

V

RESPONSE

Messianic Theology and Apocalyptic Political Economy

P. Travis Kroeker

Many thanks to each of the respondents for such generous and thoughtful engagement. I second every word of thanks and appreciation that Kyle so eloquently expressed in his response. The event itself in Denver was a remarkable engagement, and I'm delighted that it will find a wider audience through *The Conrad Grebel Review*. I shall respond to each panelist in the order in which I received their responses, since that became the de facto structure for crafting this reply, and it ended up working (at least for me)! I also respond more fully to some respondents in other sections and will on occasion signal that by highlighting their name when I do so.

Elizabeth Phillips

Elizabeth helpfully asks, How is “apocalyptic” present in my work? I agree with Ivan Illich that we live in an apocalyptic world in which the mystical body of Christ is being crucified every day, not least for its own role in bringing

about the world of modernity.³⁰ I have thought of using the term more prominently, but instead have chosen to focus upon the term “messianic,” because it is more scandalous in illuminating that this apocalyptic world is charged with the revelation or unveiling of the war between Messiah and anti-Messiah, in which there are no innocent parties—though there are plenty of victims—and where the question of allegiance is of both ultimate and penultimate significance. That is, as messianic language entails political and theological and ethical questions, these may not be divided; in fact to divide them is antichrist (though to be clear, I’m not saying that Ted Smith is that!). Christ and Anti-Christ come into being (*parousia*, 2 Thess. 2) together in an apocalypse that unveils both simultaneously. The mystery of love and the mystery of evil are agonistically coincident in the human world that includes both nature and history. Incidentally, in this same apocalyptic text Paul says, “if anyone will not work, let them not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10), and of all people maybe Mennonites should get that apocalyptic joke, quietist as it is.

The point is that we completely receive our lives, the fulfillment of our desires, by grace, and yet are impelled by the example of the “Lord Messiah” to “work in quietness”—work like *hesychasts*, in that mystical tradition of prayer and labor in the everyday to bring about the mysterious economy of divine love which may only be received in gratitude—or not! This remains a critical apocalyptic *wager* and is anything but a catastrophic, pessimistic, or hostile stance against the lived world (as apocalyptic is so often depicted). In my work I’m trying to bring as much of the world I inhabit in my particular “point”³¹ as possible into this apocalyptic messianic field of vision so as to allow the ordinary, hidden mystery of the divine economy to “awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death” (as the apocalyptic seer says in Revelation 3:2).

Thanks, Elizabeth, for pointing out where I say regarding Walter

³⁰ Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto, ON: Anansi Press, 2005), 169-70, 177-80.

³¹ Here I’m making reference to Julian of Norwich’s apocalyptic “point,” where the work of divine love is present to all creatures in every “point” or instant of time and at the “mid-point” or centre of all things. See especially the third revelation in Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin, 1998).

Benjamin that apocalyptic is about “exceeding or interrupting the natural.”³² I should have said “exceeding modern *conventions* of nature and history that reduce them to purely immanent homogeneous inanimate natural and anthropocentric historical processes in triumphalistic progressivist narratives”—to which various forms of Christendom politics and philosophy have contributed their fair share. Benjamin’s “weak” messianic power, rooted in Kabbalistic mystical messianism, may help Christians, including Mennonites, recover a messianism rooted in the foolish power of the cross in a narrative of “failure” not success, a mystical political theology of the everyday. Here I can make a segue to Paul Martens, who wonders if all of this isn’t just a bit too ascetic and world-denying.

Paul Martens

I do think that a recovery of this apocalyptic messianism must focus on the suffering of the cross rather than a glorying in our triumphalistic love of the world, which is currently very quickly killing that world. We should be aware that temptation arises precisely in our most glorious spaces of intimacy, enjoyment, and love—Augustine locates temptation precisely in the claim that “all that is is good,” the gratuitous gift of beauty, truth, goodness in a world that is “contingently” fashioned out of love. The biblical narratives say this too, beginning with that famous garden motif that moves so quickly toward disordered possessive desire, rivalry, murder, and the world-historical tower. The Johannine theology of “Word made flesh” opens us to the vulnerability and ubiquitous suffering this entails in how to love a mortal world intent on securing itself against the pain of love. John’s gospel is central not only for Dostoevsky, Flannery O’Connor, and Annie Dillard, but also for the Radical Reformers and for Miriam Toews.

Elizabeth, I’m gratefully aware of your critique that the domain of political theology can be a very male-centered one. My recent work in theology and literature takes up this approach to political theology also in relation to female writers, including medieval mystics such as Marguerite Porete (in conversation with Simone Weil) and Julian of Norwich’s apocalypse of divine love in the suffering cosmic messiah (in conversation with Annie Dillard). I’ve just published an article on Miriam Toews’s novel

³² Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, 25.

Irma Voth that argues for a figural theological reading of John's gospel in this novel that unveils the scandalous implications of the Word made flesh also for patriarchal religion, the deadness of which (as Toews shows us) must be overcome.³³

Let me make a bald bold claim here: all of these works are bound together figurally in relation to the messianic apocalypse. John's gospel is itself like all scripture related figurally to the whole of scripture and beyond that to the cosmic ("worldly") revelation of the poetics of creation that John claims to see and follow in Jesus. The early radical reformers also preferred the Gospel of John and a vision of salvation as rebirth into the restoration of the divine image, a process of divinization or deification,³⁴ which I suggest is also a politics. This vision of love as life constitutes an ontological scandal rooted in failure insofar as the world does not receive it, and yet it continues in the enfolded practices of love that suffers failure to "abide in love." There is a mystical materialism in this vision of the "bride of Christ" begotten of the seed of the divine Word that becomes a literal extension of the incarnation in the lived world. Anabaptists may only recover it figurally in everyday practices that do not divide the ethical from the political from the religious.

Paul, I end my book with a gesture toward Dostoevsky just as he ended his most famous novel with an iconic gesture: the possibility of the new community of children that may flourish only if it forgives. Remember, the epilogue of *The Brothers Karamazov* is an icon of a worldly community or polis ordered by the slain lamb. It is an unveiling at the gravesite of young Ilyusha, whose suffering brings the gang of kids together who are liberated from their violent self-asserting eros by forgiveness so as to declare their love for one another and their remembered friend (who also caused suffering). Alyosha, whom the elder has commissioned to live the monastic life not in a cloister but in the everyday secular world (also an Anabaptist trope), gives a "speech at the stone"—that "heathenish stone" (what an idea, to bury the kid there "like some hanged man"!)—about the stone of stumbling, the vicious and merciless treatment of others, especially the most vulnerable.

³³ Kroeker, "Scandalous Displacements: 'Word' and 'Silent Light' in *Irma Voth*," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018): 89-100.

³⁴ See Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, NL: De Graaf, 1977).

As Søren Kierkegaard also points out, the messianic body is built on a rock of offence, of scandal—not least the scandal that the prescribed cure for a broken world in all its beauty seems infinitely worse than the illness it claims to heal. For Christian love in the everyday world, everything turns on how one responds to life-destroying deeds of offense rooted in self-assertion, possessive rivalries, retributive fantasies (all of which are intimately tied to the trials of human desire, love—both individual and socially mediated, and these are inseparable). Read that epilogue where young Kolya confesses: “It’s all so strange, Karamazov, such grief and then pancakes all of a sudden—how unnatural it all is in our religion!” Stories of suffering love educate us in how to seek out what is precious in the world and commit ourselves to loving that goodness more fully in all its lived mortal precarity.

Nancy Bedford

It’s Sunday and I don’t go to church anymore, so I have to find places to preach. I was going to end with that line. Then I got Nancy Bedford’s lovely response, late and on the run. She’s calling me to account on a sore spot that I wanted to disguise with lame humor. Let me end confessionally, then. I find myself living in institutional exile these days, as much in the church as in the university—though I continue to have professional obligations in the latter. I will respond with reference to one of the founders of my McMaster department of Religious Studies, George Grant, and his relation to Simone Weil, who has become one of my cherished mentors on living in diaspora within messianic bonds that hold across de-institutionalized practices of sacramental love.

Grant was a critic of the technocratic historicism/progressivism of liberal modernity in whose disincarnating grip we remain firmly grasped. For Grant it is Weil who gets us closest to the theological question of incarnation and disincarnation. Here is Grant’s claim: “In the full sense of the word she was incarnate in the twentieth century—that is, she knew it not only as an observer, but its afflictions became her flesh.”³⁵ Grant could not have said this without having Paul’s words in Colossians 1:24-25: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in

³⁵ George Grant, “Simone Weil,” in *The George Grant Reader*, ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), 251.

Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, of which I became a *diakonos* according to the divine economy." Paul considers this to be the economy of divine mystery revealed in the crucified Christ, a mystery to which Weil was deeply attuned, even to the point of not being baptized or taking the Roman Catholic eucharist—so sacramental was she! I say that with what Kierkegaard called the passion of faith, not the detachment of irony. That is, the sacraments may not be exclusivistic—sociologically, doctrinally, or on the grounds of any other immanent reductionism; they are not under human control as possessions. The question then becomes for Weil how to participate in this economy without a possessive imagination fettered in the cave of the social Beast (as she calls it, following Plato) by an "I." For her this is possible only through the cruciform process of kenosis.

No theological or doctrinal formula can penetrate the depths of this mystery; it can only be lived in obedience to the one who displays the distance love must cross to redeem the world in redemptive suffering. Weil is not offended by the scandalous mystery of foolish messianic materialism, and for that reason she displays the offence of the gospel, also in the refusal to countenance the illusory optimism and pleasure-inducing fantasies of technological progressivism, the god of our age. That offence is also required if the invented Christian God who smiles on us and our self-contented safe religious techné unable to face up to reality can be identified as the Christendom idolatry it has become—unable to suffer, unable to die, and therefore unable to be reborn to real life. Unable, that is, to do battle with the god of this (and of every) age. Weil was very attuned to this.

It will be impossible here for me to convey the divine mystery of kenosis that becomes humanly incarnate as a slave. Weil says: "We must get rid of the illusion of possessing time. We must become incarnate. Man has to perform *l'acte de s'incarner*, for he is *désincarné* by his imagination. What comes to us from Satan is our imagination."³⁶ The only way to do this is to likewise empty ourselves, literally uproot ourselves from clinging to false divinity that imagines we possess anything. This is what the cross is for Weil, "*crux*" (the curse-word of criminals and prostitutes in the ancient world³⁷) as the death

³⁶ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln, NB: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1997), 102-103.

³⁷ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Cross*, trans. John

that uproots our desire from false objects of possession, in order to liberate attached energy for a loving attunement to the true relationship of things.³⁸ Only affliction, which is our lived experience of slavery to the suffering of the cross, can accomplish this incarnation. “My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me,” says Jesus in John 4:34. “There is no good apart from this capacity” says Weil,³⁹ and by it she refers to the Eucharistic exchange at the heart of real life: “God did not only make himself flesh for us once, every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and to be consumed by him. Reciprocally, by fatigue, affliction, and death, man is made matter and is consumed by God. How can we refuse this reciprocity?”⁴⁰ This is in fact the messianic meaning of work in John 4:34—“Time entering into the body. Through work man turns himself into matter, as Christ does . . . Work is like a death,”⁴¹ and it begins by taking the form of the slave without rights, without a possessed identity, without an imagined self, without attention to the future fruits of my action which are anyway not in my control.

Attention in these carnal ways may help relate us religiously to the beauty of the world: attention to the real world such that the ego, the “I”, disappears and simply dwells in the mortal moment. Here we become aware of the limit between the mortal and the immortal, the passage of eternal divine love in a world that is passing away. To discern this requires a mortification of the flesh symbolized in all sacramental attention and makes way for love. Grant loved Weil’s love of George Herbert’s “Love III”—“You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’ So I did sit and eat”—but it is a love born of affliction, a humble love that serves the lowly created things forgotten and despised by the grandiose visions of the techno-imagination. This is what it means to be a part of the body of Christ incarnate in the daily life of a suffering world.

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Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81, cf. 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 235.