

REVELATION: MIRROR OF OUR PASSION, GOAL OF OUR LONGING

By CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND

WE LIKE OUR RELIGION to be kind, gentle and non-violent, a soothing balm on our troubled world. Religious leaders are expected to be no firebrands. Rather they should encourage the healing of society's ills—albeit without any radical shift in power relations. In their authoritative writings, love and care are the characteristics which are most acceptable. Purple passages like 1 Corinthians 13 and the parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son evoke that pleasure at having found the 'essence of religion'. Other emotions like anger, vindictiveness, are less acceptable and we prefer to put distance between ourselves and the reality of such feelings within us. Scripture itself is full of those harsher realities. Accounts of the blanket destruction of cities and communities in passages like 1 Samuel 15 and Deuteronomy 20,16–18 we prefer to ignore or argue have been transcended by the more excellent way of Jesus and the New Testament. The problem is, of course, that the authoritative writings of the New Dispensation are also full of violence, not least the book of Revelation. We may find ourselves wanting to echo Rudolf Bultmann's description of it as 'weakly christianized Judaism'.¹ But can such a judgement be allowed to stand when so-called Christian civilization has been responsible for the most brutal and dehumanizing moments in human history? May it not be that part of the problem is that the violence and harshness which we find in Revelation and echoed from time to time in other parts of the New Testament we would rather ignore and so deny a part of the reality of ourselves and our world? Possibly it is all too close to what we are really like for comfort? A book like Revelation reminds us too much of ourselves and our attitudes buried for the most part beneath a veneer of respectability. It may just question whether in fact we are the kind, gentle, loving religious people we like to think of ourselves and see in others. I

want to explore in this essay some of these questions by arguing that Revelation, including its less palatable parts, is an essential component in the construction of our Christian identity in the contemporary world.

Reading Alice Miller's *The drama of being a child*² was an uncomfortable but revealing experience for me as I am sure it has been for many others. That book describes how sensitive people can often grow up in families where their individuality with all its passion and aggression may not have been entirely expected or allowed. Instead it was made to conform to meeting the needs of parents who themselves in their turn were not valued as individuals, and as a result seek in their own children validation and a compensation for what they did not receive as children. They want to find in their children persons who will not threaten them. So a false self develops in the child which is the persona formed to fit the needs of the parent for emotional validation. The conforming child who is 'good' and does what is expected represses feelings of rage and anger which are the feelings of the true self and which are sacrificed to the fulfilment of the expectations of the parent. This true self is submerged, driven 'underground', and remains only in vague touch with the public persona, the mask of respectability which society in the form of the parents demands. That means that the child and in due course the adult are going to be out of touch with true feelings, all the time seeking to polish the mask of respectability and achievement. When the mask becomes tarnished and the goal to achievement thwarted, then the persona so skilfully moulded to suit others proves inadequate to cope with the pent-up feelings, so long neglected. Thus, a very needy and inarticulate self emerges. That stunted child in all of us with all its passions needs to learn to speak, to remind the external person of deeply seated needs which can no longer be denied. The ambition and sense of achievement, however great, can no longer compensate for the passions of the child. Radical disappointment only opens up the futility of supposing that the mask can for ever disguise the reality within. Once the mask slips the anger and chaotic feelings pent up for years may spill out in a torrent of apparent irrationality. They are unmanageable because they do not conform. They do not speak the language of respectability or carefully crafted discourse—and yet there is a wealth of communication here, powerful, real and demanding to be understood. We ignore it at our peril. For Alice Miller, intellectual understanding is only a

small part of getting in touch with that frightened, angry child within. She explored healing and reconciliation between the adult and the child within through painting. Thereby, she says, 'I have been able to give the silent child of long ago the right to her own language and her own story'. Now she refuses to be dissuaded from remembering, from perceiving what really happened and reporting it with ever growing clarity.³

It is something of that insight that I want to appropriate in seeking to understand the character of the violence in the book of Revelation. Religion, like our personal lives, has gained a mask of respectability to make it acceptable to the economically and politically powerful: there is more than a grain of truth in the view that religion is the opium of the people. The mask of respectability covers up more than it reveals, particularly the unacceptable parts of our world and those feelings of resentment, vengeance, anger, deceitfulness and deep desire of which we are ashamed. The significance of a book like Revelation is that it refuses to allow us to live for ever with the mask covering up the reality of what is going on. Often in strange and highly unconventional imagery it presses us to look at our reality, for the most part hidden, so that we may continue to think that things are not too bad after all. It 'shreds' as the North American scholar Wayne Meeks has put it 'and rips away that common sense (i.e. the taken for granted consensus about the way things are) with as much violence as that with which John sees the sky itself removed.'⁴ There is a consistent refusal to allow the reader to take anything for granted. The letters to the seven churches (Apoc 2-3) consistently challenge the complacent Christian as well as giving succour to the faltering. For example, those in Ephesus are asked to find again their first love (2,4) and those in Laodicea are challenged to think again about their arrogant assessment of their worth (3,17f). The Roman imperial power is symbolized by a beast and the wealth and splendour by the whore of Babylon.⁵

Revelation holds a mirror up to the reality of the evil and destruction in our world. If we are lulled into thinking that we live in a world where suffering and pain and the abuse of human rights are absent, then we do not really live in God's world. It is a distortion of reality to suppose that we can be true to God and anaesthetized to the pain around us. Revelation does not *create* an image of barbarity. What it does is remind us of that barbarity of which we are a part and in which we collude. We do not like to

be reminded of that possibility and salve our consciences by blaming the book for the violence we cannot see within and around us.

More problematic, however, is the fact that Revelation seems to portray death and destruction as in some sense coming from God. The sequence of seals, trumpets and bowls is initiated by the Lamb taking the heavenly book (Apoc 5;6; 8-9 and 16). Two things can be said about this. First of all, in the context of the book the wrath of God against a recalcitrant world is a stark reminder of God's justice. Evil and injustice will not always prevail. The God of the covenant is not one who will allow the cry of the weak and the oppressed to go unheard: 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their task masters' (Exod 3,7). It might offend our consciences to think that God can take sides and that death and destruction may be the lot of some. The reality which the Apocalypse shows us is that, in a disordered world, death and destruction are the lot of millions and the putting right of wrongs demands a seismic shift of cosmic proportions which *will* happen even if humankind does not repent.

Revelation reminds us in a disordered world that there are values and actions which are intolerable. The liberal conscience which demands a theology in which God is equally patient with the oppressor and the oppressed is impatient with Revelation. Here is a book where God seems to take sides. Revelation compels us to consider that a God who is tolerant of injustice and whose love for all means a reluctance to take sides against oppression and injustice is not a God of the covenant who pledges to be concerned with the orphan and the widow. It resonates with the cry for vindication not only as a way of satisfying the longings of the oppressed (Apoc 6,9) but also of enabling us to own the hope for vindication of that multitude who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Apoc 7,14). To long for a time when 'they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more' (7,16) is an aspiration which we must learn to acknowledge as a right for all humanity. Any impatience which is felt (6,9) is a mark of dissatisfaction and a sign of impatience with a world that is out of order and which must not remain so.

John's image of the Messiah as a slain Lamb is a telling reminder about the different way of being and different set of priorities. The expectation that John shares is of a Lion of Judah who will conquer. That is not totally rejected as 19,11ff makes plain. Nevertheless that conquering Lion turns out to be a Lamb. It is that kind of

weak being which receives messianic dignity, thereby showing in the starkest possible way the contrast between God's values and those of humanity. The Lamb who had been slain by evil men contrasts with the different and distorted values of humankind. There can be no reconciliation between the two. One has to be overcome by the other. The gospel message is that the way of life of the Lamb is wrath and judgement on all that oppose it; there can be no accommodation with evil, and nothing can stand in the way of its fulfilment. In the imagery of judgement, however, the wrath of the Lamb is not that of the sword. The wicked find themselves overcome with the breath of his mouth (19,15 cf Isai 11,4). It is the words of Jesus which stand as a lively reproach to the ways which lead to death and convict those who refuse to accept them.

One of the reasons that Revelation is such a difficult book to read is that its panorama is too big for most of us to cope with. However hard we try we cannot tame its message and the scope of its concern. It compels us to recognize the vastness of God's concerns and the scope of God's justice. We would prefer a spirituality which concentrated on our individuality. We may concentrate on the letters to the seven churches which fall more easily within our grasp with their ecclesiastical concerns but thereby we scratch the surface of the Apocalypse. It is the threat of overwhelming passion that refuses to be tied down which is a poignant reminder of the chaotic passions within ourselves and our world. Revelation refuses to allow us to narrow our vision or to be anaesthetized to that passion. It rubs our noses in it not only by its message but also by its form. The very unusualness of its language and its imagery opens up another world, one that is both dark and hopeful. We would prefer to believe that that dark side did not exist. It does; and we must face up to it if we are to be truly reflecting the scope of God's concern. We would also prefer down-to-earth language which calls a spade a spade and speaks to us directly of our everyday concerns. But these are too narrow and too petty. Revelation reminds us of that. That everyday, commonsense approach to things is relativized by the insistence that there is another way to view things. It is a way which is not new: Revelation picks up the threads of the apocalyptic discourse in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. The striking imagery demands that we see the prosaic and ordinary as in fact extraordinarily threatening to God's way. Harmless words and actions are shown

as of ultimate significance. Revelation's symbolism refuses to allow us to remain indifferent. Even the syntax of the book refuses to conform to the basic rules of Greek grammar. It is as if even here what we take for granted in the way in which we order our language is subverted. By sitting loose to the rules of what is basic to all 'normal' existence—language—it refuses to allow the reader to remain complacent about the eternal significance of basic human thoughts and actions. The reality of our anger and passion needs to be brought to our attention, just as the consequences of ignoring human responsibility for denial of God's justice. There may be a variety of ways of doing that. The beasts symbolizing the powers of evil and the defenceless, gentle Lamb are evocative ways of bringing to the surface the horror of personal and corporate feelings of destructive power and the way to their transcendence. Unless we can recognize the sub-human urges which have led to so much destruction, then we shall continue to disinfect the instruments and language of destruction with the deceitful words and phrases that we have used to cover up our preparations of human annihilation. We constantly need to be reminded of the reality of our discourse and notions which may seem to be constructive and relatively harmless whereas in fact it reflects an attitude which is *sub*-bestial, never mind sub-human, as no animal would contemplate the virulence of our destructive instincts.

We should never forget that Revelation is a text, a product of human imagination, albeit one that claims a privileged access to divine realities. Its mysterious character reflects the mystery of man and woman created in God's image. It is a reflection that is as partial as it is true. Revelation celebrates God's justice and the mystery of suffering and death. In our reading we are asked to share in that: to participate in the drama of reading is to participate in an expression of our feelings of passion, hatred, longing and vindication as well as sorrow. All these can be brought to our consciousness as we share in the eschatological drama. We may want to write off the book as barbaric. But the reality is that it is truly human in its scope. It does not ask us to engage in barbarism or violence but draws us into the process of recognizing those feelings which are too big to manage and for us to recognize their enormity and their power. It challenges our pretence to be nice people by ripping away the mask and persuading us to recognize that darker side of things: what we have become and the peril of

staying as we are, while at the same time feeding our aspirations that things may be different.

For those who hope and struggle for another kind of world Revelation is a necessary demonstration of the content of hope. In a situation where hope would fail and dreams have to be entirely denied and subordinated to what passes for reality which also opposes every ideal, a visionary text like Revelation can offer both an escape and an inspiration. If it abstracts from the struggle, it ends up being merely the cry of a heartless world, the opium of the people. Yet we need it when we feel lonely and bereft, and there is no one to help, when we feel helpless in the face of overwhelming odds. Thus, we can increase our confidence in the saving hand from beyond which can empower us to continue and not leave us passively to await the fate that befalls us.

The Church has long recognized the importance of owning the whole spectrum of our feelings within the context of the liturgy. Hence we read the psalms which embrace their celebration of God's tenderness and deliverance as well as the fierce outbursts of pain and the demand for vengeance. We are (rightly, in my view) unwilling to include words like those which conclude Psalm 137 because they express sentiments which we would not always own. I do not want as a matter of course to pronounce as blessed the one who takes Babylon's children and dashes them against the rocks or be the righteous who 'will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked' (Psalm 58,10). In reciting these words, however, in certain circumstances we might be true to our feelings whereas in avoiding them we may pander to a deceitfulness which would prefer that we did not feel thus. There are often going to be times when we need to own that sort of feeling in God's sight. To do it liturgically, in the context of the support and checks of the Body of Christ, is an appropriate way of dealing with our anger. To deny it and drive it underground is to risk it bursting out in actuality in a far more virulent form. To own our feelings and to talk about them is the start of healing; to deny them is the insidious process of heaping up a fire of resentment whose destructive capability knows no bounds. Reading and identifying with the pain of the manifestation of God's righteousness may be a way of persuading ourselves that we need to take seriously the power and importance of our darker longings and to put them in the context of the divine justice. Revelation reminds us that the darker side is not to (indeed, cannot) be hidden

from God, because God is in it. The clear message of Revelation 6ff with its tale of destruction and death is not apart from God, however much we might prefer to shield God from it. Of course, there is no easy answer to the problem of suffering and pain that such divine involvement suggests. But then a theology after Auschwitz and Hiroshima cannot escape wrestling with such human pain and the apparent reality of divine presence in the most cataclysmic and destructive events in history. A Christian theology which does not find itself stumbling again and again on the scandal of suffering has never taken seriously the scandal of the execution of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Reading of the wrath of God is to be made uncomfortable with the consequences of the manifestation of justice. That must always be so. We cannot remain complacent in the face of injustice nor expect to be unaffected in the process of restoring to right all that is wrong. How we go about that will necessarily stress the struggle involved but deny our right to act precipitately and violently ourselves in the process. Revelation countenances the pain of the upheaval which is necessary as the mighty are put down from their thrones but refuses a role as righteous executioners to those who would presume to have right on their side. They are not allowed that presumption which is itself a mark of that arrogance which is itself culpable in God's sight (Apoc 3,17f). Of course, we would prefer divinity not to be manifested in such cataclysmic terror as the book of Revelation depicts. Because of that we are driven to ask where God's love can be in all of this. There is no easy answer to this question. If Revelation tends to stress God's faithfulness to the covenant which favours the poor and the outcast, there is no lack of evidence of love: it is evident in the promise of salvation. If Revelation has chosen to stress the dark side of God's saving act it is in no sense alone in the New Testament in mentioning it. Paul in Romans is quite clear that God in Christ reconciling the world to God's self involves a manifestation of the divine righteousness which also encompasses action against the impiety of humanity, as Rom 1,16ff make clear. Sentimentality about the love of God forms no part of the Christian gospel. The good news for the poor is also a day of vengeance of our God (Isai 61,1ff; cf Lk 4, 16ff).

Gustavo Gutiérrez⁶ has compared the concern of European theology with the Latin American concerns. He says that post-Enlightenment Europe has spent its time seeking to make sense of

God's existence in a world come of age, whereas Latin Americans are concerned to make sense of the conviction that God is a loving parent of all humanity in a world where injustice and oppression prevail. That contrast with regard to theology applies just as much to the issue of God's love and justice. The European cannot cope with a God who might consign any one to wrath. It seems to diminish God's character and brings God down to the level of a mean vindictiveness. For many in the Third World, however, it is a question of how God can be true to the covenant which favours the outcast and oppressed when injustice goes unchecked, and the weak, the powerless and the poor continue to find themselves at the receiving end of the oppressive behaviour of the powerful. It is not surprising that Revelation is an important text for the poor. That is not so much because it promises vengeance but because it portrays a God who remains faithful with oppressed people even at the expense of the upheavals necessary to set the covenant between God and humanity right again. For God to leave things as they are in the hope that the oppressor may be turned is a denial of the character of God. The covenant to which God is committed and which is celebrated by Christians in the Eucharist involves an obligation: on God's side that the character of holiness and righteousness should be *seen* to be the case. Revelation portrays this by its protracted account of upheavals leading to the vindication of the righteous in the millennium. To identify with that kind of God means to be engaged in an upheaval both in oneself and in the world which will bring about change. That comes not by identification with violence but with the slaughtered Lamb. It will mean non-conformity and incurring the wrath of those who promote injustice: 'no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is the name of the beast or the number of its name' (Apoc 13, 17).

The forms of non-conformity will be many and various. Those who persist in their identification with the God of justice will not expect to be exempt from the chaos and destruction brought about by the upheavals in a fragmented world. They will not expect peace and quiet, however. They will not be left to get on with their own lives. They will be part of that process whereby the justice of God challenges and prompts repentance. In the case of the saints it will not be by force of arms but by patient identification with the testimony of Jesus (Apoc 14,12). They will bear the cost and look for vindication. They will know that the wrath of God is not a 'knee-jerk' reaction but is consistent with the pattern of

behaviour of a God who identifies with the oppressed and is consistently to be found alongside them. In reading Revelation we celebrate the character of that covenant God and recite promises of hope and longing for the vindication of that better way. If that celebration occasionally verges on gleeful gloating over the fate of the enemies (as, for example, so nearly is the case in 14,11) it is done in the context of the outpouring of emotions in which the tangle of deep-seated longing and loathing is expressed and its origin recognized. Once expressed, the feelings may be seen for what they are. To pretend, as fearful and fragile human beings, that our tiredness and longing are not matched by feelings of satisfaction when the goal is reached is to engage in that pretence which the book of Revelation continuously reminds us is inappropriate for the people of God.

When we hold up a mirror to ourselves, we want to see an accurate reflection. Of course, we would like to think that the image is pleasing both to ourselves and to others. If it is not, often we might prefer not to look. I suspect that reading the book of Revelation has that effect. It reminds us of passions, rage and longings which we would prefer to ignore. We can use its strangeness as an excuse for not allowing it to reflect something of our reality and in particular the consequences of our anger. But we need to be clear that it is an excuse : the reality of ourselves and our world is every bit as chaotic and nasty as Revelation reveals. Claiming to reflect the image of Christ involves us in recognizing also the extent to which the way of the Messiah is neglected or distorted. Surely we need to be reminded of that and provoked into recognizing reality before it is too late? No other biblical book can better help us to do that than Revelation.⁷

NOTES

¹ *Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1952), vol ii, p 175.

² *The drama of being a child* (London, 1983).

³ Alice Miller: *Pictures of childhood* (London, 1986), p 17.

⁴ *The moral world of the first Christians* (London, 1987), p 145-6.

⁵ We might have reservations about the negative image of a woman here. Rome is described as an oppressor like the one of old (Babylon oppressed the Jewish people and led them into exile) whose wealth gained by self-abuse is a mark of disorder. Prostitution is a symptom of a disordered world. It is a sign of the abuse and oppression suffered by women at the hands of economically more powerful men and a sign of the lengths which women have to go to ensure their survival and compete in a world where they have no power. As such it

enables the reader to understand how the wealth of Rome comes by ways other than those which God's justice requires in a world where God's shalom prevails. The wealth comes from injustice and the disorder caused to millions (particularly 18,13). It is a telling reminder that the world power is an oppressor and a place of exile not one of comfort and real prosperity.

⁶ *The power of the poor in history* (London, 1983).

⁷ See further on some of the themes in this book A.Y. Collins: *Revelation. Crisis and catharsis: the power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, 1984).