Review Article
Revelation and the Political in the 21st Century: A Review Essay

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INTRODUCTION

The book of Revelation has always been understood, at least in part, as a book about the political. What might recent interpreters of the polis in the Apocalypse have to contribute to the pages of this journal and to present evangelical thinking at the nexus where the Bible and the political intersect? The following, the main portion of this essay, focuses on five books – more or less in the order that they have been published over the span of the last half decade or so – in response to this question.1 We will follow this up with a few brief reflections about existing trajectories in political theology unleashed in and through this final canonical text.

CONTEMPORARY PROPOSALS ON THE POLITICAL VISION/S OF THE APOCALYPSE

Kraybill

By the time Apocalypse and Allegiance appeared in 2010, Kraybill had been thinking with and working on the book of Revelation for over almost three decades.2 As a lifelong Mennonite pastor and church leader – including a stint in the presidency of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, from 1996 to 2008 and currently as president of the Mennonite World Conference – he would have been expected to give attention to the non-violence of the Jesus way in contrast with the violence strewn across the pages of the Apocalypse, and Kraybill does not disappoint in urging that the central figure of the Lamb slain, in effect from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8), invites a posture of “endurance” (hypomonē) in the midst of persecution and opposition (135). Yet in truth, this Mennonite biblical scholar’s aims are elsewhere and on broader horizons. His thesis is that Revelation’s symbols work to “build allegiance” (15), in this case, to both expose the commitments represented by and demanded of the ancient imperial cult of Rome, and to foster true gratitude to and worship of the slain Lamb in anticipation of the coming reign of God.

Kraybill’s argument is unfolded through twelve chapters, starting with John of Patmos’ immediate situation and wider context, traversing back and forth through his book, and concluding with a Christian vision of worship and discipleship imbued by long-term hope. Along the way, present-day readers are introduced to insights into the ancient world’s socio-economic-and-political systems and values that illuminate how Roman colonialism and the cult of emperor worship went hand-in-hand. For instance, that emperor worship “pervades international commerce” (147-49) is reflected in the coins that carried the imprints of the reigning imperial faces (149-50). More palpably, the Roman state sponsored public rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations such as the gladiatorial games that demonstrated imperial command and power over life and death, and thereby inculcated public subordination under its regimes. The point made throughout is that

1 There are other books that we could have included – e.g., Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier, eds., Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012), and others to be mentioned below – but I have opted to engage only monographs and these are the ones that we have been able to secure review copies of (thanks to ERTP book review editor, Timothy Lim).

Christian worship for John and his original audience enabled faithful discipleship within but resisted participation of these imperial systems (186-90). Translated for contemporary readers and Christ-followers, Kraybill recommends that worship “turns chaos into order” (185) and empowers Christians to live differently from and inhabit the margins of their imperial domains, here consistent with how Mennonites and others in the Radical Reformation tradition have always situated themselves as outliers, whether of Christendom or other dominant spheres of political power.

The Brazos imprint signals that while thoroughly undergirded by scholarship, including a glossary, bibliography of ancient and modern works, and subject index, *Apocalypse and Allegiance* is intended also for a lay audience. Toward that end, it is easily the most accessible of the books under review, including 81 illustrations – photos, maps and diagrams, figures and graphics, works of art, images of ancient artifacts, etc. – in the attempt to reproduce the imagistically and perceptually rich visions recounted by John the Seer. In addition, each of the chapters concludes with reflection questions and vignettes from today’s world in which readers are invited to imagine “living the vision” amidst twenty-first century global realities.

**Gorman**

If those attracted to Kraybill’s book might be first and foremost fellow Mennonite and Anabaptist types along with those in Free Church traditions, might others in more mainline Protestant and ecumenical churches be less favorably predisposed to his perspective? If so, then United Methodist scholar Michael Gorman – who cut his scholarly teeth on, and continues to publish in, Pauline studies, and also currently serves as the Raymond E. Brown Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at the Roman Catholic St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland – has written a parallel book for his colleagues and others in these ecclesial traditions. Gorman’s version is similarly addressed to Christian laity, especially to those who may be overly enthused by current Left Behind scenarios on the one hand or those curtly dismissive of the Apocalypse’s obscurities on the other hand, and thus also includes three dozen charts and illustrations (maps, boxes, graphs, photos). *Reading Revelation Responsibly* thus specifies arguments about why the Left Behind approaches to the book are “dangerous theologically” (73, emphasis Gorman’s), recommending instead that we embrace John’s “liturgical and missional spirituality (that is, a life of worship and witness)” antithetical to any – Roman or otherwise – civil “religion that idolizes secular power” (xv).

Gorman’s ten chapters unfold this “manifesto and summons to ‘uncivil’ religion” (5) via “an alternative, cruciform … strategy” (77). All along the way, he is alert to how civil religion is and has always been coopted by formal religiosity, not only in John’s time and place but in today’s America for instance: “religious beliefs, language, and practices that are superficially Christian but infused with national myths and habits. Sadly, most of this civil religion’s practitioners belong to Christian churches, which is exactly why Revelation is addressed to the seven churches (not to Babylon), to all Christians tempted by the civil cult”; so beyond any critique of empire, more significant is the critique of the church, “specifically of its participation in the idolatry of the imperial cult, 3 Most of Gorman’s other dozen or so titles are focused on Paul; none touch substantially on the book of Revelation as does the one under review.
the civil or national religion” (56).

Unlike Kraybill, Gorman follows John sequentially through his 21 chapters, albeit thematically and sectionally rather than in typical commentary style. Further as one of the major contributors to the theological interpretation of scripture conversation that has been gaining increasing momentum in biblical studies in the last decade plus, Gorman is attentive to the theological messages encoded in Revelation’s cryptic rhetoric. Thus readers are treated regularly to insightful theological takeaways, for example, as when it is deduced from analysis of the Seer’s visions of violent judgment: “It is not, therefore, because imperial power and Lamb power co-exist in God that wrath descends from God’s throne, but because when humans reject Lamb power they experience it as imperial disaster – disordered desire, death, and destruction” (140). In other words, the violent deaths of the Apocalypse are less directly inflicted upon by the Lamb and the one that sits on the throne, and more the result of human and creaturely – beastly, even! – systems run amuck. This would be representative of Gorman’s theological interpretation of the Revelation text that in turn supports what Christian discipleship looks like that resists the civil religion of the present time.

Hansen

In contrast to the works of Kraybill and Gorman as more seasoned scholars, Silence and Praxis is a revised doctoral thesis forged recently under the mentorship of renowned New Testament exegete K. K. Yeo at Garratt-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Hansen works toward what he calls “an apocalyptic political theology” (the title of his final, seventh, chapter) by way of engaging the three cycles of seven – seven seals, trumpets, and bowls – particularly their endings. He argues, persuasively in my opinion, for a recapitulative reading of the three cycles as providing different perspectives on the same themes or topics, specifically when considering how their three endings (8:1, 3-5; 11:15-19, 16:17-21, explicated in his chapters 4-6 respectively) unveil, via John’s rhetoric of cosmological renewal, a coming restoration of the Noahic covenant (77-80).

More to the point, Hansen argues with impressive deftness that the postures of silence and praise, depicted in turn at the ends of the first and second cycles respectively, and then together at the conclusion of cycle three, invite a performative praxis of prayerful and worshipful endurance and of non-participation in the Roman imperial order. Hansen’s praxis- and performative-oriented argument bursts the parameters wherein those deploying rhetorical criticism are usually constrained since the former connects symbolic and worldview construction (the domain of rhetoric) with practical ways of life and action. Hence, while comfortable with Gorman’s theological claim that “when humans reject Lamb power they experience it as imperial disaster – disordered desire, death, and destruction,” Hansen would also insist that the disaster experienced as divine judgment is brought about surely through the performative praxis of believers. Thus, “if John’s communities refuse sacrifice, they will be seen as introducing anomic into the Roman social and

4 Here connecting thematically with but yet substantively distinct from that proposed by Nathan R. Kerr, Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission, Theopolitical Visions 4 (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008), whose interlocutors are primarily theologians like Troeltsch, Barth, and Hauerwas, as well as Anabaptists like Yoder, the last thereby providing points of contact with Kraybill at the presuppositional level.
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The shift from Hansen to Moore is, in terms of ideological perspectives for readers of ERTS, a drastic one considering the latter’s poststructuralist, postcolonial, affective, and queer interpretive theoretical frameworks. Yet as we shall see, evangelicals that ignore the Moores of the guild will be impoverished principally for political hermeneutics and political theological tasks. Almost as prolific as Gorman in terms of prior monographs, Moore is probably more influential given both his Edmund S. Janus Professorship in New Testament Studies at Drew University where he also supervises doctoral students (one of whose books we will turn to momentarily), and he is certainly more expansive in his reach in terms of his editorial efforts in mobilizing the scholarship of others in his edited book and peer reviewed journal collections.¹

Moore’s Untold Tales consists of nine other chapters that are reprinted from previous publication venues, a few stretching back about twenty years, plus a new introduction. Even if some potential readers may be uninterested in his ruminations on the gendered and sexual symbolism of Revelation, much of these have implications for understanding the Seer of Patmos’s views about imperial Rome and hence also have application for current responses to empire. Three general summative remarks are all we have space for in this essay. First, while the gendered imagery of the Apocalypse, not least of the Great Whore of Babylon in chapters 17-18, is aptly illuminated according to ancient project, the inaugural volume of which is Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, eds., The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Two

Moore began his career in the synoptic gospels but has since broadened to take up questions at the interface of biblical studies and postcritical scholarship.

¹ Yeo is principally a Pauline scholar, although more recently he has collaborated with other evangelical biblical scholars on a multi-volume Majority World Theology...
notions of the brothel slave and then exposed, yet the feminine symbol of the people of God as the bride of Christ is unveiled as no less infected, it would appear, from contaminating elements within the church such as Jezebel-like figures. More problematic is that as counter-narratival to Rome as is John’s vision, yet the latter’s mimicry of Roman imperial symbolism to construct the coming kingdom of God “ultimately reinscribes Rome into the heavenly kingdom (transcendentalizing Rome, so to speak)” (28). According to the postcolonial theoretical paradigm that Moore is working with, it is but impossible for those on the imperial margins to counter the dominant ethos except with “the master’s tools,” so in this respect, John is both resistant to but yet also collusive of the imperial order. Yet Moore is able to find threads for an eco-environmental theology in the apocalyptic vision, despite its conclusion that transforms the natural habitation into a mega-city (that dwarfs even the most colossal of fashionable megamalls across the global complexes and urbanopolises), in that in the end the one at the right hand of the one on the throne is ultimately not incarnated as a human but revealed as a lamb, and it is this theriomorphic and quadrupedal figure who receives the worship from the ends of the earth that “surely qualifies as an ecotheological image with legs, despite the contradictions that repeatedly trip it up” (243).

Those who read Untold Tales carefully will see that Moore, who himself has had some sort of experience of pentecostal Christianity (78), is as attentive to the biblical text as an evangelical reader. The latter will also learn much about the postcritical tools in Moore’s arsenal – since he takes care to unpack these notions and concepts rather than assuming all his readers are familiar with the latest theoretical developments – and how they can be effective in opening up new vistas on, and affective in nurturing perception of the desires and disgusts permeating, the Apocalypse’s “revelations.” If evangelicals approached Moore with their own hermeneutic of charity, they will appreciate that this postcolonial theorist is not oblivious to how this opaque scriptural book operates like a mirror on his own life, thereby in effect generating a self-critical posture, even piety, most acute in his honest confession that perhaps he remains attracted to Revelation remarkably because it shines a light on his own psychoses (66).

Darden

Scripturalizing Revelation was originally a Drew University PhD thesis completed under the tutelage of Moore in 2011. The practice of “scripturalizing” refers to an African American form of biblical interpretation emergent from out of a double-consciousness (being black in a white world) via “signifyin” (to use the African American colloquialism) or making meaning through reappropriation of collective but yet counter-cultural memories and resources in order to forge prophetically, in a contested present, a more hopeful future. Now Assistant Professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, the only consortium of schools committed to serving the black church, Darden’s work, facilitated by postcolonial hermeneutical tools, is devoted to critical analysis of the North American colonial regime, albeit from sites of African American history, culture, and ecclesia.

At one level, Darden’s concluding fifth chapter on the throne room of the Almighty in Revelation chapters 4-5 as a kind of “recycled imperialism” (138) – including the signs and wonders characteristic of imperial majesty, the council of regent (the 24 elders), the ritual
performance of *proskynesis* or obeisance, the liturgical hymn-singing of the entire imperial domain, and the liturgical performance as a prelude to war – is a take off from Moore’s work. The result is a message that “failed because John’s mocking mimicked the very process of re-presentation that the various power systems in the ancient Mediterranean world employed to construct a sacralization of sociopolitical structures and systems” (139, italics Darden’s). At a further level, however, Darden impressively demonstrates in her chapter 4 that the double or even multiple consciousness of the African American hermeneutic provides a helpful framework for accessing John’s own double/multiple consciousness as signifyin(g) or writing from within, even if attempting to resist, the Pax Romana. In that respect, it is precisely what we might call Darden’s “plantation hermeneutic” (my term) that shows how a doubly conscious practice of signification operates in the spirituals sounded out of the slave-owners’ estates on the one hand, and through the Seer’s intertextual (from various strands of prior discourses of resistance in the Old Testament for instance) and multiply redacted (thus preserving various discursive layers reflective of cultural memories forged under distinctive conditions, whether in the wake of Nero or during the reign of Domitian, etc.) “revelations” on the other hand. Readers not familiar with African American history and theology ought to persevere carefully through the first three chapters in order to benefit fully from the “revelatory” payoff in the latter part of Darden’s book.

If the goal is to challenge the hegemonic binaries of the dominant culture from its pluralistic underside, Darden realizes that the resistance cannot but adopt and adapt the dominant culture’s tools. But, she maintains, embracing this ambivalence and “contradictoriness – the embrace and rejection, the mimicry and the mockery” – is the key to success: “the denial of ambivalence results either in an uncritical mimicry or an unproductive mockery” (99). Considered from such a *via media* standpoint, then, Darden concludes that John does not live into his doubly-conscious situation enough since he is finally coopted by the exclusive, binary, hierarchical absolutism of the empire he is attempting to resist. But hence his rhetorical strategy produces an “isolation policy [that is] unrealistic, ineffective, and detrimental” (123) as it collapses the hybridic tensions and contradictions needed to generate forward momentum. This is Darden’s admonition to the 21st century African American church: that its achievements of middle class success threaten to compromise its double-consciousness, which in the end means assimilation into, rather than the capacity to continually prophetically challenge, the status quo.

**WHITHER EVANGELICAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY? CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

This is not the place to chart exhaustively next steps for evangelical political theology. Yet to the degree that evangelical theological efforts are normed by the scriptures, to the same degree then the books reviewed above are one platform from which endeavors in evangelical political
Theology might spring. I limit my reflections to three sets of remarks.

First, I want to return to Darden’s judgment about John’s failure in order to reiterate another point that she herself would insist on. To what degree can we agree with her that John has failed in his efforts to enable resistance of empire? To turn the question around, though: are not Darden’s own achievements facilitated by if not dependent upon John’s own apocalyptic revelations? But now to expand on that point and in a way consistent with Darden’s own premises: do we not need African American readings of John from multiple sites and locations, particularly those from across the middle-class, and even from the spread of African American evangelical communities – the middle-class-evangelical combination of which Darden is most concerned about engaging in order to be alert to reinscribing the dominant society’s values in the efforts of social transformation – so that their views of the Apocalypse and its successes, or lack thereof, can be adequately registered? Are not these extant receptions of Revelation from those whose identities are complicated beyond the binary of dominant- and-marginalized cultures all needed to fully unfold the book’s prophetic achievements in the present historical circumstances? As the latter is left underdeveloped in Scripturalizing Revelation, it may be premature to conclude that John’s is a failed project. Moore’s own self-critical and self-confessional approach that sees himself implicated in, if not interrogated by, his own analyses is perhaps in this regard more suggestive for next steps. This willingly self-implicated consciousness may be reflective of the fact that Moore is much further long the path as tenured and endowed professor/teacher and therefore even more open to being vulnerable than is Darden as a junior scholar (at least by position and rank, if not by experience). But my point is one that Darden herself is urging: that the African American double consciousness actually opens up to the plurality of hybridized identities, and the witness and reading of the Apocalypse from across such a spectrum is essential for comprehending currently the book’s normative accomplishments, or lack thereof, and thereby assessing and evaluating its revelatory potential.

This leads to my second point for evangelical political theology in the current climate: that it ought to be attentive to a broader range of sites of hermeneutical and theological reflection representative of Evangelicalism as a global movement than it usually or currently is. What I mean here is that if world Christianity is vital and explosive primarily because of evangelicalizing, pentecostalizing, and charismatizing trends and developments in the majority world, then evangelical theology in general and evangelical political theology in particular ought to be more engaged in reflection and dialogue with global South and non-Western viewpoints than it has been. Moore and especially Darden here are helpful in reminding evangelicals it is important to foreground their multiply situated perspectives in any interpretive, theological endeavor, rather than to minimize or neglect such, as is most often the case. Such perspectivalism, however, ought not to be limited to racial, ethnic, or gendered poststructuralist axes, but should include the specificities of confessional traditions.


for instance that inhabited by Mennonites like Kraybill. To be sure he could have been more explicit about the difference that such Anabaptistic approaches may have made for retrieving Revelation for political theological purposes today, even as Hanson might have been more specific about how Nazarene and Wesleyan commitments could have impacted his project. As these were neither what Kraybill nor Hansen attempted, I am not finding fault with their actual efforts. My point is that these confessional spheres ought not to be ignored, and that evangelical political theology is most robust precisely when these are accounted for up front, rather than swept under the rug of the dominant tradition.\footnote{My own efforts to think theologically and politically through marginalized and confessional (pent-evangelical – combining pentecostal and evangelical – in my case) sites of ethnicity, migration, and transnationalism are in Yong, The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014).} Toward such a telos, then, the five voices reviewed herein are each important for insights they contribute, but these invite, rather than put an end to, further and diverse consideration of the import of John's Apocalypse for evangelical thinking in political theology today.

Last but not least, if nothing else, this review essay highlights the need for multiple hermeneutical frames of reference as each one involves distinctive insights while occluding other possible interpretive possibilities. Reading Revelation in light of today's global political theological situation therefore not only alerts us to the incredibly pluralistic contexts within which evangelicals live presently and the varieties of uses readers today can derive from the book but also helps us to recognize the plurality of authorial perspectives generative of Revelation's apocalyptic visions (as denoted by Darden), the diversity of ecclesial locations to which such were originally directed (noted by Gorman but also others), and the multiplicity of performative actions relevant to the polis then and now (Hansen's thesis).\footnote{In other work, I have also noted the epistemological pluralism embedded in Revelation; see Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity, images and commentary by Jonathan A. Anderson (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014), ch. 12.} Thus our guides have prompted fresh sensitivity to the heterogeneity within the revelatory text, even as they have precipitated new appreciation for the breadth of its political applicability, and all of this in and through rather than notwithstanding Revelation's arguably totalizing apocalypticism. This is as it should be since political theology is not merely an abstract and speculative enterprise at the level of theory but always connects with how the people of God ought to feel (recall Moore on this point), live, and act in the public square. And if there is not just one way to be faithful but many forms of truthful resistance to the imperialisms of this world, then we need political theological thinking and formulation that articulate and exemplify such flexibility, nuance, and dynamism.\footnote{For more on this point of pluralism and political theology that I unpack in terms of "many tongues many political practices," see Amos Yong, In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology – The Cadbury Lectures 2009, Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age series (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).} Our conversation partners in this review essay have been helpfully catalytic toward such ends.

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