

3

Apocalypse and Modernity

Bruce K. Ward

One of the more interesting postmodern cultural critics, Jean Baudrillard, has called the apocalypse the “defining trope” of the contemporary world.¹ As such, it needs to be thought about seriously; but this can seem tantamount to thinking the unthinkable. “Unthinkable” not only because of the resistance of apocalyptic symbolism to rational analysis, but also because of the resistance of intellectuals to such an unfashionable subject. As Norman Cohn declared in his classic account of medieval apocalypticism, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the apocalypse belongs to “the obscure underworld of popular religion.” Certainly, it would be hard to disagree with Nietzsche’s assessment of religious history as the “madhouse world of entire millennia,” based on even a cursory survey of apocalyptic movements, past and present.²

Yet, there has long been a significant exception to the tendency to dismiss apocalypse as an inappropriate subject for serious thought, for the great literary artists of the West have not been reluctant to make it their theme: for instance, Dante, Blake, Dostoevsky, and Hölderlin are all profoundly apocalyptic in their imaginative vision. More recently, the French historical anthropologist, René Girard, inspired in part by the novelists and poets to whom he is so indebted, has brought apocalypse into contemporary scholarly discourse in dramatic fashion, especially in his latest book, *Achever Clausewitz* (translated into English as *Battling to the End*). In this book, Clausewitz’s reflections on war serve as the impetus to a rich and probing meditation on the

idea of Europe, on the struggle between Empire and Papacy, and above all on the question of meaning in history. Girard insists on the imperative need for contemporary philosophers and theologians to overcome the worry that it would be irresponsible to pay serious attention to apocalypse, and "to take it out of fundamentalist hands."³ While some significant work has been done in this regard, especially among Roman Catholic scholars influenced by Girard's thought, the challenge remains largely unmet.⁴

Towards the end of thinking seriously about apocalypse from a theological and philosophical perspective, I want to put forward as immensely important the work of Thomas Merton. Merton's thinking is deeply apocalyptic and eschatological—but he certainly cannot be considered a fundamentalist. Nor, despite his popular reputation, especially during his lifetime, as a Buddhist-leaning mystic and anti-war activist, can he be considered simply as a "liberal" or an unqualified "progressive." In one self-explanatory meditation, he called himself a "progressive" with "a deep respect and love for tradition ... who wants to preserve a very clear and marked continuity with the past."⁵ By "the past," Merton meant particularly the great tradition of Christian mystical theology, Eastern and Western, in which he was thoroughly immersed, from Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa to Augustine and Aquinas. Merton's sense of connection with the past, moreover, was ecumenical, in the most serious sense of the word; the range of his concerns, knowledge, and connections spanned Protestantism and Orthodoxy, and outside Christianity—Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.⁶

In what follows, I intend to identify what I consider the primary features of Merton's apocalyptic thought: 1) his identification of the profound inner connection between Christian art and the Apocalypse, 2) his sense of the objectively apocalyptic situation in which we find ourselves at this point in history, 3) his interpretation of the "wrath of God," 4) his concept of the "apocalyptic reversal," and finally 5) his reflection on the question of Athens and Jerusalem and its relation to the apocalyptic question. The last three features,

as I will argue, are particularly suggestive and so they will receive correspondingly more attention.

In an unpublished manuscript entitled "Notes on Art and Worship" Merton wrote:

The hieratic solemnity, the significance, the otherworldliness and the eschatological seriousness of the Apocalypse would seem to be, in some degree, essential to all art that is in the fullest sense Christian.... It is significant that Boris Pasternak, in *Dr. Zhivago*, observes that "all great art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John."⁷

Rather than dismiss the Apocalypse⁸ as a marginal and dubious text within Christianity, Merton affirms the "visions of the seer of Patmos" as the ultimate source of the "purest and most authentic tradition of Christian art," quoting in its entirety in his manuscript John's vision of God enthroned (Revelation 4:2-11). By "Christian art" Merton means the centuries of visual art inspired by this passage; but as his reference to Pasternak indicates, he means also the literary art that continued to manifest the apocalyptic vision even in the twentieth century. Indeed, for Merton, now that the liturgical and iconographic impact of the Apocalypse has largely faded from modernity, it is above all the poets and novelists who keep it alive. Yet how does Merton see the connection between Christian art and the revelation to John in the Apocalypse? He sees Pasternak's view of the connection as expressed in the words of Yuri Zhivago to a dying woman, Anna Ivanovna: "There will be no death says St. John. His reasoning is quite simple. There will be no death because the past is over; that's almost like saying there will be no death because it is already done with, it's old and we are bored with it. What we need is something new, and that new thing is life eternal."⁹ What Merton has in mind, then, and what he thinks Boris Pasternak has in mind, is the great theme of eschatological hope in the Book of Revelation, the hope expressed, for instance, in Revelation 21 that "death will be no more ... for the first things have passed away," the hope that, in Merton's expression, the kingdom of God is already present, is "decided," though not yet

"manifest."¹⁰ The Christian artist reflects this hope in the embodied creativity of the work of art itself, which affirms life and love in the face of hatred, violence, and death.

Within the Biblical tradition, the apocalyptic is inseparable from the prophetic, and the Biblical prophet not only offers hope, but more famously, *warning*. The element of warning, too, Merton finds in Pasternak's art:

If Pasternak is ever fully studied, he is just as likely to be regarded as a dangerous writer in the West as he is the East. He is saying that all political and social structures as we understand them are things of the past, and that the crisis through which we are now passing is nothing but the full and inescapable manifestation of their falsity. For twenty centuries we have been calling ourselves Christians, without even beginning to understand one tenth of the Gospel. ... Now "charity is growing cold" and we stand facing the smoky dawn of an apocalyptic era..."¹¹

As the title of Merton's essay on Pasternak indicates, the Russian poet and novelist was both a Christian artist and a Cold War phenomenon or political "affair." In Merton's view, the same Christian art which preserves a transcendent hope for love and "life eternal" inevitably constitutes a warning critique of those civilizational forces devoted to violence and death. In *Doctor Zhivago* he found the hope and the warning together, expressing through the art of the novel his own apocalyptic conclusion about the situation of modernity. Modern civilization, now become global, had reached a point of crisis that would not be resolved by capitalist democracy or by communism or by nationalism or any other political-economic ideology; if the world were to be transformed, it could be only by the inner moral-spiritual transformation of individuals in the light of truth.

In the section of his revised journal *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* entitled "Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era," Merton challenges:

Shall I say that we are confronted with a choice: either to live by the truth or be destroyed? (Pilate said: "What is truth?") Shall I say that we are being given one last chance to be Christians, and that if we do not accept it, then we are done for? And not only we the "Christians," but also everybody in our society? Shall I say that we are offered one last opportunity to work out in practice the social implications of the Gospel, and that if we fail we shall have an earthly hell, and either be completely wiped out or doomed to a future of psychopathic horror in the new barbarism that must emerge from the ruins we have brought down upon our own heads?¹²

These dramatic words are by no means an isolated instance of Merton's sense of the objectively apocalyptic situation of modernity. Allusions to "our apocalyptic era" and a "world crisis" abound in his writings. For Merton, "our era" meant particularly the Cold War crisis in which the world seemed poised on the either/or of global nuclear annihilation or global totalitarianism. His writings demonstrate a consistent engagement, all the more remarkable in light of his monastic vocation and circumstances, with the political questions then besetting the U.S. superpower in which he lived as a monk and citizen. While he succeeded in addressing responsibly the leading political questions of his day—the nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, racism—the underlying theme of his political writings is actually the obsolescence of politics. This is to say that he addressed the world crisis not as a political thinker in the conventional sense, but as an apocalyptic one.

The world crisis was for him one that transcended any possible political solution because at the heart of the crisis was the truth which he found in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, that the structures which have hitherto dominated civilized history—political, legal, cultural, even war itself (or what Girard calls, quoting St. Paul, the "Powers and Principalities")—have become worn-out, revealing their emptiness. One obvious symptom for Merton of this obsolescence of politics was the uncanny manner in which, despite

the talk about ideological differences, the Cold War adversaries tended to become "mirror images of each other."¹³ This insight did not, however, imply a strict equivalence, in Merton's view, among political systems. While Western democracy is "under judgment" no less than communism or other authoritarianisms, nevertheless, it is not a negligible difference, but rather "a great mercy of God," that we are able to recognize and "say" this.¹⁴ Merton's writings reflect that continual movement between hope and warning which he found in the apocalyptic vision of Pasternak and other Christian artists, and which is so characteristic of the Biblical prophetic tradition. In this, he bears witness to the continuing vitality of this tradition within modernity, and in a manner decidedly not "fundamentalist." There are three additional features of Merton's thinking about apocalypse which are especially illuminating for modernity. They might be considered "way-markers" on the path towards the renewal of a truly *thoughtful* apocalyptic vision (in the original sense of *apokalypsis* as an unveiling of truth), and hence towards a renewal of Christian civilization.

If apocalypse is intellectually distasteful for many modern people, the primary reason is surely the image of God evoked by the notion of divine wrath. The "wrath of God" is inescapably present in the Book of Revelation¹⁵ and other apocalyptic texts; it cannot be translated away, so for those who cannot embrace the notion, it becomes a matter of dismissing it, glossing it over, or re-interpreting it so that "wrath" is magically transmuted into "mercy" and "forgiveness." In attempting to take apocalypse out of the hands of the fundamentalists, René Girard, for instance, tends to place all the emphasis on *human* rather than *divine* violence.¹⁶ This is understandable, not only because of Girard's apologetic concerns, but also because of his concern with making a basic distinction between archaic religion, which sacralizes violence, and Biblical religion, which rejects it. The locus of violence in apocalyptic thought does need to be shifted from the divine to the human, but there is a risk that the concept of the "wrath of God" can be jettisoned too quickly by well-intentioned Christian apologetics, without sufficient attention to its full meaning and implications—which need not point to

what we conjure up in the term "fundamentalism."

One striking example of Merton's daring and openness as a Catholic thinker was his willingness to reflect seriously on the "wrath of God" with the help of the most important modern Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, the great interpreter of Calvin:

"To be a man," says Barth, "means to be situated in God's presence as Jesus is, that is to be a bearer of the wrath of God." I do not want an "optimism" that shrinks from this truth. But it must be understood. Jesus bears the wrath, and He lives. Because he bears it and lives, we bear it also, not by our own strength but by His. ... Other perspectives speak of Christ's sufferings in exquisite physical detail, but miss the essential, the theological wrath. His pains are enumerated as the pains of one who has not truly been struck. They are quantitative, detailed, wrung out to the last essential drop of agony, but the seriousness of the wrath is not there because, as one gradually realizes, in the mind of the preacher, God is pleased with this pain.... Wrath means that God is not pleased, is not "gratified" by the pains of the Redeemer We have lost our sense of the wrath of God. It is only thunder, power. True wrath is ontological. It reaches into the very depths of being. I think I will have to become a Christian.¹⁷

Merton became deeply interested in Barth during the later period of his life; the passage quoted above is placed near the end of one of Merton's very best books, based on his journals of the 1960s (interestingly, a time when he was increasingly in dialogue with Buddhism). This placement makes the passage appear a culmination towards which the book has been aiming, and indeed, the whole collection of notes originally went under the working title of "Barth's Dream."

According to Merton, we "have lost our sense of the wrath of God," and by this he means the original Biblical sense.¹⁸ All we have is the noise of "thunder, power." We must, in his view, cease to think of the "wrath of God" as some sort of emotional

feeling of God directed towards human beings, a feeling in need of placating through human sufferings, agony, pain – which we offer up to God as a kind of sacrifice in the hope that God will “go easy” on us, and at the same time “go hard” on those who are not interested in placating God’s anger.¹⁹ Instead, Merton wants to interpret the “wrath of God” as an ontological reality, inscribed in the very depths of being itself. This would be the “essential,” the “theological” wrath. Merton’s meaning here is illumined by his discussion of the human quest for autonomy elsewhere in the same book. For him, the ontological basis of the divine wrath is the human separation from God through the willful assertion of human autonomy as ultimate: “the *complete* autonomy of the individual, who is no longer responsible to anyone ... free to do exactly as he pleases without rendering an account to anyone and without taking into consideration the moral and physical consequences of any of his acts.”²⁰ This implicit claim to ultimate autonomy, in willful forgetfulness that the self, life itself, is sheer gift (“a feather on the breath of God”)²¹ is, according to Merton, the fundamental impulse animating modern civilization; and therefore modernity itself lies peculiarly under the “wrath of God.”

But what exactly is the connection between the human claim to autonomy and the “wrath of God”—not as God’s feeling of anger towards humans who claim this autonomy, but as ontological reality? The key to Merton’s thought here, I believe, is his view that there is in a human being no solid self that can exist independently of God. The assertion of an autonomous, justifiable, consistent self that is independent of God is based on an illusion and can only end in the reality of emptiness, the nothingness of the self (here one can note the influence on Merton of Buddhism as well as Eastern Christian mystical theology).²² How is this emptiness or nothingness experienced as wrath? Merton’s answer seems to be that in attempting to fill the emptiness on our own, we build a counter-order of being that is destructive to true human being, as well as the being of the world. In cutting itself off from the true order of being, humanity increasingly detaches itself from the sources of living life, spiraling, in effect, ever closer to the refusal of life itself

and therefore into nihilistic despair. This despair is the “ultimate danger.”²³ It is the ontological “wrath of God.” According to Merton, if Christian teaching needs to focus more on turning to the world with acceptance and positive assent, it is not merely because Christianity wants in turn to be accepted by the world, but because affirmation, rather than condemnation, is just what the world most needs now. Lurking underneath all the upbeat modern affirmations of “humanism” and “earthly delights”

Merton detects a profound negation, dangerously close to a despairing impulse towards collective death. Merton’s interpretation of the “mercy” of God is thus closely linked to the ontological “wrath” of God: “without the awareness of God’s wrath and of His mercy, the modern world makes no more sense (religiously) than a drunken hallucination. If we remember what the Bible means by the wrath of God, we can see how terribly the world needs mercy, pity, and peace – none of which things can come merely by [our] own wishing.”²⁴

Merton’s account of the “wrath of God” as an ontological reality, now inscribed particularly in Western modernity, reflects his profound misgivings about the modern quest for the autonomous self, a concern which places him close to Christian critics of modernity such as Dostoevsky and Barth. It is an account which points the way towards a more thoughtful theological-philosophical appropriation of the apocalyptic “wrath of God,” not only by emphasizing human instead of divine violence, but also by interpreting the “wrath” much more broadly as an ontological reality - of which human violence is one despairing manifestation.

Merton concludes his meditation on Barth and the wrath of God with a surprising acknowledgement: “I think I will have to become a Christian.” This acknowledgement goes beyond his personal situation to include the situation of Christianity itself as something that has not yet existed historically, or to express it somewhat differently, we are obliged to call historical Christianity a failure.²⁵ Merton includes within his assessment the Christendom culture of medieval Europe, as well as his own Roman Catholic Church, then and into the present (or at least until Vatican II). As

he puts it: "The Parousia having been 'delayed,' we have been for two thousand years left to construct for ourselves in the world a kind of kingdom, a cultural-religious-political Christendom, which is admittedly not all one would have looked for, but which has its advantages."²⁶ One of these "advantages" is that it gives us a kind of "peace," which is, in reality, "only another form of war."²⁷ This is not the kingdom of the Gospel, but a kingdom built in the usual way of the world, to which Christians have become so attached that "we find ourselves, in effect, *deciding against* the Parousia, 'Thy Kingdom come'—but not now, not in that distressing way—but in *our* time and *our* way." Merton concludes by suggesting ironically an emendation of the Lord's Prayer: "Take out 'Thy Kingdom come' and substitute 'Give us time.'"²⁸ This is not wholly ironical, however. It is an emendation that reflects Merton's view that Christianity has failed to bring about the kingdom, failed even really to desire the kingdom; but it also reflects his view that the problem with most apocalyptic thought is that it supposes the end of Christianity, along with the end of history, when, in fact, Christianity has barely yet begun.

In the last pages of *After Virtue*, his magisterial account of the moral crisis of modern Western civilization, Alasdair MacIntyre invokes the need for a new St. Benedict, now that the "new dark ages are upon us."²⁹ As a monk, Merton was certainly not averse to the idea that a new monasticism might be modernity's last best hope; but not if it entailed a refusal of history. He did not think that Christianity could adopt some privileged stance outside and above history. In his view, "we"—meaning monks, Christians, and non-Christians alike—are all, "for better or for worse," *in* history (and, he added, "one might ask the question whether we will shortly be in posthistory").³⁰ The attitude towards history that Merton advocated for Christians was neither a Gnostic repudiation of history as inherently evil and therefore deservedly doomed to destruction or acquiescence in a complacent historicist progressivism but rather an acceptance of history that nevertheless hopes for an overcoming or reversal of history. The apocalyptic Parousia is, for Merton, not an event coming from *above* history,

but an "immanent dialectical acceptance and reversal of fallen history." This dialectical movement is not Hegelian, since the ultimate reconciliation of human beings is not some inevitable or automatic outcome of the historical process. Merton's inspiration was not the German philosopher but the English poet, William Blake, as the following passage from an essay entitled "The Death of God and the End of History" indicates:

... Blake's vision points the way to a total acceptance, if ultimate reversal, of the full reality of a fallen history.... It is at once *acceptance and reversal*. A reading of Blake's Prophetic Books will show clearly enough how radical is the reversal! On the other hand, the reversal is not a rejection of history in favor of something else that is totally outside history. The reversal comes from within history accepted, in its often shattering reality, as the focus of salvation and epiphany. It is not that the world of Auschwitz, Vietnam, and the Bomb has to be cursed as the devil's own territory. That very world has to be accepted as the terrain of the triumph of love not in the condemnation of evil but in its forgiveness ...³¹

Merton found in Blake's prophetic poetry (especially *Jerusalem*) an articulated insight into what Girard has called the "secret strength of eschatology."³² This secret strength seems to lie in the mutual inherence of the worst and the best, the danger and the saving power, or to borrow an analogy from the Book of Revelation (3:15-17), the hot and the cold ("I wish that you were either cold or hot"). This paradoxical strength is "secret," but not "magical." According to Merton, the condition of the dialectical reversal within history that could bring about the apocalyptic kingdom rather than apocalyptic destruction is quite clear to those with "eyes to see," and it is within the compass of human choice. This condition is an "interior revolution" that is first, spiritual, then ethical, and once accomplished, opens out to political transformation.³³

For Merton, genuine apocalyptic thinking always confronts human beings with a choice rather than a supernatural destiny. The

choice is plain: humanity must learn to make peace; if peace is not chosen, then the famous apocalyptic catastrophe, the destruction of humanity, either through violence or the false peace of totalitarian tyranny, will ensue.³⁴ This, in Merton's words, "is the one great lesson we have to learn. Everything else is trivial compared with [this] supreme and urgent need ..."³⁵ But can we learn the lesson, when as Merton says in a letter to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, our apocalyptic situation is like "a bunch of drunken people at the last end of a long stupid party falling over the furniture in the twilight of dawn."³⁶

The hope that the lesson might be learned and the saving choice made rests inescapably on an enormous presupposition: that human beings actually have the capacity and the desire to make such a choice, that we are not entirely determined by powerful and destructive historical forces, "drunks falling over the furniture." If the immanent dialectical reversal from catastrophe to kingdom is to be realized, then human beings must possess sufficient freedom and rationality, indeed also goodness and love, to choose to survive. Here Merton's historical realism struggles with his Christian hope, repeatedly expressed throughout his most apocalyptic book, *Seeds of Destruction*, that the *imago Dei* ("image of God"), which is in the deepest centre of human nature, is not entirely eclipsed, but is still active.³⁷ The image of God within human nature is the basis of the freedom to consent to find the true fulfillment of human freedom within the infinite freedom of God, not in the futile quest for a self-created autonomy.³⁸ This image of God is the basis also of the rationality Merton considered essential to the apocalyptic choice.

Merton's emphasis on the crucial role to reason stems from his realization that the apocalyptic reversal must have a collective dimension, since the isolated individual, even with the faith of a Karl Barth, stands little or no chance against the overwhelming forces of history. The lesson to be learned must be learned and communicated together with others in dialogue. The reversal Merton envisages is not the outcome of divine magic, or of conversions in the inner lives

of isolated individuals—but of building a culture. It is a matter of cultural renewal, or more specifically, the "recapitulation of culture and civilization in Christ":

I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam. ... Here we have the real theological principle that must govern all discussion of the Church in the modern world. ... What is needed is the recapitulation of culture and civilization in Christ.³⁹

Note that Merton's term is "recapitulation" and not simply "repetition" of the cultural history that has brought us to where we are now.

By "civilization" Merton means, above all, the Western experience of reason. This might seem surprising, given Merton's popular reputation as a spiritual writer inclined towards Eastern mysticism; but his work as a whole testifies to a consistent and passionate defence of reason. As he insisted, "faith cannot be preserved if reason goes under."⁴⁰ The reason which Merton defends is not, however, the truncated reason of modern scientism and its philosophic handmaid; rather, the experience of reason he has in view is that of classic reason, which always sought the truth of the whole. This was, for him, the "inexhaustible beauty" and "indestructible strength" of the civilization to which he belonged, as he testifies in the following passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

In John of Salisbury I ran into a familiar quotation from Virgil's *Georgics*. ... There I read (for the fifteenth time) these lines:

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari.⁴¹

The Stoic ideal of knowledge, seeing into the root of things and thus conquering fear and fate, and even "the roar of

hungry Acheron," the river of Hell! For me the lines retain an inexhaustible beauty. Though it is not a Christian beauty, yet its classic purity has something in it that Christianity was wise to assimilate, and John of Salisbury rightly sees that to have gained something of this Classic temper leaves one ready for faith and for the highest truth To have learned such lines as these and many others is to have entered into a kind of communion with the inner strength of the civilization to which I belong ... this inner strength is in itself, indestructible. But one can abandon it, and get carried off by the rising of the dark winds, not remembering to hold fast to the root of things.⁴²

For Greek reason, the truth of the whole included the truth of the divine, and reason thus could also be called "intelligence" (*nous*) and "wisdom" (*sophia*), terms which Merton also uses frequently.

Reason supports and even "preserves" faith by helping it to understand and articulate itself. Since both reason, in the Greek sense of wisdom, and faith entail participation in the mind of God, one can speak (with Thomas Aquinas) of revelation as a higher measure of that divine illumination which is already presupposed in true reasoning. Reason also supports faith by helping it to communicate itself to others, including non-Christians. To this end, Merton firmly defends the tendency of papal encyclicals, like Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, to employ a universal language of reason—for instance, that of human rights—in addressing the world at large. He argues that this signifies, not a capitulation to modern rationalism, but an affirmation that in the Incarnation the whole of the world, including secular modernity, is taken up and sanctified or recapitulated:

Pope John [XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*] could very well have called the world to peace purely and simply in terms of the Gospel of Peace. Instead he called it to peace in the name of humanity and reason. But was this a contradiction of the Gospel? No. Since Christ is fully and truly *man*, since the world, society, humanity, human and social life have been

taken up and sanctified in the Incarnation, the Church can speak to the world in terms of a reason, a compassion which both the Church and the "world" are capable of understanding, but of which the Church also has a deeper, theological understanding than the world. ... This was also the spirit of the Catholic reasonableness of Thomas Aquinas.⁴³

This brings us to the other essential aspect of the concept under consideration: recapitulation in Christ. Here Merton takes an implicit position on the perennial problem of Western philosophy and theology: that of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem. As we have seen, for him not only are Greek reason and Biblical revelation compatible, but the former is a necessary support to the latter in the building of a culture of peace in order to avert apocalyptic catastrophe. This "support," however, does not imply "equivalence." "Recapitulation," rather, implies that the Greek *logos* is a kind of preparation for the Biblical *Logos*, in which it is at once absorbed, fulfilled, and transformed.

There is not space here adequately to unpack Merton's position on this important question of the relationship between Greek philosophy and the Gospel revelation. My intention is only to highlight the curious way in which Merton's reflection on the apocalyptic future of modernity brings him back to an ancient question. One can notice a remarkably similar development in René Girard's more recent apocalyptic thought, as in this remark, also in defence of a Pope, towards the close of *Battling to the End*:

Benedict XVI [in the Regensburg lecture] ... is alerting Europe to the loss of Greek culture, for only rational theology, "broadened reason," capable of integrating the divine, will make us 'capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.' ... The Pope is alerting us to the fact that Greek reason is disappearing, and that its disappearance will leave the way open to rampant irrationality.⁴⁴

Both of these Catholic thinkers—one by way of historical

anthropology and the other by way of mystical theology—arrive at a thinking about the future end of civilization which returns us to the famous question of Tertullian at its beginning: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” In Merton’s vision, that apocalyptic reversal, which alone can allay the ontological reality of the wrath of God under which modernity lies, depends on our willingness to return and “to drink” from the two sources of truth at the heart of Western civilization.

Endnotes

1. For an interesting sample of Baudrillard’s apocalyptic thought (or, as he would style it, *anti-apocalypticism*), see *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002).
2. See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957), 14-15; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 161. For a fascinating historical survey of the “mad-house world” of apocalypticism in the West, see Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses* (Toronto: Random House, 1999).
3. See René Girard, *Battling to the End*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 48.
4. See for instance, the excellent discussions by Józef Niewiadomski, “‘Denial of the Apocalypse’ versus ‘Fascination with the Final Days’: Current Theological Discussion of Apocalyptic Thinking in the Perspective of Mimetic Theory,” and Wolfgang Palaver, “Carl Schmitt’s ‘Apocalyptic’ Resistance against Global Civil War,” in Robert Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Politics and Apocalypse* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007). Niewiadomski offers an interesting overview and analysis of the “embittered trench warfare” in contemporary theology between the fundamentalists “ridden by apocalyptic fever” and the progressive theologians “smirking at them or ... warning of their danger.” See also the observations about apocalypse and modernity in Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005), 43, 100-101, 179, 184.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York:

Doubleday, 2009), 316.

6. For Merton’s serious understanding of the nature of his “ecumenism,” see *Conjectures*, 14, 141.
7. Thomas Merton, “Notes on Art and Worship” (unpublished manuscript in the Thomas Merton Centre of Bellarmine University), 57.
8. A note on terminology: “Apocalypse” (capitalized) is the substantive that designates a specific Biblical text by that title (also called the “Revelation to John”); while “apocalypse” (not capitalized) is the more generic substantive that scholars have borrowed from the original Biblical title to designate a body of ancient visionary literature with similar themes, and more generally the entire body of speculative thought and writing, ancient and modern, concerned with the “end of history.” This usage is reflected in this essay.
9. See Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. John Bayley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 68, 90. Pasternak expresses this idea of the overcoming of death also in one of Zhivago’s poems, “Holy Week”: “And when the midnight comes/ All creatures and all flesh will fall silent/ On hearing spring put forth its rumor/ That just as soon as there is better weather/ Death itself can be overcome/ Through the power of the resurrection.” Here we find that intermingling of the natural and the spiritual, that “cosmic liturgy” which Merton refers to in his insightful interpretation of Pasternak’s novel. See “The Pasternak Affair,” in *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 210-211.
11. Merton, “The Pasternak Affair,” 394.
12. Merton, *Conjectures*, 88-89.
13. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 105. See also *Conjectures*, 72-73. For a graphic and fascinating account of how the same can be said of the adversaries in our more recent world crisis of terrorism, see Bruce Lincoln, “Symmetric Dualisms: Bush and bin Laden on October 7,” in *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
14. Merton, *Conjectures*, 75-76.

15. This includes the phrase itself; see, for instance, Revelation, chapters 15-16 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.
16. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 48.
17. Merton, *Conjectures*, 351.
18. For Merton's reference to the wrath of God "in the Biblical sense," see *Conjectures*, 326.
19. At the level of popular culture, Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which is driven theologically by the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, is a good example of this notion that the divine wrath must be placated through human suffering, and the more the better.
20. Merton, *Conjectures*, 110.
21. Quoted by Rowan Williams in his insightful essay on Merton's reading of Barth, "Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth," in *The Merton Journal*, 16:2 (2009).
22. For a powerful modern affirmation of the autonomous self, together with the vague and elusive nature of the self thus affirmed, see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (New York: Penguin 2004), 87-89, as well as my commentary on this passage in Bruce K. Ward, *Redeeming the Enlightenment: Christianity and the Liberal Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 78-84.
23. Merton, *Conjectures*, 324. See also Williams, "Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth," to which my interpretation above is indebted.
24. Merton, *Conjectures*, 325-326.
25. For this assessment, see Girard, *Battling to the End*, 79. For an example of Merton's own assessment of the historical failure of Christianity, see the quotation from his unpublished *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, in Ronald E. Powaski, *Thomas Merton on Nuclear Weapons* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988), 67.
26. Merton, *Conjectures*, 119.
27. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 122.
28. Merton, *Conjectures*, 120.
29. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.
30. Merton, *Conjectures*, 341-342.

31. Thomas Merton, "The Death of God and the End of History," in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 258. Italics are in the original. Merton had a longstanding interest in Blake, though his focus on this particular theme of Blakean apocalyptic seems largely attributable to his reading of Thomas J.J. Altizer's commentary. See Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967).
32. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 46.
33. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 124-34. In this essay, "The Christian in World Crisis," Merton offers a sustained interpretation of the Biblical Apocalypse in order to illumine the situation of the Christian in the contemporary world crisis: "The Apocalypse describes the final stage of the history of the world as a total and ruthless power struggle in which all the Kings of the earth are engaged but which has an inner spiritual dimension these kings are incapable of seeing and understanding." (130)
34. Merton, perhaps under the influence of Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor," frequently invokes the totalitarian possibility as an alternative to violent catastrophe, or following violent catastrophe.
35. Merton, *Conjectures*, 213.
36. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 276.
37. See, for instance, Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 98-99, 113, 178-179, 258-259.
38. See Merton's discussion of St. Anselm and Sartre in this regard in *Conjectures*, 330-332.
39. Merton, *Conjectures*, 192-193.
40. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 243.
41. In English: "Blessed is the one who has been able to understand the causes of things, and trample underfoot all fears and inexorable fate, along with the roar of devouring Acheron." Acheron, the river of pain in Greek mythology, was a stream and swampy lake of the underworld and its god.
42. Merton, *Conjectures*, 260.
43. Merton, *Conjectures*, 320. Merton's emphasis.
44. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 207-208.