

## Apocalypse Now (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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Few teachings of the Christian faith are as easily misunderstood and equally misapplied as the things pertaining to the “End of the World.” Christian history, both East and West, offers numerous examples of popular misunderstandings – some of which led to bloodbaths and the worst moments in Church history.

By the same token, *apocalypticism*, the belief in an end of history, has had a powerful impact on the cultures in which Christianity has dwelt. Various Utopias (Marxism, Nazism, Sectarian Millenarianism, etc.) are all products of a misunderstood Christian idea. They are not the inventions of Christianity – but they could hardly have originated in any other culture. The same can be said for various Dystopias (the belief in very difficult and hard times). The imagery of the end of the world can be read both ways. In either case, the worst outcomes generally are found in groups who not only believe in one form of apocalypticism or another, but believe that their own actions can have a direct effect on the advent of the end.

Any number of apocalyptic sects have sprung up from within various Christian heresies over the centuries, many of them on American soil, a land whose first European settlers had a decidedly apocalyptic view of the world. Even Islam, sometimes described by the Orthodox fathers as a “heresy” rather than a “new religion,” has its apocalyptic element, particularly within its extreme groups.

So what is the nature of *false apocalypticism* and the Orthodox understanding of the *End*? To a large extent the primary element of false apocalypticism is rooted in a *linear* view of history in which everything is read in a literal manner. Linear time allows for only a succession of moments, whose cause is to be found in the moment before. God may *intervene* in this linear procession but the linear nature of things is not changed. We can say that in this model *history* can be changed, but not the nature and experience of *time*.

Such linearity and literalism can often reduce its devotees to caricatures of Jerry Fletcher, the near psychotic lead role in the film *Conspiracy Theory* (1997). He carefully read an armload of daily newspapers, looking for patterns, finding connections where none existed (but also accidentally finding some for the sake of the movie’s plot). The End, as understood in Orthodox theology, is not a cosmic conspiracy theory being wrought within the linear time-line of human history. Our newspapers do not contain hints and hidden clues to its appearance. Indeed, the entire linear conception of life and time are a failure to understand the Lord’s Pascha and what has come to pass in the Resurrection of Christ.

The language of Scripture, both in the course of Christ’s ministry and particularly in the descriptions of the disciples’ encounters with him after the resurrection, is quite peculiar, especially its treatment of time. Most Christians are familiar with Christ’s statement:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.” Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:56-58).

Obviously the text makes reference to the pre-existing Son of God – but the statements of Christ utterly destroy the normal sense of time. His statements are more than a mere mind-game being played by Christ – they are a revelation of the “distortion” (perhaps reconfiguration) and fulfillment of time. Christ, in St. John’s Revelation, says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (Rev. 22:13). This statement, a clear proclamation of

Christ's divinity, is made purely in temporal terms – but in each of the three cases, temporal terms that are normally contradictory. The temporality of Christ cannot be stated in purely linear terms.

St. John again leaves temporality behind in the proclamation: “All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). Christ is most surely slain on the Cross within history, and yet St. John identifies that Christ with the Lamb “slain from the foundation of the world.” Christ's Pascha is both “historical” and yet *cosmic*, transcending time.

This same transcendence of history and time is an inherent part of the Orthodox understanding of worship (and ultimately of all our life). We begin the Divine Liturgy with the words, “Blessed is the Kingdom...” The priest doesn't say, “Blessed is Thy Kingdom which is to come...” He blesses the Kingdom which *is*, for when we give thanks to God, we stand within His Kingdom. In the course of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the priest prays and gives thanks *in the past tense* for the glorious second coming of Christ. What can such language mean?

It means that having been Baptized with Christ into His death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection, time has shifted from the time of this age, and now participates in the time of the age to come. We stand with the Alpha and the Omega: the Beginning and the End dwells in our hearts.

Many have rejected the Beginning and the End in favor of a “linear Christ,” either lost in their search for the “historical Jesus,” or furiously scouring their Bibles and newspapers for signs of the linear approach of a time-bound Christ. Such a Christ reduces Christianity to theories and moralisms. The linear Christ does not and cannot save. That which is bound within time is bound within death. He who has trampled down death by death, has also trampled down time by time and “brought us up to His kingdom which is to come.”

With such a transformation in our lives, we can cease to live as prisoners in our own age awaiting the return of an exiled Lord. God is with us and makes us to be with Him.

*This article can be found at a July 30, 2011 post on Fr. Stephen Freeman's Blog:*  
<http://fatherstephen.wordpress.com/page/2/>

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