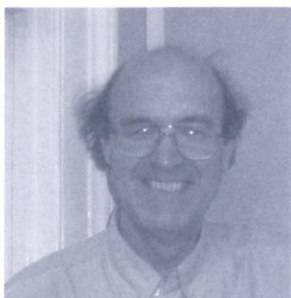


# UNMASKING IDEOLOGY

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND



**CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND** is Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford. He has recently completed a commentary on the Apocalypse that focuses on the history of its reception. He is Co-editor of the Blackwell Bible Commentaries.

**THE REASONS FOR LINKS BETWEEN THE CATASTROPHIC AND DISASTROUS AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION ARE OBVIOUS, AND THE LINKS BETWEEN WORLD-SHATTERING EVENTS AND THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGES OF DOOM COME ARE NOT SURPRISING.** After all, John's awesome vision is full of images of disaster. The impact of such disturbing elements has, from the earliest times, been a dominant element of the interpretation of this text. It is a widespread view that the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, is about cataclysm, death and destruction, and, the end of the world. The original meaning of the word "apocalypse", however, is in fact not about the cataclysmic end of the world, but an "unveiling", or "revelation", a means whereby one gains insight about divine mysteries about the present, or about a particular historical situation. This perspective offers a different way of understanding the function of a text like the Apocalypse; it is applicable to every age and not just to "the end of the world". So prevalent is the link between Revelation and the "end of the world" that it is not often realised that here has been a long tradition of allowing the Apocalypse to give deeper meaning and significance to events. So, the imagery of the Apocalypse becomes, as it were, an interpretative lens with which to view history. In this way of using the Apocalypse the interpretative perspective has ceased to be solely about the eschaton and becomes instead a means of interpreting every age of human existence.

A modern example of this is William Stringfellow's, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*.<sup>1</sup> For Stringfellow, Revelation offers an indispensable guide for all societies in history and their eternal destiny, as people struggle to "live under the shadow of empire". His book is geared to enabling his North American audience to read their own country in the light of the Bible, rather than allow the United States of America, its culture and values, to determine the way the Bible is read. At the heart of his method is this conviction that the Bible can assist us to understand a particular moment of time because it enables an enhanced vision of the reality that confronts us. So, he sees the Book of Revelation as "a parable of the fallenness of the nations".<sup>2</sup> The book's contrasts, not least that between Jerusalem and Babylon, offer an interpretative key to understand the cosmos under God. Babylon is a description of every city, an allegory of the condition of death. It is the principality in bondage to death in time the focus of apocalyptic judgement. Apocalyptic insight enables one to detect where Babylon is at work. On the other hand, there is another horizon represented by Jerusalem. This is about the emancipation of human life

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## NOTES

1. Waco: Word, 1973.
2. Stringfellow, *Ethic*, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

► in society from the rule of death. It is a parable, Stringfellow says, of the church of prophecy, an anticipation of the end of time: "Babylon is a description of every city, an allegory of the condition of death. It is the principality in bondage to death in time, the focus of apocalyptic judgement. Jerusalem is about the emancipation of human life in society from the rule of death, a parable of the church of prophecy, an anticipation of the end of time. Antichrist is a stylised way of talking about the idolatry of death in a nation. Antichrist mimics and displaces Christ. Antichrist is where the churchly institutions are banished or destroyed or converted into functionaries of the State."<sup>3</sup>

Central to this way of looking at things differently is the unjust crucifixion of Jesus. So, in Revelation 5 the one who is the victim (the Lamb) actually becomes the one who shares the throne of God, transforms history and turns upside down the way in which reality is to be viewed. God is, therefore, on the sides of the nobodies and the victims of oppression and violence. What this chapter proclaims is a new politics. John sheds tears in the face of the world's injustice, but the meaning of history is the formation, around the Lamb that was slain, of a new human race, international in character, that is not determined by Caesar's military rule, which is based on violence. The Lamb's suffering for the cause of right overturns the political powers, and marks the beginning of a new politics.

What comes out in the way in *Ethic*, is that the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, is not so much about the cataclysmic destruction of the world at the end of history, but is a means of insight or revelation into life in history now. It is the means whereby one gains insight into a particular historical situation and the powers which confront us. So, doomsday language is relevant to our own situation, as well as being ultimate. The reality of which the Book of Revelation speaks impacts upon us in each and every moment: "So long as time lasts the apocalyptic reality impends upon each and every happening. In the very anarchy and futility that mark the fallen principalities and powers empirically the apocalypse is forecast and portended."<sup>4</sup>

If we read Revelation 13 in the light of Stringfellow's interpretative method, we discover a potent means of doing political theology. The vision of Revelation 13 picks up on the tradition of representing nations by beasts found in Daniel 7. As in Daniel 7, the beast arises from the sea, possibly the symbol of primeval chaos.

We note that two creatures are described (Rev 13.1 and 11). John's inspiration may have come from the arrival of the representative of Rome by sea and the local, indigenous promoter of the imperial cult, of which there was a prominent example in Asia Minor. Their task was by its propaganda to encourage support for imperial Rome.

The beast is the incarnation of the powers of a demonic and dehumanising empire ("the dragon conferred on it his own power", Rev 13.2) which succeeds in attracting universal admiration for acts which *appear* to be beneficial ("the whole world went after the beast in wondering admiration", Rev 13.3). The plausibility of the beast is seen as it is like the Lamb and appears to deserve worship. The wonder of the world is rooted in its military power and prestige (Rev 13.4). Public opinion goes along with the propaganda of the beast and its supporters. The pressure is to conform and be marked with the mark of the beast (Rev 13.14). But readers of the Apocalypse have been allowed to have a glimpse of a completely different set of values: God is on the side of the nobodies and the victims of oppression and violence. The way of the Lamb is the secret of the universe. This is an encouragement to those who refuse to go along with the regime and culture of the beast. They are offered reassurance that being marked with the Lamb is a sign of righteousness even if it means social ostracism (Rev 13.16). Those marked with the beast *appear* to have freedom to go about their activities, whereas those who refuse to be so marked and side with God and the Lamb are persecuted and their deaths are greeted with glee by the inhabitants of the earth (Rev 11.10). In reality, however, it is those who maintain their integrity, even at the price of their lives who will be vindicated. Those who persevere (an important theme of Revelation) are shown that the might of state power is itself extraordinarily fragile, and its affluence, so attractive and alluring, is destined for destruction destroyed by precisely that power which has maintained it.

The imagery of Revelation 13, in a way similar to a modern political cartoon, challenges the presumptions of power and its oppressive character. It does this not so much by analysis, but by sharp, penetrating and disturbing images that get us to look at things in a different light. Both function to unmask ideology. It makes you think the ideas that are widely held to be "obvious", "common sense" and "normal" are, in fact, often used to cover up the powerful vested interests of a small group which has and wants to retain power.



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John's vision unmasks the way ordinary people are cajoled and bemused into thinking that what seems normal and admirable is in fact having a disastrous effect on them and their communities. John's vision helps to unmask these processes. So, the maintenance of civilisation (by force if necessary), of family, nation and property and privilege in the name of Christian civilisation cannot be squared with the priorities of God's identification with the Lamb who bears the marks of slaughter. That is because they exclude those who are without and deprived, putting self-interest above human community and the right to possess above the privilege of serving.

Finally, the mysterious number 666 in Revelation 13.18 attracts much attention. Jews were fond of working out the numerical value of letters (we need to remember that Jews and Greeks used letters for numbers to, so a = 1, b = 2, etc.). The numerical value of Nero Caesar (in Hebrew) is 666. Equally probable (and of more universal significance) is the fact that three times it falls one short of the number of perfection 7 (In Greek, the name "Jesus" adds up to 888, one who is beyond all human concepts of perfection.) The beast seems to be near perfection but what it lacks actually renders it diabolical and utterly opposed to God in supposing that it has ultimate power and wisdom (Rev 13.4).

In choosing to concentrate on a way of reading the Apocalypse that uses it as a basis for ethical critique and contemporary political theology, we should recognise that it is one (albeit very influential) way of reading the Book of Revelation. Because of the nature of Revelation, with its allusive images, no one can lay claim to have the definitive form of interpretation. Liberals and fundamentalists alike have to live with the fact that the interpretation of the Bible is a contested area and there is not clear way of interpreting it that jumps out at us.

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