Book review: Apocalyptic Theopolitics: Essays and Sermons on Eschatology, Ethics, and Politics.[1]

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Written and delivered across thirteen years (2008-2021), these essays and sermons offer a multi-faceted exploration of Elizabeth Phillips' theme: a call for interdisciplinarity between political theology, theological ethics, and eschatology, and their importance to an understanding and application of the apocalyptic. Phillips helpfully sketches out the histories of eschatological and of political theologies, of Anabaptism, and of Black theologies and demonstrates the importance of interrogating received theological wisdom from the hermeneutic of the racialised and marginalised. Each section ends with one or two sermons picking up the preceding essays' themes which, she hopes, "challenge without inspiring guilt, inform without being overly didactic, and express a point of view without being partisan".[2]

Theology, she says, has always been eschatological, from biblical sources to Augustine and Aquinas. Her concern is that eschatology and, particularly, apocalyptic have been shunned by theologians and ethicists because of how they have been distorted, for example, by a millenarianism which separates eschatology from theological ethics and politics, as in the case of her study of Christian Zionism, and historically by over- and under-realised eschatologies. Apocalyptic, she says, is not: "to long for an otherworldly future that eclipses and annuls this world and its history […] Rather, it is to embrace an openness to seeing what is ultimate in the world and the social order through dramatically calling status quo power claims into question".[3] The importance of the eschatological 'not yet' restrains both an over-realised eschatology and an apocalyptic "urgent already".[4] Both should be read within the frame of the goodness of creation which is not merely the story of origin but "the reality within which our world and its history exist". If eschatology is not simply about the 'last things' but about the "things that last",[5] how we live now is given eternal significance.

Treating politics as one ethical issue among others leads to seeing politics in terms of problems to be solved rather than a way of working out how we live now from an eschatological perspective. Theological questions are to do with ultimate meaning and theological ethics needs

[1] Elizabeth Phillips. Apocalyptic Theopolitics: Essays and Sermons on Eschatology, Ethics, and Politics. (Wipf and Stock, USA, 2022).
[2] Ibid., xv.
[3] Ibid., 20.
[4] Ibid., 21.
[5] Ibid., 23

political theology if it is to escape a purely immanent frame. For example, ethical questions about the use of violence and 'just war' theorisation can fail to question the nation-state's legitimation of its own violence under the myth of saving us from 'religious violence', as William Cavanaugh has argued.[6] It is here, in this volume, that Collins introduces racism as a fundamental theopolitical challenge to Euro-centric political theology, citing M. Shawn Copeland's theology of the Eucharist as "the dangerous memory of the torture and abuse, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" as well as the transvaluation of our values and transformation of what it means to be human.[7] Phillips follows this with a sermon tracing the development of Black theologies, from the groundbreaking work of James Cone "naming and exposing White theology" aligned with power and privilege, to 'third generation' challenging the racializing construct of "white" and "black". From where must theology be done, she and Cone ask, if not in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, "the crucified people in our midst"?[8]

Phillips argues for an ethnographic approach, investigating theology as it is believed and acted upon by a community. Theologians, she says, should be getting away from libraries and their desks to be with and amongst the people and issues they are thinking and writing about. Time spent with a Christian Zionist congregation (FBC) in Colorado opened her, as a theological ethicist, to the complexity and internal consistency of members' beliefs she would not otherwise have understood, *and* to their God-given humanity. FBC is a mega-church in Colorado which raises funds to support an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and sends members on annual tours of Israeli military bases voicing their support. They pray for the Israeli state to enjoy continued international support and victory over its enemies.

FBC's eschatology is shaped by dispensational pre-millennialism. The first advent of Christ as the suffering servant inaugurated the dispensation of the church and of personal salvation and this will end when the church is raptured from an irredeemably evil world, following which the focus falls on Israel, leading up to the existential battle of Armageddon when Christ returns as conquering Davidic political-military messiah. Critics of Christian Zionism blame eschatology itself for what they see as a misguided politics, but Phillips rescues it from the proverbial bathwater arguing that a theopolitics guided by eschatology is not the problem; just the opposite - a biblical eschatology should indeed shape our understanding and practices of political action now. In other words, she pleads for the contingency of political theology, ethics, and eschatology which have come asunder in a Christian Zionism which is uncritical of, and actively in support of, militarism, nationalism, and

[6] William Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence* (2009).
[7] Phillips 2022, 35.
[8] Ibid., 40-41.

violent domination, and which has nothing to say about current societal transformation. She says: "These particular Christians have rightly discerned that eschatology is not only a chronology of end-times events; it is also a doctrine of God's intentions for humanity and all creation, and of the status of those intentions in the time between the two advents of Jesus Christ".[9] The answer is not to abandon eschatology and apocalyptic, but to recognise our need for a well-articulated alternative. For this she turns to Anabaptism and the political theology of John Howard Yoder.

We are only too used to revelations about character failings of media and cultural icons and then having to weigh our continued enjoyment of their work, and Phillips, strongly influenced as she has been by the non-violent eschatology of Yoder, faces the same quandary concluding that few of us live up to the dogma we profess and none of us are immune to the temptations to abuse our power. Central to Yoder's eschatology and theology is the cruciform character of God's reign in the world seen in Revelation 4 and 5 where the Lamb "as if slain" holds the meaning of history: "the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power, determines the meaning of history".[10] This means that the Jesus-shaped ekklesia "must refuse attempts to seize power or control history" (p.90)[11] but, in solidarity with and from the point of view of "the underdog",[12] be able to discern the invalid use of power through understanding the nature and function of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic deconstructs the hegemonic worldview of the powerful, proclaims oppressive power is not the final word, and speaks truth to power.

Intriguingly, Phillips explores apocalyptic through the lens of trauma theory. Trauma is a violent suspension of our narrative, linguistic, and bodily senses so that our normal symbolic and linguistic coding fails us leaving us with "intrusive" vivid sensations and images. Apocalyptic offers the possibility of re-narrating the traumatic event, re-membering it now in relation to God, and of lamenting the loss occasioned by the trauma and then cultivating hope. "Seen in this light, the narration of monstrous powers and their destruction in apocalyptic texts functions not as a simplistic, dualistic worldview of good versus evil in a fantasy of the future, but rather as a way of both lamenting and understanding loss and oppression, and asserting that it is not the final word".[13] She applies this to "the catastrophic constructs and structures of racism"[14] with reference to J. Kameron Carter's 'third generation' Black theology and Afro-pessimism which views race as a metaphysical construct in the development of the nation-state, and of the universalising white

[9] Ibid., 72
[10] Yoder. Politics of Jesus. P.132.
[11] Phillips, 2022, 90.
[12] Ibid., 91.
[13] Ibid., 147.
[14] Ibid., 149.

theology that developed within it, so any Black theology that leaves whiteness in place is not radical enough.[15] This "nothing less than devastating" critique of 'white Christianity' leaves Phillips asking if apocalyptic praxis, lament, and then cultivation of hope might enable us to re-narrate our own history and to be re-membered in the body of Christ through Eucharistic praxis.

Central to the eschatology and political theology Phillips espouses is not the Davidic conquering king but the messianic lamb of God. To live hopefully requires the employment of apocalyptic to unmask and resist hegemonic and oppressive power, even and especially when we are implicated, and to imagine and enact a theological ethics and politics in the eschatological light of this kenotic God. From this informative and wide-ranging volume of essays, I am left with what I suspect will remain an apocalyptic challenge to my White Christianity.

[15] Ibid., 154.

