

APOCALYPSE (4)¹ APOCLYPTIC TIMES

The word “apocalyptic” is often used rather loosely, when we speak about catastrophic or overwhelming events which might remind us of things described in the last book of the Bible. In fact, hardly anything which happens to us today has this apocalyptic signature – what (forcefully) disrupts our more or less placid life is hardly “apocalyptic”, even if nowadays we use the word for such events. When we look more precisely, we must acknowledge that only what happens when the heavens begin to make their presence felt can be called “apocalyptic”, that is: when our own human world and our world of earth is being shaken up by as yet unknown, “revealing” forces.

This is what the “Apocalypse to John” is about, when after an introduction and a first vision it describes a series of events triggered off by the opening of seven seals, by the sounding of seven trumpets and the pouring out of seven bowls of wrath. We have already looked at this apocalyptic process by focusing on the Writer, on the Book and on the so-called “Second Coming”. Let’s here look at what we can find out about the process itself.

An important moment in the course of the unfolding apocalypse has come when the 24 elders who sit on their thrones before God, at the beginning of the Third Throne Vision, when the 7th Trumpet has sounded, state that He “has begun to reign” (11:17). Now, the forces of adversary in earnest show themselves in battles of various kinds: the heavenly dragon and the beast rising out of the sea as well as the beast rising out of the land. Another such moment comes when, after the pouring out of the seven bowls and the sacking of Babylon, at the beginning of the Sixth Throne Vision, the voice of a great multitude resumes with another Hallelujah, crying that “The Lord our God the Almighty reigns” (19:6). Now the die is really cast, and the White Rider and his armies begin to mop up the forces of evil, who with Death and Hades eventually all end up in the “lake of fire that burns with sulphur” (19:20, 20:2, 10 and 14).

Decisive moments of the apocalyptic process happen when the Godhead takes steps to overcome the forces of evil, of adversary, which have taken over parts of the world. What goes before, through seals and early trumpets, is all in preparation of such final apocalyptic confrontations.

We can look at one of Rudolf Steiner’s “Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts”² for help, to understand more about the stages of overcoming cosmic adversaries. In the aphorism numbered 112 in this series, he states that the Divine Spiritual in cosmos manifests itself in the following stages:

- [1] By way of its innate, very own, Being;
- [2] By way of the Revelation of its Being;
- [3] By way of Activity, when the Being has drawn back from revealing;
- [4] By its manifestations itself, when the Divine is not anymore present in the “universe of manifestations”, but only in its forms.

When we apply words of the *Apocalypse* to this concept we would, speaking of “Being”, speak of the “One who is, who was and who is to come” (1:4, 1:8 and 4:8) – the same who, when he began “to reign” apocalyptically, is found to be the “One who is and who was” (11:17 and 16:15), as his future, as one might say, is fully identical with the process which has now begun.

The Beast carrying the woman, with its seven heads and ten horns (17:7, see 13:1), on the contrary “was and is not, and is about to ...”. It does not really exist, and has only a limited future. Once the forces of adversary are engaged in the apocalyptic process, we see that they are increasingly being thwarted and “put in their place”:

- [4] In the realm of manifestations, after they had begun to trouble human beings on earth (9:1ff, 11:7);

¹ After a presentation in the Boston Christian Community congregation, August 5, 2007. Edited by Muriel Morris.

² A series of short articles appearing in the weekly *Das Goetheanum* between January 13, 1924 and April 12, 1925 (the last two posthumously) and from February 17, 1924 accompanied by these numbered “Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts”, meant as suggestions and stimuli for those working in anthroposophical settings, numbers 112-114 dated November 2, 1924.

[3] Through their activity, while they are making haste to enslave human beings within their realms (Ch 12/13, 15/16);

[2] Because in the sphere of revelation, they are not “present” at all and can only fall short (Ch 17/18);

[1] Whereas to their being, they will ultimately be relegated to the Lake of Fire (Ch 20).

This is what “apocalypse” is about. Everything else has to do with indications that something is going to happen, in the way John the Baptist proclaimed that “the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the heavens has come near”, while he called for a “change of heart and mind” – calls taken up by Jesus himself.

Such phenomena we might call “apocalyptic stirrings”, and far too often among people they generate fears that “apocalypse” is already at hand.

Apocalyptic Stirrings

Thus, we are in fact not speaking of things “apocalyptic” when dealing with everything which since the Fall belongs to existence on earth, as described in Matthew 24 and parallel chapters in other gospels:

- hate, killings, wars and tribulations, “spin” and deceit among human beings, and so on
- wars, famines, earthquakes on and in the earth itself.

Such are, as the gospels say, “the beginnings of the birth-pangs” only – indications that something is stirring (Mt 24:8, Mk 13:8), something like that rattle in the car which disturbs one when driving, because one can’t find what causes it.

One effect such a “disturbing rattle” may have on us, such stirrings, is that we begin to pay attention, become more aware. In the gospels we indeed are exhorted again and again to “be aware”, to “be awake”, to “watch” and “take heed” (in Mt 24:42-43, Mk 13:34-35, 37, in Luke 21:36-37 as well as in Mt 25:13).

That rattle in the car may be important, or not – what is stirring in our world is the kingdom of the heavens, the kingdom of God coming near, slowly and gently beginning the process of unsettling settled existence.

When the Christ came near and Jesus started to walk on earth and the first stirrings had begun, he and John the Baptist before him told people that the only way to meet this “rattling” was to “change heart and mind” (to “repent”, using old church language). The first step would be to “go inward”, shutting the door on the world outside (advice given those going to pray), in order to find ways and means fully to orientate oneself anew in the world. Whoever doesn’t take such steps, might at some point of the apocalyptic process find that it would be already too late to begin re-orientating oneself in such a way (Rev 9:20-21, 16:9-11 and later 21:8 and 22:15).

Those who have taken the trouble to try to “change their heart and mind” will also become aware of what happens in cosmos, as they will perceive the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven. The Seven Letters written to the angels of the seven congregations in the first vision speak of this “going inward”, to come to terms with oneself and to be able to meet what is to come.

The Seven Letters

We may read these seven letters as a preparation for “becoming apocalyptic” ourselves, for as it were learning to “tune-in” to the spiritual situation which develops when our world situation starts to become apocalyptic: that we may learn to deal with apocalyptic phenomena. He who speaks the words recorded here begins his letters by revealing various specific aspects of his appearance as “a son of man”. Not so much descriptions of his let’s say his “outer manifestation” themselves, the way he is clothed for instance, but more where activity goes out from him, to which he adds his essential description of himself when speaking to John. From the fourth letter onwards he announces himself also through other aspects of his apocalyptic being and activity; in the sixth and seventh letter, no memories of the first “son of man” vision remain.

When beginning to speak the words of the first letter, the One who appeared to him like a son of man shows himself in the setting in which John saw him – between the golden lampstands, in the middle of

the seven churches, and holding in his right hand the seven stars, the angels of the seven churches. In the second letter he introduces himself as he spoke to John, as being the first and the last, the one who died and came to life. For the third he is the one with the sharp two-edged sword, for the fourth the one whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose feet like burnished bronze; but here he goes beyond the first vision and reveals himself as the Son of God too. The fifth letter evokes once more the picture of the seven congregations, but also of the seven spirits of God who appeared in John's Greetings to the Churches (1:4) and will do so again in the first Throne Vision (4:5 and 5:6). In the sixth letter, with images which occur only here and partially recur in the call of those seen cowering under the altar when the first seal is opened (6:10), he evokes images of the one who is becoming the true Lord of Destiny. In the seventh letter, again with unique images, impressions of the Christ Jesus from John's greetings to the Churches (1:5) blend with those of the Rider on the White Horse who inaugurates the final transformation unto a new heaven and a new earth (19:11).³

In a comparable way, in the fourth letter the promises to "him who conquers" have a special emphasis by the addition: "and who keeps my works until the end" (2:26). Here, a typical Johannine word which in the Gospel is connected with "my word", "your word", "my commandments" and "the commandments of my Father"⁴ appears in connection with "my works" – "keeping my works until the end". In this way, the outcome of such perseverance is moved into the truly apocalyptic realm over which "the morning star" will shine (see 22:16). And that indeed is the realm into which these promises lead: in the first letter to "eating the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7, see 22:2,14,19), in the second letter to "not being hurt by the second death" (2:11, see 20:6 and 14, 21:8), in the third letter to the "hidden manna", the "white stone" with the "new name written on it" (2:17) – a name which "no one knows except him who receives it" (compare 19:12). The promise in the fifth letter, "being clad in white garments", invokes the picture of the garment of the Bride of the Lamb, its white linen being "the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). In the sixth letter the image of New Jerusalem is called up, wherein the presence of God and the Lamb is the temple (21:22), together with the image of the three names written on the one who is part of that city (3:12). The seventh letter crowns all this by the promise of the throne, which takes us through this Apocalypse to John right to its culmination: "to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (3:21).

The people in the various congregations are beset by tribulation and persecution, by presumptions, untruthfulness and falsehood, by powers of adversary having taken hold. "Do not fear what you are about to suffer", is said to those in the second congregation (2:10) – reminding us all that there is no worse suffering than the suffering one fears. Again and again, people have found that one finds that one receives strength according to what one has to endure. This second letter, which evokes prison and looming death, speaks about the crown of life, about not having to suffer the second death. In this letter, we don't find two elements which in one way or the other are part of the other letters: the need to "repent" and the promise of the coming of Christ – even if "only" to put things right again. (For this promise and the way it evolves, see the preceding contribution in the paragraphs on "The Opening Vision".)

In various difficult inner and outer situations, this need to "change heart and mind" becomes clear. Toil, patient endurance and bearing up are simply not enough when one slides away from one's "first love", says the first letter; turning back by "remembering" and changing heart and mind are needed (2:5). When surrounded by people who reach back into the past and hold on to its petrifying influences, one especially needs this change of heart and mind, says the third letter (2:16). And even when one seems rather sound oneself, it will be difficult to hold fast what one has, in a setting where lack of clarity and immorality which can't exist in the light of Christ, "who searches heart and mind", are tolerated by those who do not want to change heart and mind (2:21, in the fourth letter).

In the fifth congregation people just hang on by their fingertips – seemingly alive but in reality inwardly almost dead, not able to keep themselves out of rampant contamination. To strengthen what is dying one has to go back, changing heart and mind by strengthening one's memory, to awaken what one

³ See also the paragraph in the preceding, third contribution (July 29), in "The Opening Vision".

⁴ "Keeping my word": Jn 8:51,52; 14:23-24, "keeping my word and yours" Jn 15:20, "keeping my commandments" Jn 14:15, 21; 15:10, as I myself "keep my Father's word" Jn 8:55, "keep my Father's commandments" Jn 15:10; 17:6.

received and heard (3:3). When once more patient endurance has been able to face strong temptations, the sixth congregation hears: “the door is open”, “I love you” – “hold fast what you have”, “I am coming soon” (3:11). Now the time has come to take stock of one’s situation, to stop sitting on the fence while fooling oneself, recognizing that who experiences Christ’s love without eagerly having changed heart and mind cannot but feel rebuked and chastised (3:19). The seventh congregation will behold the One who comes standing at the door, knocking.

With these short overviews I have wanted to give an impression of the need, becoming stronger and stronger, for us human beings to become part of the apocalyptic process announcing itself. Whereas in the Gospels the “birth pangs” of this process are described, referring to our growing human and terrestrial problems, here in the beginning of the Revelation to John Christ, present among his congregations, shows the need to prepare ourselves inwardly.

The Revelation to John shows how, once “apocalypse” has begun to unfold itself, humanity develops into an important factor working in this eschatological drama. “Human Evolution in the Apocalypse of John”, Rudolf Frieling has called the last chapter in his *Christianity and Reincarnation*.⁵ As this book has been out of print for a long time, in the next and last contribution, added to this series, I will give an impression of its contents.

⁵ Rudolf Frieling, *Christianity and Reincarnation*, Floris Books, Edinburgh 1977, pp 90-117.