

Book Review: Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances.¹

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Catherine Keller is a formidable theologian – ‘one of the greatest living,’ according to Tripp Fuller in his back cover endorsement of this book, alongside those by Jürgen Moltmann and Katheryn Tanner. In this punchy and provocative assessment of the theme of ‘apocalypse’, Keller confronts the cacophony of apocalyptic issues we are facing as we progress through the 21st century through the lens of the book of Revelation which, she contends, continues to be deeply misunderstood and misinterpreted. Rejecting interpretations that focus on biblical apocalypse as prediction, optimistic denialism or pessimistic nihilism, Keller proposes an ‘apocalyptic mindfulness’ which produces a ‘solidarity of unexpected possibility’.²

Keller does this in seven chapters, each considering a key figure of the Apocalypse of John alongside modern-day apocalypses, be it climate change, global economics or the crisis of democracy. Not that John had predicted such things to the letter, as a fundamentalist reading might suggest, but Revelation reveals ‘patterns in its own world deep enough to persist, dangerously, and perhaps disclosively, into our own’³. Keller proposes a mode of ‘dreamreading’ the last canonical book of the Bible, whereby we can understand these fatal patterns as repeating themselves today, albeit in different specific situations. Sometimes this dreamreading must be done even ‘against’ John himself⁴ as he was subject to the same temptations that he writes about; for instance, in his depiction of women: ‘The very excess of John’s vision of the whore, a slow close-up within the sweep of apocalyptic signs, taps the misogyny of his time’.⁵ This method of dreamreading provides a suggestive and creative way of interpreting apocalyptic texts which avoids both the literalism of fundamentalism but also a dismissive attitude many ‘ex-vangelicals’ or those who have largely deconstructed their faith often apply to parts of scripture that seem unpalatable.

Keller’s prose are poetic and illustrative, perhaps attempting to mirror the text of Revelation itself. She says no deep knowledge of Revelation is required, but you must pay attention otherwise

¹ Catherine Keller. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances* (Orbis Books, New York, 2021).

² Ibid. 19.

³ Ibid. 3.

⁴ Ibid. 189.

⁵ Ibid. 118

you will lose her train of thought – although, dealing with a book as complex and difficult to follow as Revelation, again this is perhaps to be expected.

The sections on the climate emergency are perhaps written with most passion and urgency. The book is not an academic tome, but Keller draws on scientific research to impress the drastic nature of the crisis which we now face. Keller argues Revelation does not provide a clear-cut ending to the world, but a ‘disclosing’ of what is really happening – an opportunity to open our eyes and respond. Any future is still possible – the PostScroll after the final chapter provides seven potential scenarios that might unfold over the coming decades and centuries, including ‘Exhumanity,’ ‘Cybertopia,’ and ‘Cosmocalypse’ – new language developed in keeping with much of the rest of the book as Keller attempts to illustrate in dream-like fashion the potentialities laying before us. A wide range of other sources are also used – from feminist and economic theory to philosophy and theology.

Despite this, Keller’s liberationist and process theological leanings are clear throughout. ‘God’ arguably does not play a central role in this book, and the aim is stated as dreamreading ‘the text away from any recourse to divine control of earth’s destiny’.⁶ This will jar with some more confessional Christian readers, and it would have been interesting to hear more of Keller’s assessment of a Barthian apocalyptic reading of scripture, for instance, leading on from a brief allusion to Ziegler.⁷ This approach to biblical apocalyptic, associated with figures such as Beverley Gaventa, Susan Eastman, J. Louis Martyn and Douglas Campbell holds a stronger conception of the agency of God while clearly rejecting the ‘Trumpocalypse’ of mainline evangelical America that Keller has in her sights.

Overall, this was an enjoyable book, providing a new and creative approach to not only Revelation but one which could be applied to biblical apocalyptic more generally. It is informative regarding some of the deepest crises facing humanity and our planet and offers a clear challenge to the reader regarding what they are going to do in response.

⁶ Ibid. 196.

⁷ Philip Ziegler. *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic Press, 2018). pp.96-7.