

IV

RESPONSE

**Agonism, Aesthetics, and Apocalyptic**

*Kyle Gingerich Hiebert*

I want to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to each of the panelists for their provocative and challenging engagements. To have one's work read in this way is nothing short of a gift for which I remain truly grateful. Although I did add material to make what began as a Ph.D. thesis potentially more interesting and relevant to a wider audience, I never expected this work to find a hearing in this kind of forum. I assumed it would be primarily collecting dust in the stacks of the Rylands library in Manchester. It is difficult to know what to say in response to such wide-ranging and thoughtful readings. While I certainly won't be able to do justice to the richness of any of your engagements, I want to try to say something in response to each of you. Hopefully, this will be something that signals the extent to which your engagements have come to me as gifts that helpfully and rightly trouble the avowedly incomplete theopolitical vision I haltingly attempt to offer in the book, and that will provoke wider conversation. I would also like to express thanks to Phil Ziegler for his initial invitation and for organizing this panel, to Travis for his willingness to share the stage, and to Wipf and Stock not only for publishing the book but also for sponsoring this session.

**Elizabeth Phillips**

I have heard loud and clear that while my ability to choose an interesting title may not be in question, my ability to explain it in an introduction certainly is! Fair enough and duly noted, although I suspect this may be something of a perennial failure on my part. In her response, Elizabeth points toward the contested nature of apocalyptic in particular, and suggests that what is needed is more specificity and precision in our use of the term. Part of my reticence to include a definition of “apocalyptic” from the outset lies in the fact that I wanted to try to let such a definition emerge from the different voices in the text themselves, instead of having whatever initial definition I might have offered hijack the different apocalyptic inflections that emerge in the genealogy. Of course, as Elizabeth notes, I do hint at a definition by making reference to Annie Dillard’s discovery of a work by Marius von Senden that details the sometimes startling responses of blind patients who, after cataract surgery, were able to see for the first time. For the benefit of those who aren’t familiar with the passage from Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* I’ll quote some of it here:

A twenty-two-year-old girl was dazzled by the world’s brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but, “the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: ‘Oh God! How beautiful!’”<sup>26</sup>

As I say in the book, I can think of no better way of describing the mysterious apocalyptic interplay of veiling and unveiling that is bound up with what it means to learn to see. This way of putting the matter is doubly helpful for the argument I seek to make, because apocalyptic and aesthetic modes of theology are inseparable. Of course, we do not learn to see in isolation, which is why it is also important for my argument that “the education of the eye” is not a violent subjugation imposed from without but rather is shaped by a mutuality of gazes that supplement and shape one’s own vision in ever new and surprising ways. And so, perhaps—although

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<sup>26</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2011), 27-31.

this may be a case of my wishing to absolve myself of a bad habit—the lack of an overriding definition of apocalyptic can be read as an attempt not only to highlight the sense in which there are different kinds of apocalyptic at work here that would be obscured when measured against a pre-existing definition, but also to deflate an overwrought sense of the explanatory power that apocalyptic theology often claims for itself.

I'm not arguing that apocalyptic is central for political theology but that it is not solely or even mainly a discourse of the margins. In this respect I have quite deliberately opted for the weaker thesis, which I have also done in qualifying the extent to which the genealogy that begins with Schmitt does *not* explain why subsequent voices *must* be understood with reference to him. Rather, if we attend to the Schmittian aporetics that are unwittingly repeated in subsequent debates, we will be able to detect hidden resonances between ostensibly opposed political theologies that would otherwise remain invisible. So, even though I don't want to claim that Schmitt is *necessary* to explain Metz's negative theological anthropology, to take one example, reading Metz as in some sense repeating Schmitt even while resisting him yields significant theological insights that might otherwise be left veiled.

### **Paul Martens**

Part of what is at issue is helpfully articulated by Paul in his question about whether any apocalyptic theopolitical vision is capable of escaping a fundamentally agonistic framework. I hope it is clear in the book that *none* of the five voices at its heart, Yoder included, manages to do this. I'm happy to grant that Yoder's apocalyptic politics can promote, and does in fact embody, violent postures. I'm still not as sure as you seem to be that Yoder's basic logic can be boiled down to something like Tolstoy's dictum that the cure for evil is suffering, but the precise reasons for that are beside the point here.<sup>27</sup> I want to push back on this question in two directions that force me to clarify some things perhaps not as well formulated or explicitly foregrounded as they could be.

First, the genealogy I construct tries to work against the notion that we might eventually, finally (mercifully?!) be able to articulate a theopolitical vision devoid of agonism, and instead seeks to be instructed by failures to

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<sup>27</sup> See Paul Martens, *The Heterodox Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

subvert such an agonistic framework. I want to refuse the question entirely, at least insofar as definitively escaping an agonistic framework isn't precisely what I'm driving toward, although I admit that there are places that could be read to imply that escape is the goal. However, in the course of my reading of Metz, for example, I suggest that such an attempt to understand his *new* political theology over and against Schmitt in this way is doomed to fail.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, part of what I attempt to do in the book is to imagine the possibility of a nonviolent theopolitical vision that does not extricate us from the struggle to remain in those agonistic spaces but willingly seeks them out and enters them, not to escape or destroy but to reconcile. The kind of theological metaphysics that must accompany such an account is one that is habitually seized by the beauty of Christ and can therefore proclaim with confidence, as I think Yoder does, that "there is no enemy to be destroyed; there is an adversary to be reconciled."<sup>28</sup> This also begins to complicate your second question about the extent to which rejecting an agonistic metaphysics weakens the disjunctive force of apocalyptic. On the one hand, I don't want to reject an agonistic metaphysics *tout court*, just a particular kind. On the other hand, I want to question the extent to which the disjunctive force of apocalyptic is always necessarily violent. Part of the key for me is that whatever interruptive function apocalyptic serves to illuminate corrupt forms of power must also be turned back on itself. Put another way, because all our creaturely modes of vision are subject to forms of blindness, whether willful or not, all our attempts to see not only must be aware of the *potential* for self-deception but must actively cultivate a positive capacity for self-criticism.

### **Nancy Bedford**

Cultivating such a positive capacity for self-criticism is undoubtedly one of the key insights I take from Yoder and, in this sense, Nancy is exactly right to point to the sense in which the case of Yoder is deeply troubling. It goes well beyond a simple failure to embody one's own best insights, and is rather a form of willful blindness with devastating and ongoing material consequences that made life itself, as she puts it, "uninhabitable" for scores of women. I continue to be at a loss about how to move forward in the light of

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<sup>28</sup> Yoder, *Nonviolence—A Brief History*, 46.

Yoder's destructive and violent sexual experiments. However, I believe that it is incumbent upon those of us who have inherited his legacy to continue to wrestle with the difficult questions about the links between its perceived achievements and its glaring failures, which we so often do not wish to see. Nancy is absolutely right to suggest that this is a blind spot in the theopolitical vision I articulate in the book, although I hope that my recognition of Yoder's sexual violence against women means that it is not a form of willful blindness on my part. I also take it that Elizabeth's suggestion that I (we) must work harder to seek out and engage women's voices to be one way of addressing such a blind spot. Although there are seeds of such engagements in the book with voices like Chantal Mouffe, Catherine Pickstock, Grace Jantzen, and Gillian Rose, I completely agree that more needs to be done.

After reading the book a number of months ago, a Catholic friend made a provocative suggestion that Mary can profitably be read as an exemplar of nonviolence who was not martyred. That suggestion has stayed with me. This kind of reading requires a kind of leap, perhaps more so for Protestants for whom Mary is not even associated with private devotion but, in my experience, is most memorably trotted out as the meek and mild mother of the nativity play and mostly forgotten after December 25. In a Christmas story I read to my kids over and over last year, Mary is so incidental that the donkey carrying her plays a bigger role in the narrative. However, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) stands as a majestic theopolitical witness, should we have ears to listen. I also wonder if John's portrayal of Mary at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-26), in what must be described as a moment of pure anguish, isn't just as troublingly powerful. After all, as the poet Frances Croake Frank poignantly reminds us, it is Mary who is able to authentically say, "this is my body, this is my blood."<sup>29</sup> If this is what creaturely nonviolence looks like, then the recovery of the figure of the martyr to which I draw attention in the book is in danger of missing this completely unless it can take Mary seriously.

As for the first blind spot that Nancy identifies, the "wound of coloniality": while I'm grateful that she took note of a few occasions in

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<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women," in *Freeing Theology—The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993), 185.

which I gesture in the direction of a repair in this regard, this is too generous because, as she points out, much more needs to be done here too, not only in excavating the shadows of the North Atlantic legacy but in becoming attuned to see the light coming from the global South.

In any case, all of this response barely scratches the surface. There is much more I could say and, certainly, much more work must be done in the light of the challenges issued by each of you. I'll end by entering another note of thanks to you all; your engagements will stay with me, and I very much look forward to further conversation. Thanks.

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