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IDEOLOGY AND APOCALYPTIC

A review of Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009. 206 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 1606081993.

Postliberalism, which was prominent within Anglophone theological discourse for the last quarter of the twentieth century, seems to have faded away. This is partly due to the rise of "Radical Orthodoxy," and partly due to the relative repetitiveness of the efforts now coming out of the postliberal trajectory. With the exception of Stanley Hauerwas' continuing work (more on this below), there is very little in recent postliberal theology that comes close to its past dynamism. Nathan Kerr's recent book, however, has complicated this summation—here we find something new in postliberalism.

There is good reason to locate Kerr within a postliberal context, for he develops his argument by way of conversation with this movement's standard figures. He begins with Ernst Troeltsch, who of course is no postliberal, but this is precisely the point: Troeltsch's liberalism provides the necessary supplement, the point by which a contrast may be drawn. Troeltsch, Kerr argues, is to be opposed primarily for his inability to make Christianity into something that departs from "the given, immanent processes of 'history'" (19). Christianity, insofar as it aids and abets these processes, serves an ideological function—and the reason it assumes this function is that it has abandoned its essentially apocalyptic character. Right here we have the basic move of Kerr's argument: Christianity, in order to cease being ideological, must recover its apocalyptic character.

This fundamental opposition between ideology and apocalyptic orients the entirety of the book. Karl Barth is distinguished by his apocalyptic Christology, and thus marks the emergence of a new tendency in theology—but Barth achieves separation from Troeltsch at a significant cost. This is because while Troeltsch may have collapsed Christianity to an immanentized teleology, his motivation for doing so was to become adequate to the intractability of history's contingency and particularity. Barth then is a kind of inversion of Troeltsch, for

in reaffirming the apocalyptic he tends to ignore the need to establish a link between the apocalyptic and the particularity of the historical. In order to address this problem, the apocalyptic baton is relayed to Hauerwas, who is to be recognized for his insistence on the need for a politics that embodies Barth's apocalyptic Christology—that is, for a church. Nonetheless, Kerr takes Hauerwas to task for collapsing Christology into ecclesiology. Hauerwas, he claims, is overly determined by an opposition to liberalism, an opposition that leads him to make the church into a double of the very sort of political body that Christian apocalyptic means to resist.

Kerr turns finally to John Howard Yoder, who enables us to envision what Kerr calls an "apocalypticization of history" (160). Yoder, like Hauerwas, wants to provide a link between Barth's apocalyptic Christology and a political embodiment of this apocalyptic that is thoroughly historical and particular. Decisive in this regard is that Yoder foregrounds the link between Jesus and history. What matters, then, is not universality but singularity, or more exactly the relation between the singularity of Jesus and the excessiveness of history in its own singularities. This sets the stage for Kerr's final chapter, which seeks to recast politics in terms of mission. The church is not a pre-existent body that is political in itself, the church is rather the effect of mission, of the encounter between Jesus and history. Kerr is only able to provide a sketch of the logic of this missional church, but he makes clear that such a logic must be one of dispossession.

The opposition between ideology and apocalyptic, I have already mentioned, is the central feature of this book—fortunately, it is also the book's most provocative feature. This opposition certainly provides the cipher according to which Kerr is able to re-write—and to radicalize—the postliberal tradition. He uses it to demonstrate, rather impressively, the limits of postliberalism as it now stands. But, less impressively, this opposition simultaneously seems to demarcate the limits of Kerr's own thought. Put simply, if Kerr succeeds in providing a theology of politics, or an apocalyptically theological critique of politics, he fails to imagine, much less to provide, a politics of theology, or a political critique of apocalyptic theology.

Let us start from the ideological side of Kerr's opposition, and this means observing that his concept of ideology is ultimately confused. He does hazard three attempts at giving form to this concept. First, he claims that ideology is found in the "authority of history"—ideology is evident when "history becomes the artifice which produces, and thus protects and encourages, the endurance of that institution which alone guarantees the attainment of freedom: the nation state" (3). Ideology thus resides in an understanding of history as universal, necessary, and auto-teleological. Second, he associates ideology with Constantinianism, which "loosely names a certain set of ideologically bound theological assumptions" (6). Whereas critique of ideology seems, in Kerr's first determination, to involve a defense of historical contingency and particularity against teleological necessity and universality, it seems, in his second determination, to call for a defense of Christian claims against history.

These two determinations are not unrelated, but it is not clear exactly how they might cohere. Is Kerr claiming that ideology conceals historical contingency and particularity, or is he claiming that it conceals Christian truth? His loyalties appear to lie with the latter, as is indicated in his assertion that “Constantinianism proceeds as if what happened in the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus had not profoundly altered history, and it provides for the church a way of acting politically in history which is not entirely determined by the lordship of Jesus Christ” (7). Ideology is thus defined as anything that precludes action “entirely determined” by Jesus’ “lordship.” But is not the demand that historical action be entirely determined by Jesus incredibly vulnerable to the accusation of ideology? Kerr does not explain how a critique of ideology in virtue of historical contingency and particularity and a critique of ideology in the name of Jesus entail one another. Perhaps he does not think that they are mutually entailing, but if that is the case then he would need to give a much more precise definition of ideology, one that equates the ideological with anything that precludes political action not “entirely determined” by Jesus. Notably, such a definition (let us call it the “Christian” definition) would make any non-Christian advocate of historical contingency and particularity into an ideological agent—and that is precisely the problem, for a definition of ideology that functions in this manner is itself ideological.

In order to clarify why such a “Christian” definition of ideology remains ideological, let us consider Kerr’s third attempt to explicitly define the concept. Here he has in mind “the basic sense of the term: it orients history towards very specific political and social purposes by serving as a necessary postulate to secure the development of history towards its proper *telos*” (10). If we take this definition as “basic,” we face two immediate consequences. First, it is possible to be anti-ideological without being Christian. But Kerr is not interested in this possibility. Second, one could imagine Christianity as an excellent exemplar of ideology. Of course, Kerr would claim that this is true only where Christianity is Constantinian, for insofar as Christianity is properly apocalyptic, it refuses any telos. This is uncontroversial in a facile sense, but it is not obviously true in a deeper sense. I say this because even if there is always some apocalyptic openness in Kerr’s missional church, this is still a church that must “articulate the lived embodiment of [Christ’s] lordship as a sign of the Spirit’s ongoing conversion of history to the coming reign of God” (16-17). Is it possible to call for a “conversion” of history to Christ’s lordship while simultaneously positioning oneself as anti-ideological? It is certainly difficult to imagine such a possibility. But even presuming that it is possible, one has a lot of work to do—work that involves, at the very least, giving a basic and coherent definition of ideology. After all, the primary affirmative concept of the book (apocalyptic) gains much of its value from being anti-ideological.

Before addressing the apocalyptic, however, it is necessary to clarify three ancillary matters. First, Kerr might wish to opt out of my critique. He could simply maintain the “Christian” definition of ideology. In doing so, however, he would not only have to give an incredibly idiosyncratic account of ideology, he

would also have to abandon his desire for a “politically subversive encounter between ‘church’ and ‘world’” (20). One cannot be politically subversive while maintaining a restricted definition of ideology.

In this regard, and second, we should recall that Louis Althusser, to whom must be attributed the most advanced determination of ideology, located the paradigmatic instance of ideological formation in theology. He says “that religious ideology is indeed addressed to individuals, in order to ‘transform them into subjects,’ by interpellating the individual.”¹ Continuing, he observes that “there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God.”² This logic bears more than a passing resemblance to Kerr’s assertion—which he takes to be anti-ideological—that a transcendent God, through the person of Jesus, effects the “*transformation* of the historically contingent as such” (131). In other words, Kerr’s presumption that the historically contingent cannot be expressed as such, that it must be “transformed” by the transcendent, is not at all a politically subversive, anti-ideological version of Christianity. On the contrary, it is a precise exemplification of what Althusser, nearly forty years ago, defined as ideology.

Third, there is the question of Hauerwas, who has always made it a point of pride never to have written a “big book,” one which would systematize his thought. Kerr, we might say, has written a “big chapter” on his behalf, a chapter proposing that Hauerwas’ emphasis on the political body of Jesus (the church) is ultimately ideological, for it makes a particular form of life into the key to universality. Yet what Kerr misses is that one can easily understand Hauerwas as a kind of pluralist. If Hauerwas commends commitment to a particular form of embodiment, it is not in order to subjugate or to encompass other forms of embodiment, it is rather to facilitate intensive encounters with these other forms. Central to Hauerwas’ endeavor is an attempt to embody Christian claims at the same time that one encounters other embodied claims. Such pluralism witnesses to a kind of vulnerability—for Christianity must then compete with, and possibly be demonstrated as inferior to, other forms of life—that is lacking in Kerr’s straightforward demand that the world be converted to and transformed by Christ’s lordship. Hauerwas, in other words, lacks the sort of presumption that Kerr’s injunction involves.

Let us now turn to the concept of apocalyptic. Kerr, when introducing this term, insists on its connection to God’s transcendence and claims that it has to do with “God’s ‘invasive action’ with relation to the world” (13). There is something immediately problematic about posing apocalyptic in terms of a transcendently motivated invasive action, for it engenders a rather strong disjunction between the divine and the worldly. Kerr is clearly concerned with making the politics of Jesus coincident with the contingency and particularity of history, but it is hard

¹Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 120.

²Althusser, 121.

to see how the language of invasion is able to address such a concern. His Jesus may be committed to these contingencies and particularities, but only under the condition that they are the object of a transcendent invasion. At stake here is the degree to which Jesus may be described as "secular," where this term is strictly understood to name the world's manifest contingency, particularity, and temporality. Yoder always affirmed that Jesus stands with the secular, over against the "religious," which is to say that worldliness and time are constitutive of any expression of a politics of Jesus.³ Yet in what sense should we understand this constitution? Kerr, in advocating for the dispossessive nature of the apocalyptic, avers "that there is no *ecclesia* as such that can by-pass 'the secular'" (190). But this refusal to bypass the secular actually ends up turning the secular *into* a bypass, or a necessary detour of the transcendent, for being "bound" to this world is the means by which we are "truly gathered into the apocalyptic 'sending' that is Jesus himself" (190). In other words, the world is important not in itself—recall that Kerr enjoins the "*transformation* of the historically contingent as such"—but only in the sense that it provides the theater for a gathering into Jesus. Encounter with "flux and contingency" is constitutive in a very controlled manner, it is relevant only because it allows us "in our own historicities [to be] brought into conformity with the truth of Jesus' own 'apocalyptic historicity'" (92). Historical flux and contingency are ultimately valued, then, in virtue of their ability to conform to a transcendent invasion of the historical. This is not an affirmation of the secular, it is rather a sublation of the secular.

Apocalyptic, when it understood in Kerr's terms of transcendence, invasion, and transformation, is not the enemy of ideology, it is instead a doubling of ideology. We might say, in fact, that Kerr's apocalyptic is all the more ideological insofar as it presents itself as antagonistic to ideology. It is ideology immunizing itself from critique. To critique ideology is to seek to unhinge the historically particular and contingent—that is, the secular as I have defined it—from the coordinates that claim to capture it. Kerr is certainly opposed to one kind of capture, but this is in virtue of another kind of capture: he refuses "ideological" coordinates by introducing another set of coordinates. The problem with this latter set of coordinates is that they are not constituted by the world, they are instead constituted from above. They invade the uncoordinated world in order to transform this world into conformity with them. It is not that it is impossible to pursue a Jesus in alliance with a fundamentally secular constitution, or an anti-ideological Jesus that would affirm the liberation of the historically contingent and particular as such. It is just that this pursuit is lacking in Kerr's argument.

Kerr's apocalyptic is inextricable from ideology, but his is not the final word on apocalyptic as such. It would be helpful, I think, to distinguish between two kinds of apocalyptic. Drawing on the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, we might call these majoritarian apocalyptic and minoritarian

³For an account of secularity that strongly departs from Kerr's claims, see my essay, "Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular," in Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner, eds., *The New Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), pgs. 271-293.

apocalyptic. The former orients apocalyptic around the transcendent, it makes apocalyptic into something that comes into history from beyond, in order to coordinate history with the major apocalyptic event. The latter pursues a different track, for it seeks not a once for all apocalypse, but rather an ongoing, secular apocalypticism. A minoritarian apocalyptic breaks with "History" not through an invasion of the historical, but rather through an affirmation of the becoming of history. Such an apocalyptic lies in historical flux and contingency, in a particularity that always breaks open the attempts to coordinate the historical into "History." There is, then, an apocalyptic manner of resisting the ideology of "History," but it is not found in something that transcends history. Apocalyptic resistance lies in the world itself, the world in its becoming, in its secularity. These are minor resistances, for they do not presume to transcend the historical, but that is precisely their strength: they are able to resist "History" precisely by being historical. It is possible, in fact, to see Jesus' own existence as belonging to this sort of secular, minoritarian resistance. This is the sort of possibility that will need to be experimented with—beyond, and in many ways against, Kerr's formulations—in order to conceive of a Christian apocalyptic that is genuinely anti-ideological.

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