

Theology and New Materialism – Tim Howles response

I think it's safe to say that the party political literature that came through my letter-box during the recent General Election campaign tended to have a rather cheap and amateurish feel to it. The print quality was invariably poor. The spelling was often atrocious. But as I glanced over each leaflet (before throwing it in the bin) one thing in particular struck me—how prominent and audacious were the references to “change”. For an election whose presiding theme was supposed to be that of “continuity”, I found this interesting. I would even go as far as to say that the vision boldly announced from within the pages of these rather scruffy-looking leaflets sometimes verged on the utopian. In one, the Conservative candidate promised “a bright and secure future for all”. In another, I was assured that a vote for UKIP would be a vote to “make Britain what it can and must be”. And the Labour candidate, in a leaflet that I thought made appeal to almost eschatological language, was able to offer “a society with enough space for everyone to flourish”. In spite of the apathy and disenfranchisement felt by many of us about the power of politicians to effect anything new, a situation apparently now reflected in the parliamentary arithmetic that was actually delivered in the election last week, it seems that the political discourse itself is still seeking to convince us that an alternative future does indeed lie within our grasp (if only we would lend *their* party our vote).

And yet, as many of us instinctively feel, there is something in the structure of modern existence that militates against the possibility of meaningful change. What is this? A number of critical theorists and theologians (Ulrich Beck, Peter Sloterdijk, Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, John Milbank) have attempted to capture this under the title of “secular apocalyptic”. The thought here is that, contrary to what we might suppose, modernity is imbued with a sense of the end times. What the moderns see as they stare into the future, of course, is the triumph of their own cherished values: liberal democracy, greater material wealth for all, and mastery of the natural world through scientific-technological apparatus. And, as with all apocalyptic, the point of such an unveiling is not to leave that vision in the future, but rather to inspire its actualization in the present. That is to say, the genre of apocalyptic is ready-made to be secularized. It provides modernity with the idea of the descent of an ideal state of things into the here-and-now and incites its adherents to work to bring it about with evangelical fervour.

Of course, it's not hard to spot the religious discourse undergirding all this. Nor the troubling points of equivalence between this mode of “secular apocalyptic”, which we find all around us, and the apocalyptic discourse spouted by religious fundamentalists. In both cases, human beings set themselves up as agents by which the end is to be prematurely brought into the present, even if this is by violent means. Thus, writing an article in *Le Monde* in response to the Paris attacks of November 2015, Bruno Latour argued that “behind their archaic appearance, these Jihadists must be understood above all as fanatical modernizers”, going on to propose the even more

controversial thesis that “we, the secular moderns, who feel our own way of life to be under attack, must also understand that like the most extreme zealots of Jerusalem and Ramallah we also are political fundamentalists”. In both cases, the hard work of politics—the representation of different voices, the negotiation of competing claims—is interrupted by a vision of the future that is already realized.

Actually, the idea of the “secular apocalyptic” is not new. It can be traced back to the work of twentieth-century German political theorist Eric Voegelin: attempting to understand the rise of fascist regimes in the 1930s and the power they exerted over the imaginations of so many, Voegelin coined the phrase “the immanentisation of the eschaton” so as to indicate the way in which these regimes leveraged an idea of the future for their own hegemonic purposes in the contemporary moment.

The other side of the coin of this “secular apocalyptic”, of course, is that it shuts down history itself as the crucible of any real political activity. So although we modern people might believe that our future is open, that we can be whatever we want to be, that we can “change” the world, our mode of existence has in fact already been fixed according to this teleology. I like how the French philosopher Michel Serres puts it in his *Hermès* books, when he describes modern existence as being mapped out on a “Euclidean grid”, just like a line is plotted on square-ruled graph paper. Wherever we are and whatever we are doing, writes Serres, we are constrained by this grid: “the Euclidean house, the Euclidean street and its network, the Euclidean church and the enclosed spaces of the sacred, the Euclidean school and its spatial varieties containing fixed points, the Euclidean spaces of the factory, the family, the political party, and so on”.

One of the things I like about John’s book is its attempt to think about how theology might work with a different kind of apocalyptic than this. Here, we still have an end of time. But this end is to be brought about by God. And it will come at the end of time. It’s not in the wit of any human being to know when that will be, nor how it is to be brought about. And this frees up the present moment to be one of creative entanglements and emergent realities. We might call this “pluralism”, in the best sense of that word. Contrary to what is usually supposed, then, religion is not the enemy of pluralism. Rather, it is its ally. For John, theology (when it is properly practised) keeps the end at the end, and in doing so promotes the beautiful values of care and attention to the plurality of the world as it is given to us. Now, human beings become sensitive to the heterogeneous assemblages in which our lives are held. Now, the flow of history is not pre-determined, but becomes the crucible in which something genuinely new can emerge.

So where is this new theology to arise? Is it already here, if only we knew where to look? And what will its relationship be to the existing institutions of religion—in John’s case, dare I say it, even to the Church of England?

Just as food for thought for John, I'd like to close by suggesting one contemporary context or frame that might provide a catalyst for the sort of theology he is proposing. This is the context supplied by the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene, as all of us know, is a geological term. It refers to the historical period in which human activity, the footprint of the *anthropos*, can be shown to have produced a significant impact on the Earth's climate and ecosystems, to such an extent that the functioning of the Earth system itself has been irreparably changed by our behaviour and consumption.

Of course, it goes without saying that apocalyptic overtones are immediately apparent here. It's hard to avoid them if you wade into some of the literature on the subject, written not by scaremongering conspiracy theorists, I would add, but by respected, Nobel-prize-winning scientists, with titles such as *Requiem for a Species: The Truth about Climate Change* (written by Clive Hamilton, Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy here in Oxford) or *Climate Wars: Why People will be Killed in the 21st Century* (written by Harold Weltzer, Professor of Paleo-Climatology at the University of Berlin).

And yet, at the same time, perhaps the advent of the Anthropocene also signals the possibility of a rupture with the mode of "secular apocalyptic" I mentioned above. How can modern people assume mastery of the natural world through their own scientific-technological apparatus when nature itself seems to be rising up against us and threatening our own survival on planet Earth? Like Pi with his tiger in the lifeboat, we might be forced to take a more humble attitude to the plural world we inhabit, to negotiate with it, and to find some space in which we might co-exist alongside it in order to have any kind of future at all. It is here, perhaps, that a theological mind-set, in the sense that John describes, might be able to contribute. The advent of the Anthropocene, with its complication of the future that we thought was ours to bring about on Earth, may (paradoxically) supply the context in which a different kind of apocalyptic can be thought. I think some recent theology has begun to map that out, foremost of which is Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato Si*. John's book, and others like it, will help us to take that further.