REVELATION, VIOLENCE & EMPIRE

lctp summer school, cuddesdon, 2016
“Have you ever thought what a God would be like who actually ordained and executed the cruelty that is in that book? A holocaust of mankind.”

“I read its cruel barbarous message and I despair.”

“What an evil book it is, for it says that humanity is nothing, is worth nothing.”

“Christianity would be better without that book. It preaches nothing but cruelty and destruction. It teaches that the destruction of human beings does not matter, is even to be rejoiced over. It is evil.”

»revelation« by c. j. sansom
“Where the Book of Revelation is concerned, I share the view of Guy, that the early Church Fathers released something very dangerous on the world when, after much deliberation, they decided to include it in the Christian canon.”

c. j. sansom
“neither apostolic nor prophetic”

“I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it”

“Christ is neither taught nor known in it”

martin luther
“the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history”

friedrich nietzsche
a “grandiose scheme for wiping out and annihilating everybody who wasn’t of the elect”

it “has in it none of the real Christ, none of the real Gospel”

“just as Jesus had to have a Judas ... so did there have to be a Revelation in the New Testament”

d. h. lawrence
the "curious record of the visions of a drug addict"

gorge bernard shaw
“a sick text. ... there's something not quite right about Revelation”

will self
a “retreat from ethical responsibility”

“its existence and its place in the canon are, in the fullest sense of the word, evil”

Jack Sanders
a “misogynist male fantasy at the end of time”

tina pippin
transforms the “nonviolent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus”

john dominic crossan
“Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”

rev. 6:15-17
“the seven trumpets ... there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and ... a third of the earth was burned up ... A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died ... A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.”

rev. 8:6-11

paul mersmann (2010)
... locusts ... were told ... to damage ... only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them ... And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.

Rev. 9:3-6

Max Beckmann (1941)
“So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. ... By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths.”

rev. 9:15, 18

paul mersmann (2010)
“Those who worship the beast and its image ..., they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image ...”

rev. 14:9-11
Another “angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.”

**rev. 14:19-20**
“... the seven bowls of the wrath of God ... every living thing in the sea died ... because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve! ... they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory. ... people gnawed their tongues in agony, and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds. ... and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.”

rev. 16:1-11, 21
“Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ... He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ... From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”

rev. 19:11-15
“Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders — flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.’ ... And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”

Rev. 19:17-18, 21
“not only one of the finest literary works in the New Testament, but also one of the greatest theological achievements of early Christianity”

Richard Bauckham
“a gift — a work of intense imagination ... [a] brilliantly conceived and endlessly useful document”

eugene h. peterson
is revelation good news or bad news
“though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators”

g. k. chesterton
“few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation .... Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation”

luke timothy johnson
“How one reads, teaches, and preaches Revelation can have a powerful impact on one’s own — and other people’s — emotional, spiritual, and even physical and economic well-being. ... some readings are not only inferior to others, they are in fact unchristian and unhealthy.”

michael j. gorman
APOCALYPTICISM AND VIOLENT IMAGERY
apocalypticism offers ...

• a “scathing critique of the oppressors”
• “passionate exhortations to defiance”
• “unfailing confidence in God’s ultimate defeat of the present evil”

michael j. gorman
apocalypticism envisages ...

• a cosmic dualism: this dualism between God and Satan is also embodied in real-life struggles between good and evil on earth

• an ethical dualism: everyone has to take sides, either that of the good or that of the evil

• a temporal dualism between the present, evil age, marked by injustice and oppression, and the age to come, which will be characterised by goodness, justice and peace
Revelation “is not consolation for ... persecution by Rome but admonition against ... acculturation to Rome. The venom of the book’s anti-Roman rhetoric ... intends to preclude any Christian cooperation with the Roman Empire, although John believes that collusion is already happening.”

john dominic crossan
THE BEAST

REVELATION AND EMPIRE
MEET THE DRAGON AND THE BEAST
bamberg apocalypse (c. 1000)
facundus apocalypse (1047)
angers apocalypse (14th c.)
nicolas bataille (1375-79)
meister bertram (late 14th c.)
ottheinrich bible (1425-30)
block book (c. 1450)
albrecht dürer (1497-98)
dionysiou monastery (mount athos) (16th c.)
georg david nessenthaler (1695-1736)
karl rössing (1946-47)
pat marvenko smith (1982)
images courtesy of johannesoffenbarung.ch
by andreas schwendener and roman s. gutzwiller

music: 'from the windmill' by jon lord
Revelation as Political Resistance Literature
“the language and literature of resistance”
(michael j. gorman)

“written to oppose imperial rule”
(richard horsley)

“the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire”
(richard bauckham)

“a linked and interwoven attack on the empire of Rome, the city of Rome, and the emperor of Rome — ... on imperial theology”
(john dominic crossan)

“Christian underground literature”, “resistance literature”, “subversive literature”, “martyr-producing literature”, “revolutionary literature”, “protest literature”
(walter e. pilgrim)
an “anti-assimilationist” or “anti-accommodationist” text opposing the imperial culture of death

(michael j. gorman)

“far from looking for the end of the world, [the apocalyptic writers] were looking for the end of empire. And far from living under the shadow of an anticipated cosmic dissolution, they looked for the renewal of the earth on which a humane societal life could be renewed”

(richard horsley)
a theopolitical text, not only a critique of empire but also a manifesto against civil religion

michael j. gorman
the beast vs. god

“all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it”
(rev. 13:8)

“it exercises all the authority ..., and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast”
(rev. 13:12)

“Lord, ... you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you”
(rev. 15:4)
“a liturgical text that amounts to a theological and political manifesto”
(pablo richard)

a “visionary critique” of “the deification of human power”
(craig koester)

“a set of Christian prophetic counter-images”
(richard bauckham)

“a critique of all idolatries and injustices similar to those of Rome, throughout history and into the present”
(michael j. gorman)
CASE STUDY: THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, EMPIRE AND CIVIL RELIGION
u.s. imperial characteristics

- slave labour
- demonization, genocide, and displacement of indigenous people
- colonization of distant lands
- cultural arrogance
- global military power

w. howard-brook and a. gwyther
“I chant the new empire, grander than any before
- As in a vision it comes to me;

I chant America, the Mistress — I chant a greater supremacy ... 

And you, Libertad of the world!"

walt whitman
The 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center "produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of our leaders, who began to see our republic as a genuine empire, a new Rome, the greatest colossus in history, no longer bound by international law, the concern of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force."

chalmers johnson
empire

“An entity that has come to widespread (global or nearly global) dominance through deliberate expansion by means of the extreme exercise of some form(s) of power – economic, political, military, and/or religious – resulting in the creation of colony-like clients of the entity and of enemies who perceive the entity as oppressive.”

michael j. gorman
we need “to see Revelation as a critique of secular power wherever and however it expresses itself oppressively, and especially as a critique of such power that is deemed sacred and granted devotion and allegiance”

michael j. gorman
civil religion

a) ideology of the sacralisation of the state, its power, accomplishments, values and leaders

b) demand of solemn devotion and allegiance to the state as a sacred responsibility (incl. the willingness to kill or die for the state)

c) mixing of religious faith and practice with political, nationalistic claims and practices

d) sacralisation of one’s own people and demonization of others, leading to a culture of hatred and violence

michael j. gorman
u.s. american civil religion

- exceptionalism
- messianism
- innocence
- extreme patriotism or nationalism
- militarism and sacred violence

michael j. gorman
civil religion and its alternative

- politicisation of the sacred
- sacralisation of the political
- participation in the idolatry of the imperial cult

- uncivil worship and witness
- following the Lamb in a community of faithful resistance, liturgical living, and missional hope
“Christian references to ‘our troops,’ in prayer or any other forms of discourse, are theologically inappropriate because ‘we’ (the church, Christians) do not have any troops. Such talk confuses our being Christian with being American (or British, or whatever) and manifests a profound forgetfulness about two important aspects of the church stressed in Revelation: its international character as a worldwide assembly of people from every tribe and nation (Revelation 7) and its peaceful, nonviolent character as a community of the Lamb.”

michael j. gorman
“I would contend ... that the most alluring and dangerous deity in the United States is the omnipresent, syncretistic god of nationalism mixed with Christianity lite: 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 precisely why Revelation is addressed to the seven churches ....”

michael j. gorman
revelation's counter-programme

1. reign of God and Lamb
2. reality of evil and empire
3. temptation to idolatry and immorality
4. call to covenant faithfulness and resistance
5. alternative vision of God and worship
6. faithful witness according to just and nonviolent pattern of Christ
7. judgement and salvation/new creation

michael j. gorman
VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF REVELATION’S CRITIQUE OF EMPIRE
allusions in seven trumpets (8:6-9:21) and seven bowls (16:1-21)

- plagues of Egypt (Exodus)
- fall of Jericho (Joshua)
- army of locusts (Joel)
- Sinai theophany (Exodus)
- contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry
- earthquakes of Asia Minor
- eruption of Vesuvius

richard bauckham
“Revelation ... allows no neutral perception: either one shares Rome’s own ideology, the view of the Empire promoted by Roman propaganda, or one sees it from the perspective of heaven, which unmasks the pretensions of Rome. Revelation portrays the Roman Empire as a system of violent oppression, founded on conquest, maintained by violence and oppression. It is a system both of political tyranny and of economic exploitation.”

richard bauckham
the satanic trinity

- the dragon or serpent: the primeval source of all opposition to God
- the beast or sea-monster: Rome's imperial power
- the second beast or earth-monster: the propaganda machine of Rome's imperial cult
“Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.’”

**rev. 18:4-5**
THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION'S VIOLENT IMAGERY
“We had fed the heart on fantasies, The heart's grown brutal from the fare.”

william butler yeats
fundamentalism’s lust for slaughter

“What then should be the believer’s attitude to the destruction of the world by fire? First of all, he should welcome it and pray for its nearness.”

(robert gromacki, 1970)

“The world has one great war yet to endure .... The slaughter that will take place is too frightening to imagine. Just be thankful that you’re not going to be around.”

(chuck smith, 1977)

“The Tribulation will result in such bloodshed and destruction that any war up to that time will seem insignificant.”

(jerry falwell, 1983)
fundamentalism’s lust for slaughter

“Some day we may blow ourselves up with all the bombs .... But I still believe in God’s going to be in control .... If He chooses to use nuclear war, then who am I to argue with that?”
(charles jones, 1986)

“Peace and peace plans in the Middle East are a bad thing, in the view of fundamentalist Christians, because they delay the countdown to Christ’s return.”
(robertson, falwell and lahaye)
“As Christianity follows John in emphasizing ... apocalypse over incarnation, it finds itself waiting for God to act violently while God is waiting for us to act nonviolently.”

john dominic crossan
“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’”

**rev. 6:9-10**
“... because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!”

rev. 16:6
“Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief.”

*rev. 18:6-7*
“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

**rev. 19:1-2**
THE MYTH OF REDEMPATIVE VIOLENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE VIOLENCE
“The holiness and righteousness of God require the condemnation of unrighteousness on earth and the destruction of the powers of evil that contest God’s rule on earth, so that their rule may give place to the coming of God’s kingdom on earth.”

“With their violence, oppression and idolatrous religion [the evil powers] are ruining God’s creation. His faithfulness to his creation requires that he destroys them in order to preserve and to deliver it from evil.”

richard bauckham
“Death and destruction in Revelation are symbolic of the judgment and cleansing of God that is necessary for the realization of the hope offered in Christ for a new heaven and new earth in which God and the Lamb alone reign forever among a redeemed, reconciled humanity from all tribes, peoples, and nations.”

michael j. gorman
“The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

*rev. 11:18*

trier apocalypse (c. 800)
“the normalcy of civilization’s violent injustice” (John Dominic Crossan)

“the deep irony that we constantly seek peace by going to war” (John Swinton)

“we use war to make ourselves think that the world can be made safe” (Stanley Hauerwas)

the “myth of redemptive violence undergirds American popular culture, civil religion, nationalism, and foreign policy” (Walter Wink)
“As faithful followers of Christ in a world at war, we cannot imagine being anything other than nonviolent. ... nonviolence is a sign of hope that there is an alternative to war.”

stanley hauerwas
“Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.”

Martin Luther King
“There is a place that understands, deep within, that violence can only breed more violence and that this is where it must stop. It is not a place where justice means more pain, punishment and revenge. It is rooted in a strong instinct for this depth of pain not to happen to anyone else. ... It is a place of insight which opens up to learning, hope and compassion. It is a place that yearns for healing, which is willing to sacrifice the immediate response of revenge. ... It wants to say, just wait, stay with the pain, let it burn you into a place of renewal.”

marian partington
Violence is “a desperate attempt to assert short-term physical control in a situation that is psychologically out of control.”

marcia a. owen
“The most empowering gift in ministry: hearing God whispering, ‘I have no enemies’”

marcia a. owen
“There is ... no other way to God for our time but through the enemy, for loving the enemy has become the key both to human survival in the age of terror and to personal transformation”

walter wink
“It is precisely here, in the midst of persecution, that many will find themselves overtaken by the miraculous power of divine forgiveness. God’s forgiving love can burst like a flare even in the night of our grief and hatred, and free us to love. It is in just such times as these, when forgiveness seems impossible, that the power of God most mightily manifests itself.”

walter wink
“If we resist violence with violence, we simply mirror its evil. We become what we resist.”

walter wink
“To turn Jesus into a divine warrior allows once again — but now terminally in the last book of the Bible — the normalcy of human civilization’s violent injustice to subsume the radicality of God’s nonviolent justice.”

john dominic crossan
"the very essence of Christianity is the cross"

miguel d'escoto
BIBLICAL DEPICTIONS OF GOD AND THEIR REINTERPRETATION IN THE LIFE OF JESUS
VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE IN REVELATION
“Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”

rev. 13:9-10
“They have conquered [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.”

rev. 12:11

paul mersmann (2010)
The Christian “response to hatred and violence is not more of the same, but the willingness to suffer for the cause of Jesus Christ, without hatred or bitterness. Here we encounter once again the radically new ethic toward one’s enemies exemplified in the life and teaching of Jesus. ... Christian resistance ... responds with suffering love, as did its Lord. ... Only in this way can the cycle of violence be broken and the power of tyranny overcome.”

walter e. pilgrim
"If God is not present in the world as ‘the One who sits on the throne’, he is present as the Lamb who conquers by suffering. Christ’s suffering witness and sacrificial death are ... the key event in God’s conquest of evil and establishment of his kingdom on earth. Even more than the judgments which issue from the throne in heaven they constitute God’s rule on earth."

richard bauckham
reinterpretation of messianic titles

“Then one of the elders said to me, ‘... the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered ...’”

“Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered ...”
“A poet uses words not to explain something, and not to describe something, but to make something. Poet (poētēs) means ‘maker.’ Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it.”

eugene h. peterson
Revelation and Universalism
“In the first stage of his work, the Lamb’s bloody sacrifice redeemed a people for God. In the second stage, this people’s participation in his sacrifice, through martyrdom, wins all the peoples for God. This is how God’s universal kingdom comes.”

richard bauckham
“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!’”

rev. 5:13

max beckmann (1941)
"The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

rev. 22:17
“John’s vision is of the ultimate defeat of Christ’s enemies by reconciling them. This is the kind of victory most fitting for the Lamb who triumphs through sacrificial love.”

gregory macdonald
(aka robin parry)
READING

REVELATION

RESPONSIBLY
reading revelation responsibly

1. tragic misinterpretations call for responsible reading of Revelation
2. understanding of nature and purpose of apocalyptic language and imagery required
3. apocalyptic as consolation, but no evidence for major persecution and still problematic depictions of a violent God
4. Revelation’s shocking rhetoric seeks to dissuade readers from colluding with Roman Empire
reading revelation responsibly

5. notion of retributive justice

6. myth of redemptive violence

7. images of a violent God perpetuate an understanding that reflects ‘the normalcy of civilisation’s violent injustice’

8. alternative vision of the ‘radicality of divine nonviolent justice’ is reflected in Jesus’ call to love of enemies and Revelation’s vision of nonviolent resistance
reading revelation responsibly

9. Jesus’ death on the cross provides the model for God’s nonviolent, noncoercive and restorative engagement with the world, including his final, eschatological triumph.

10. Revelation offers a nuanced portrayal of God’s ultimate triumph.

11. Violent depictions of God need to be read symbolically and metaphorically (not literally) and as a rhetorical deterrent.
reading revelation responsibly

12. desperate, honest cries to God, even if cries for justice rather than revenge, envisage a perpetuation of ‘redemptive’ violence

13. John’s cultural background has imposed limits upon his ability to perceive of God in radically different terms

14. nonviolent understanding of God’s engagement with the world requires a universalist understanding of salvation, which is hinted at in Revelation
THE END?