars.

Moore mocks the New Jerusalem as a continent-sized shopping mall with a single tree—an all-too-American possibility!^[11] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote11\]](#) But Moore recognizes that the slaughtered lamb's return also suggests an ecological revitalization of our world. However, this New Jerusalem is not a return to Eden but an urbanization of the planet—surely not an unrealistic projection. The question is as to just what kind of urban world, and so the biblical scholar Barbara Rossing names it «the choice between two cities.»^[12] [\[b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote12\]](#) Two projections of femininity: virgin bride or greedy whore. Problematic for the gender politics of feminist theology—meaningful, though, as the opposed economic options of political theology. For the Christian right,

however, it retains John's vengeful dualism: endless punishment for those not written in the book of life. In my dream-reading, John here misreads the dream. As he often does. He mistakes vengeance for justice.

I only repeat: The New Jerusalem, wrapped in a renewed earth at the tail end of the bible, does not signify The End of the world. It is a vision of a rehydrated world of social justice and environmental health. And as Heinrich Bullinger emphasized, it is a vision of comfort for all who suffer unfairly: «He will wipe every tear from their eyes.» (21:4) I do not read here any guarantee, just an undying outer edge of the prophetic hope. And hope, as the Swiss-Reformed Karl Barth made clear, must not be confused with optimism. For an ecofeminist theopoetics, hope means the embrace of the possible. It is a hope in the dark, and it works to twist catastrophe into catalyst.[13] [/b-n-l/apocalypse-after-all/pdf#Fussnote13] As to what John of Patmos imagined, it has what value it may have only, as Bullinger made clear, as parable. I hope this practice of dream-reading has helped to push open an ancient signifier of danger and possibility. What shifts, what comes, within the wooly clouds? They are dark and glowing with uncertainty—like these wondrous clouds over your gorgeous city.

[1] In this premillennialist plotline, returning Jerusalem to the Jewish people is a key to the second coming of Christ. Some Rapture believers, like Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, hold posts inside the president's cabinet. Pastor Hagee, who was one of two pastors invited to speak at the embassy opening, is a leader of this view, and of organizing pro-Zionist Christians; he preached in a sermon in the 90s that Adolf Hitler had been fulfilling God's will by aiding the desire of Jews to return to Israel in accordance with biblical prophecy. See Matt Korade, Kevin Bohn, and Daniel Burke, «Controversial U.S. pastors take part in Jerusalem embassy opening,» CNN, 14 May 2018,

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/13/politics/hagee-jeffress-us-embassy-jerusalem/index.htm>

[2] Quoted in Jane Coaston, «The «biblical» defense of Trump's affair with Stormy Daniels: King David, President Trump, and using Scripture for political purposes,» Vox, 26 March 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/26/17164268/stormy-daniels-donald-trump-bible-christian>.

[3] See David Wallace-Wells, «The Uninhabited Earth: Annotated Edition,» *New York Magazine*, 10 July 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html>.

[4] See Tamsin Edwards, «How soon will the «ice apocalypse» come?,» *The Guardian*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2017/nov/23/climate-change-how-soon-will-the-ice-apocalypse-come-antarctica>

[5] See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2014).

[6] Carl Jung, who spent much of his life in Zürich, coined the term in his 1916 essay, «The Structure of the Unconscious.»

[7] See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); see also Stephen D. Moore,

ed., *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

[8] See Stephen D. Moore, «Quadrupedal Christ,» in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014).

[9] See Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

[10] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 342

[11] See Moore, «Ecotherology,» in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*.

[12] Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, Harvard Theological Studies (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

[13] Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, third edition (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016 [2004]).

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