

*AN EXAMINATION OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION FROM A  
LIBERATION THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE*

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## PREFACE

Invariably the instant reaction forthcoming from many persons who learn that the Book of Revelation is the subject of this study is one of surprise accompanied by curious enquiry betraying puzzlement as to what there is to come out of the book. The good wish that then follows confirms a perceived difficulty of the task undertaken. There were certainly no illusions about the difficulty which seemed to become more evident as the time went by. This leads quite naturally to the acknowledgement of the great debt of gratitude owed to many for what is here being presented as the finished work. Among the many, special thanks are due to the following: The Bethel Baptist Church congregation, Kingston, Jamaica where in the very first instance the work took shape; many friends and colleagues who by way of discussion and reading of the work at various stages offered valuable encouragement and insights; Grace Educational Foundation, the British Council, the World Council of

Churches and generous individuals who gave financial grants and gifts that made the undertaking possible; the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of Leeds University and in particular Dr. Haddon Willmer my supervisor, who endured with me and whose guidance and insights were invaluable; the typists Miss Heather Llewellyn, Mrs. Lola Bailey and Mrs. Lillieth Callam who at various times had to contend with my abominably difficult handwriting; finally to my wife Ann and my three sons Jeremy, Mark and Michael who remained a constant source of encouragement and inspiration throughout, while at the same time making personal sacrifices to accommodate my preoccupation with the study.

Whereas the work has been enriched by the criticisms and valuable suggestions of others whatever shortcomings there are, are entirely due to my own failure.



## ABSTRACT

This study emerged from a study of the Book of Revelation originally undertaken in the Bible study programme of a local Baptist Church congregation in Kingston, Jamaica. Soon, dissatisfaction was felt by the writer, who had conducted the study, concerning the methodological procedure adopted and the practical relevance achieved. Insights gained from the Theology of Liberation, its own methodological procedure in general and hermeneutical approach in particular, showed up the inadequacies of the approach that had been adopted and also suggested possibilities which have become the basis of this present study. There resulted a heightened appreciation of the book including fresh awareness of its significance for the contemporary world, particularly the so-called Third World.

There seems to be a certain structural correlation and correspondence of experience between the context and people of the book's focus and the context and peoples of Today's Third World. The context was one of oppression and the experience one of struggle and endurance. The Book represents reflection on engagement in solidarity and struggle against oppression, on the part of its writer and his fellow-believers. The reflection took place in the light of the Word of God, the book being greatly influenced by the Old Testament in particular, without it being quoted and by the inspiration of the Spirit. Self-Conscious Contextual orientation, practical commitment, prophetic consciousness, political sensitivity, ecclesial framework of action and witness and liberative hope soteriologically grounded and eschatologically focussed are significant features of the reflection. These features which are themselves anticipatory of certain insights of the theology of liberation give the Book very powerful meaning and effective relevance particularly for the Third World experience.

The book's significance is, however, not exhausted by the particular contextual relevance emphasised. It combines remarkably the contextual and cosmic, thus indicating quite instructively that the contextual and universal are not necessarily mutually exclusive realms for theological reflection that is self consciously contextual.



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## INTRODUCTION

This piece of work can be said to have had its beginnings over a decade ago. The exact occasion was a course of Bible Studies on the Book of Revelation conducted in the Bethel Baptist Church, Kingston, Jamaica,<sup>1</sup> in the years nineteen seventy-nine and eighty. At the time when the studies were conceived and during the period they were conducted, there was, however, no thought of the present project. They were then simply a part of the routine Bible-study programme of the church. It was nevertheless very soon after the studies were completed that for reasons, soon to be disclosed, it was felt that the book needed to be re-examined from a completely different perspective.

The choice of the Book of Revelation for study at the particular time was for two clearly perceived reasons, namely personal challenge and pastoral concern.

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<sup>1</sup>The Bethel Baptist Church is a member of the Jamaica Baptist Union which is both a member of Jamaica Council of Churches in association with the World Council of Churches and of the Baptist World Alliance. The Jamaica Baptist Union is considered one of the 'mainline' denominations in the country



These two factors combined to make the urge to undertake the study irresistible, daunting as the task was considered to be. The personal challenge stemmed from the fact that over a period of time there were constant criticisms made by certain of the newer or non-traditional church groups of the main-line churches for their alleged neglect of the Book of Revelation. Such groups often maintain a special interest in the book and some of the chief elements of their doctrinal position are linked to what they regard as central teachings of the book itself. They claim to possess the key to its correct interpretation and so are self-assured in and about what they believe concerning it and its teaching. The criticisms of neglect that were made of the main-line churches were accompanied by suggestions that the neglect was due to fear. They were afraid of what seemed to be the difficulty of understanding the book and were lacking in the insight given by the Spirit to gain such an understanding. It was also felt that there was additional fear that if the real truth were grasped they would be brought to the knowledge of the error of their ways and beliefs and they were not prepared for any such experience. This no doubt was but a reminder that the

Book of Revelation had always been the subject of much theological controversy and an instrument in Ecclesiastical-political conflicts dating back to the earliest times; but the challenge was keenly felt.

Whereas questions could be raised about the reasons given for the neglect of the book by the main-line churches, it had to be admitted that there was some substance to the criticism itself. Without undertaking any scientific survey, the impression gained from various levels of contact, discussions and sharing of experiences, was that the neglect was a fact. Systematic study of the whole book is rarely if ever undertaken. If or when the book is considered, the first three chapters, with special reference to the letters to the seven churches, are invariably the focus of attention. At other times isolated passages are randomly chosen and studied not necessarily with any due regard for their context. Reasons for this attitude and approach vary. Some think the book is too perplexing, too difficult, hardly meant to be understood by the contemporary mind. Some are convinced that it is actually irrelevant to the present world. And some are convinced that the book disqualifies itself by not reflecting an authentic



Christian character and spirit such as are to be found for example, in the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. In the end, it seems as if something of a tradition has been developed and has at least been tacitly accepted that the Book of Revelation is not one of the Books of the Bible that merits attention and study in the main-line churches. The challenge was, therefore, strengthened by the perceived element of truth in the criticism of neglect.

The pastoral concern which was the other factor that was responsible for the choice of the Book for the course of Bible-study, stemmed from the feeling that the time had in fact come for the members of the congregation to be introduced to the Book and the Book to them. This was a way to see if at least some of the misconceptions, misgivings and mis-understandings that they might have had about it could be cleared up. It was also an attempt to see if the chances of their being misled by those who were so sure they had the key to unravelling the mysteries of the book but who were considered to be obviously mistaken in their own understanding of it would lessen.



### Dissatisfaction

The Bible-study course was undertaken as planned. It lasted for almost twenty-four months and on the basis of how such things are usually assessed - numbers in attendance, level of participation, expressions of appreciation and enthusiastic testimonies of satisfaction and help received - it would have been considered a successful course of study. Strangely, however, almost immediately upon its coming to an end there was the onset of a deep sense of dissatisfaction akin to a sense of failure on my part in relation to the whole exercise. This dissatisfaction centred on the way the study was actually approached, its aim and what was accomplished in the given circumstances. It did not take a long time for the cause of the feeling to be discovered. There were two not unrelated factors that figured most prominently in this regard. In the first place, when the book was chosen for the Bible-study course it was at the same time a most critical moment in the life and experience of the society, though there was no conscious relation between this and the choice then. It was a time when the society was having some of the most traumatic experiences of political ferment that it had ever had in all its history

and these were of such a nature that they were bound to have long-term consequences for the society itself and even for the wider Caribbean Region, especially the English speaking Caribbean.

Essentially, the ferment represented a dramatic highlighting of long-standing underlying political and socio-economic problems that characterised the society, and their ongoing and increasingly painful consequences for the poor majority of the population. It also represented what generally happens when any apparently serious attempt is made to tackle such problems and when aspects of the attempt appear to be ill-conceived or lend themselves to be easily distorted by detractors because of lack of thoroughness in planning. A fragile dependent economy on the point of collapsing for want of meaningful assistance, poor and constantly declining social services and welfare facilities, very high unemployment, an ever widening gap in quality of life between a poor, powerless and generally marginalized majority and a rich, powerful minority class, along with aspirants to that class and influential international counterparts who see them as local guardians of the values, status quo and ideological orientation in which they had vested interest, influenced



much of what was happening. Legacies of a colonial past along with strong neo-colonial attachments seemed to predetermine a state of economic, cultural and psychological dependence on the predominant western centres of economic and political power, in particular the United States of America. Signs of the emergence of new self-understanding on the part of the majority of the people or of the possibility of this became a point of suspicion and mistrust on the part of those who have always benefitted from the situation as it existed and who had always had power and control, though not necessarily occupying prominent positions in the political directorate. Their economic power and the international connection and favour they enjoyed were key factors in this regard.

Indeed, there were nascent awakenings of self-awareness and a slight but nonetheless significant thrust towards self-reliance not without signs of misguided idealism, miscalculation of the level of consciousness of what was involved on the part of the majority and of the resolve of the powerful to defend the status quo and an overlooking of the strong conservative religious presence and influence mainly concerned with self-preservation and



what it conceives to be its freedom to preach the gospel for the saving of souls. Predictably the stirrings were immediately defined in terms of a burgeoning communist interest in direct conflict with long-standing traditional pro-western, mainly American friendship. This was the signal for the battlelines to be drawn and all the forces and factors to be put into play to stop an imminent communist take-over which if successful would make Jamaica join Castro's Cuba with whom the Government shared friendly relations as a second communist client-state in the Caribbean. During the most volatile and disruptive period of the ferment, that is the several months approaching the General Election in October 1980,<sup>2</sup> the Bible-study course was in progress but no real notice was taken of what was going on or the whole situation that spawned it. This subsequently made for the troubling of the mind which is part of the dissatisfaction to which reference has been made.

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<sup>2</sup>The announcement was made by the government at the very beginning of the year that there would be a general election in the year with no date stated at the time and there was no constitutional necessity for the election, since the life of the Government could have constitutionally gone on for yet some more time into the following year. This added to the already tense atmosphere and there was a high level of politically motivated violence up to the period of Election.

The second reason for the dissatisfaction was that the particular church community in which the study was taking place had pioneered and developed an extensive social outreach programme, embracing wholistic health care, early childhood and adult literacy education, skills training and community development but this social involvement and engagement made no direct impact on the study. Indeed the church had earned a name for itself as one that cared for the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized. It had identified itself with those who were in need and were exposed to human suffering in its starkest and most distressing form. Yet nowhere in the study of the nature that was being undertaken of the particular book, the Book of Revelation, was the Church's social involvement and engagement considered relevant to the study or the study relevant to the involvement and engagement. Something was obviously inadequate about the study as it was undertaken and this too resulted in the dissatisfaction felt.

#### *The Theology of Liberation*

A developing interest in the Theology of Liberation proved very helpful to the writer in enabling the whole matter to be put into meaningful perspective. This was



especially so in terms of the approach that the theology of liberation advocates to reading or interpreting the scriptures as part of the project of doing Theology. In a most significant manner it threw light on particular mistakes that were made in the approach to and pursuit of the study. What were some of these mistakes? It was shown to be abstract, negative and too individualistic. It was abstract in that there was much emphasis on predetermined ideas and concepts believed to be associated with the book in an attempt to explain them and ensuring a proper theoretical understanding of them. It was negative in that there was much dwelling upon disproving and refuting teachings that were said to be based upon the visions and expectations found in the book. And it was individualistic in that at the points where attempts were made to render a practical application of the teachings of the book, it invariably had to do with encouraging, reassuring or warning individual Christians in terms of their personal and private hopes, experiences, conduct and destiny. As these mistakes in the approach to and pursuit of the study were brought to attention by the insights gleaned from the Theology of Liberation, the insights also lead



to a new and heightened appreciation of the Book of Revelation itself. This in turn led to a new awareness of and conviction concerning its utmost significance and relevance for contemporary life in the contemporary world, particularly the so-called Third World countries with the conditions and experiences associated with them. The manner in which the writer of the Book was now seen to have responded to and reflected upon his situation, seemed to have been on the basis that the Theology of Liberation was now advocating in its own methodological approach. In certain ways, which it is hoped will be shown as the study proceeds, the writer anticipated some of the very emphases and distinctive features of the Theology of Liberation and at the same time in his own way offers certain insights that can be of benefit to those who are committed to the project of doing the Theology of Liberation.

At the outset the Theology of Liberation was viewed with great suspicion generally, traces of which still linger on in some theological and political quarters. It was regarded as 'faddish' and as a result was considered destined for an early demise. It suffered from journalistic distortions, misrepresentations and

caricaturing by its critics, smear by politicians and their ideological support system and bad publicity from misguided enthusiasts and careless exponents. Yet it has withstood the tests. It has not only managed to hold its ground but it has succeeded in developing into a very important theological project and enterprise. It has become more precise and coherent in its formulations. It has also extended the range of its study in relation to the various articles of the Christian faith and at the same time it has remained quite self-critical in the process of establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with on the theological scene.<sup>3</sup>

The Theology of Liberation is, of course, not monolithic in nature though it is not a factor that its critics are always mindful of and so have been guilty of certain unfortunate and unfair generalizations about it. It is a theology that embraces within its general orientation and expression different forms and emphases, varying perspectives and issues. It has even been suggested by some that it would be better if the plural

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<sup>3</sup>The very ambitious "Liberation and Theology" series being undertaken by Publishers Burns and Oates, and authored by well-known Liberation Theologians, is a case in point.



"Theologies of Liberation" were used rather than the singular 'Theology of Liberation'. Various expressions of this theology are to be found in the same place as also in different places of the world.<sup>4</sup> Yet having said this, it can also be said that there are certain basic common features of the said general theological orientation that can be identified and of which something of a general profile can be developed. Further, these features are basically typified in the most well known and developed expressions of the theological orientation, Latin American Theology of Liberation, which is the expression of our own focus and attention.

There are six features of it to which attention will be drawn and which will form the basis of our own approach in the study. These are often expressed in different forms, described in different ways and grouped together in varied relationships but all are generally present in any reasonably accurate summary or representation of the Liberation Theology project. They form an integral part of its methodology which

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<sup>4</sup>Such Theological projects as Feminist Theology, Black Theology, Gay Liberation Theology, African Theology, Asian Theology, Minjung Theology have been grouped under the general Rubric of the Theology of Liberation.



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overall is the most distinctive feature of the theological project as far as most of its exponents are concerned. Gustavo Gutierrez speaks for them concerning the methodology when he writes:

... The Theology of Liberation offers not so much a new theme for reflection as a new way to do theology.<sup>5</sup>

In the first place, the theology of liberation is self-consciously and deliberately contextual, which means that the theological project is itself responsive to contextual realities in terms of life-situation and particular historical experiences. The question is asked:

"Where is liberation Theology to be found?"

And the answer is given:

... You will find it at the base. It is linked with a specific community and forms a vital part of it.<sup>6</sup>

This grounds the theology of liberation in a specific context as its base of operation. In further definition

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<sup>5</sup>G. Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, SCM 1975, p. 15

<sup>6</sup>Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, (Liberation and Theology I) Burns and Oates, 1987, p. 19.



of the context that forms the framework of this theology, with particular reference to its Latin American expression, but not entirely different from many other Third World situations, Rebecca Chopp writes of it:

... The first, and most important factor, is the context of Latin American Liberation Theology in the concrete situation of massive poverty, a context that can only be hinted at by terms such as poverty, starvation and oppression.

Such realities, directly related to the colonial and neo-colonial experience of the people in the particular historical context, are confronted by or are seen from the basis of the ferment of the faith of the people. Faith that sensed the possibility of the fulfilment of God-given human potential in history, in concrete human existence in society, discerned that the conditions and realities in the context that undermined such possibilities were not in line with God's liberative and creative purpose. The specific factors that resulted in the dehumanization and/or marginalization of the people are such as come within the scope of the reflections of the theology of liberation. It is therefore, not a

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<sup>7</sup>Rebecca Chopp, "Latin American Liberation Theology" in The Modern Theologians, An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century, David Ford (Ed), Blackwell, 1989.



theology that has as its chief priority any interest or pretension to be universally relevant. It takes its contextual responsibility and accountability seriously and admits its contextual commitment and conditioning.

Following very closely is the second feature which points to the fact that it is a theology of practical engagement. This brings to the forefront that essentially the contextual interest and orientation displayed by it is not by any means of a purely or largely theoretical or speculative nature. It is rooted and grounded in action or more technically in praxis which represents a complex of factors by which the human reality is understood in a dynamic, relational and practical way. Rebecca Chopps explains praxis in the following manner:

... First of all praxis means that human beings are constituted through political-historical reality. Where one lives, the status of socio-economic class, what kind of power is available, must all be clear considerations for understanding human reality. Secondly, praxis means that human reality is intersubjective, that human beings are not first ahistorical 'I's' that express their unique essences in relation to others through language, but that subjectivity arises out of inter-subjective relations between human beings. Finally, praxis as the

understanding of human reality means that humans must and can intentionally create history, transforming and shaping reality for the improvement of human flourishing.<sup>8</sup>

Liberation Theology is said to be a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the word of God.<sup>9</sup> This means that there is an epistemological shift or break in the methodology employed by this theology with that of the traditional way of doing theology.<sup>10</sup> And in this regard it has been critical of the traditional methodology, probably too sweepingly at times not giving recognition to the exceptions that might have anticipated at least aspects of the methodology now being emphasised. The traditional methodology is seen as abstract, academic, theoretical and speculative. Truth and knowledge as gained in the process are generally thought to be of universal relevance. They can be applied in and to any given context which is but another aspect of the imperialism practised in relation to other countries and cultures by the centres of their origin. The theology of

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid p. 177

<sup>9</sup>See the discussion of Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, SCM, 1974, pp. 6ff.

<sup>10</sup>This has to do with theology as being done in Europe and North America and which has invariably been the "Received Theology" in the Third World.



liberation on the other hand has a different starting point. It does not begin with detachment. It begins with commitment that expresses itself in engagement in the historical process of liberating the oppressed and disadvantaged. And understanding the theology itself also warrants active participation in the liberating process, since it is considered to be vitally important that one must advance beyond a mere theoretical or intellectual approach that is simply satisfied with understanding a theology through its theoretical dogmatic constructs, if one is to grasp what it really involves and means. Truth and knowledge emerge out of and are intimately bound up with practice. It is said that in this process, doing theology is a "second Act". Commitment in engagement is the "first act" and critical reflection on the commitment in engagement in the "second act". Gustavo Gutierrez writes:

... The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce a pastoral activity, rather it reflects upon it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>G. Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, SCM 1974, p. 11ff



Critical reflection on the basis of praxis, within the framework of the great efforts undertaken by the poor and oppressed and those who identify themselves with them in solidarity in their struggle, in the light of the Word of God and the inspiration of faith is the strength of the Theology of Liberation.

The resources that are at the disposal of this theology and upon which it draws are, therefore, the context and situation in which it is done, the praxis on which critical reflection takes place, the scriptures, the traditions of the Church and the life of the Church itself which is the immediate setting within the context for the actual doing of the theology. Of course it needs to be borne in mind that where the Church is the immediate setting or base for the theology, the concern of the reflection will not be exclusively those related to the welfare and well being of the Church itself. And there is a dynamism that is characteristic of the theological project which makes it open to change and development and prevents it from hardening into a system of orthodoxy. Indeed one of the ways in which the primacy of praxis has been summed up is to indicate that "orthopraxy" comes before "orthodoxy". The sharp

contrast stated in this has not always been as helpful as those who state it may assume. It gives the impression that there is little interest in orthodoxy or doctrine, generally speaking. There has been a change represented in increased interest in the articles of the Christian faith, albeit reflected on from a Liberation perspective, which while still giving primary emphasis to praxis, greater recognition is given to matters of belief having their rightful place in close relation to praxis.

An appropriate accompaniment of praxis is analysis. If engagement in praxis is to deal effectively and appropriately with the issues and realities of the context that impinge directly, negatively or positively, on the lives of the people, it has to know how the society, particularly its socio-economic structures and associated cultural structures, work. There is, therefore, need for theology to enter into dialogue with the social sciences for it to gain the needed understanding. This became one of the most controversial aspects of the methodology of the theology liberation mainly because of an early attraction to Marxism, considered as an appropriate tool of analysis by many leading liberation theologians. The charge has been made

that theology of liberation itself is no more than thinly disguised Marxism, thus not granting it the status of a theology but regarding it as essentially a Marxist political ideological construct.<sup>12</sup> With less direct identification but with nonetheless decisive dissatisfaction with the association which it considers mars the Theology of Liberation, the Vatican Document, "Instruction on certain aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'", expresses the following as basic to its purpose -

... To draw the attention of pastors, theologians and all the faithful to the deviations and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain

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<sup>12</sup>In a review article on Jon Sobrino's The True Church of the Poor, SCM, 1984, Nicholas Lash comments that in the view of some critics the theology of liberation is "Marxist theory decorated with flowers from the 'Garden of the Soul'" ... (See *Theology*, March, 1986, p. 140).



forms of Liberation Theology which are in an insufficiently critical manner concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought.<sup>13</sup>

While there seemed to have been cases where there was a feeling among some that liberation theology's use of Marxism ought to go beyond a mere pragmatic use of certain aspects of it to a more thoroughgoing commitment to the whole Marxist point of view, for the most part many of the leading liberation theologians insist that their use of Marxism as a socio-analytical tool does not presuppose the adoption of its world-view. Gutierrez in an attempt to dismiss the view that there is any exclusive commitment to Marxism as a system insists that there should be more emphasis placed on the fact that in the study of the society the theology of liberation makes use of the social sciences rather than on the fact of Marxist analysis as such. He goes on to say -

... As far as I am concerned the ultimate  
and most important reason for

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<sup>13</sup>"The Introduction of Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation" is the work of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published in 1984. A subsequent document entitled "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" which was actually promised in the 1984 document was published in 1986. This document displays a more positive attitude to the theology of liberation generally than the previous one, though not to the satisfaction of many leading liberation theologians. The misgivings also about the Marxist associations do not seem to have disappeared.

liberation theology, the preferential option for the poor, is not to be found in social analysis, but in God in whom we believe in the communion of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

This coincides with the fact that there are those within the ranks of the liberation theologians who are sensitive to the fact that Marxism is itself an outside influence like other imports of which liberation theologians themselves have been critical. They are also otherwise cognizant of the limitations of Marxism and think that it is not necessary to depend on it for understanding their context. William R. Barr in an important article on "Debated Issues in Liberation Theology", makes reference to Argentine's Juan Carlos Scannone and Lucia Gera who seek to develop a "populist theology" which sets aside Marxist categories and 'draws upon images and concepts and modes of thought from the particular culture of the people'. What they are trying to do is to develop what is referred to as a "historical hermeneutic" that emerges out of "the national and popular experience".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>See Account of an interview with him in Rosino Gibellini, *The Liberation Theology Debate*, SCM, 1987, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>William R. Barr, "Debated Issues in Liberation Theology" in *Theology Today*, January 1987, p. 519.



It will not serve any useful purpose to go into any further details of this particular discussion. It is sufficient to note that even though some critics question the possibility and/or viability of a distinction being made between the use of Marxism as a socio-analytical tool and accepting its ideology or world view many Liberation theologians insist they do. They claim further that Marxism is considered to be the most appropriate instrument of analysis of the particular society in the broader recognition that the social sciences must be considered an important ally of the theological process as philosophy has long been considered to be in the traditional theological centres. And it is also important to bear in mind that there are liberation theologians who do not think it necessary to depend on Marxism at all and that a combination of analytical tools may well be necessary bearing in mind the varied forms of oppression that may exist in a given society. The recognition of the need for theology to enter into dialogue with the social sciences for better understanding of the social reality is the key idea, for this is itself part of the shift that the new methodology represents.

In the third place the theology of liberation is self-confessedly prophetic in character. This prophetic nature bears close link with the historical praxis which it emphasises as an essential part of the theological project. In seeking to understand what is taking place in the historical context the theology of liberation sees this as part of getting to know and identifying with what God is doing in the outworking of his liberative and redemptive purpose. History is the sphere of the divine activity and of the vindication of the divine purpose of righteousness and justice. The understanding that is sought is not by any means a theoretical or apologetic exercise. It is not simply a matter of offering explanations or giving answers from a position of detachment. It is intimately bound up with actual engagement in historical praxis with the meaning and truth that emerge in the process being incorporated in service of further engagement and commitment.

In locating and identifying with God's liberative and redemptive purpose in history, the theology of liberation is very sensitive to the claims, challenges, demands and promise of God's righteousness and justice. God Himself is conceived of as the God of Righteousness



and justice and as such he is especially concerned about the victims of unrighteousness and injustice - the poor, exploited, oppressed. This is something the theology of liberation meditates on, which in turn makes the poor and oppressed also of special interest to it. Meditating on God's activity and God's redemptive grace amongst those who are the victims of injustice and oppression is considered to be very much in line with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and of Jesus. When the Bible is read from the perspective of the poor as it ought to be read in the particular context where poverty is a major reality of the peoples' historical experience, the God of Righteousness and Justice is seen as the Liberating God. He is the God who acts to liberate the oppressed. The Exodus is accordingly seen as the paradigmatic event of God's redemptive activity. The Exodus is a historical event, by which God liberated the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt, constituted them into a Holy Nation, entrusted them with the task of establishing justice towards the creation of a society of freedom and human fulfilment.

Gustavo Gutierrez believes that when the Exodus is seen in such a light it is saved from being narrowly spiritualized and then seen for what it really is, a political as well as a spiritual event.<sup>16</sup> It is of profound and central importance in the Biblical narrative. It was never regarded as an event of a distant memory but one that remained the pattern for understanding God's liberating activity in the life and experience of subsequent generations in the history of Israel in the frame-work of their faith. The work of Christ became part of the continuing pattern of understanding god's liberating work in terms of the Exodus paradigm. Christ's work must, however, be seen as its complete fulfilment and enrichment. It is brought to its climax along with new dimensions of profound significance in Christ's work. The liberation that is accomplished by Christ fulfils the promise of the prophets and a new covenant brought into being which reached beyond the boundaries of Israel, embracing all humanity.

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<sup>16</sup>G. Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, SCM, 1974, p. 155ff.



This perception of the liberative work of God sets the tone and spirit of the prophetic consciousness of the theology of liberation as well as laying its basis and foundation. One of the ways in which the Exodus metaphor remains relevant is that there are contemporary human conditions and situations that bear correspondence to those of the Hebrew people in Egypt whose groans God heard and he liberated them in and through the Exodus. The prophetic vision of the theology having been shaped by this, along with its related commitment to righteousness and justice, there is a shared solidarity with the oppressed in their struggle for freedom and fulfilment.

This leads to the fourth feature of the Theology of Liberation which is its declared political interest and commitment. It is convinced that some form of political conditioning is inescapable whether this is admitted or not. But quite apart from this, it is committed to taking sides and making choices in historical praxis, that have inevitable political implications. Juan Luis Segundo has the following to say:

... Every theology is political, even one that does not speak or think in political terms. The influence of politics on theology and on every other cultural sphere cannot be evaded any more than the influence of theology on politics and on other sphere of human

influence of theology on politics and other spheres of human thinking. The worst politics of all would be to let theology perform this function unconsciously, for that brand of politics is always bound up with the status quo. Liberation theology consciously and explicitly accepts its relationship with politics. First of all, it incorporates into its own methodology the task of ideological analysis' that is situated on the boundary line between sociology and politics. And insofar as direct politics is concerned, it is more concerned about avoiding the (false) impartiality of academic theology than it is about taking sides and consequently giving ammunition to those who accuse it of partisanship. When academic theology accuses liberation theology of being political and engaging in politics, thus ignoring its own tie-up with the political status quo it is really looking for a scapegoat to squelch its own guilt complex.<sup>17</sup>

As can be seen, this coming from one of the most well-known and influential exponents of the Theology of Liberation, shows no reserve about its political awareness or interest and commitment. The commitment is spoken of in terms of 'partisanship'. This is not partisanship at the level of political party support and commitment but at the level of a more fundamental division in society, that is division at a structural level in the society. It faces up to the reality of "the world of the poor and oppressed" in society and opts to take sides with them. This is often referred to as 'bias

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<sup>17</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, Orbis, New York, pp 74-75, 1976.



to the poor' or 'preferential option for the poor'. It means according to Gustavo Gutierrez, more than simply adding sensitivity to our present occupations. It is really a case of entering into 'the world of the insignificant ...'<sup>18</sup> To be poor is to be truly insignificant, to be powerless economically or politically, not truly regarded, without real identity as far as the rich and powerful are concerned. Preferential option means becoming committed to the struggle for justice towards liberation from the position of solidarity with the poor.

One of the ways in which the theology of liberation's political concern and commitment become evident is engagement in the process of education referred to as conscientization.<sup>19</sup> This is a process of education that aims at the heightening of consciousness and empowerment of the oppressed for liberative decision-making and action on the part of the oppressed themselves. By this way they are meant to become

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<sup>18</sup>See Gutierrez's article, 'The Church of the Poor,' in the Month, July 1989.

<sup>19</sup>This method of education is associated with Paulo Friere as its chief Instigator and pioneer in its development -- See his seminal and foundational work, "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Seabury, N.Y. 1970

critically aware of the real nature of their situation. They will understand that they have not been fated to be as they are and will be able to identify the causes and sources of their oppression. Self-realization, coming to terms with their own potential and the possibility of change through their own action now become part of the liberative process. The theology of liberation sees this as an important part of its own project of doing theology which involves preferential option for the poor. The pattern is different from the traditional teacher-student relationship. It is a process of enabling within the context of mutual sharing. The most effective use of it has been made in "Ecclesial Base Communities" or groups of a similar nature. It therefore, takes place within a context of worship, study of the Bible, reflection on life and exploration of theological meaning in the face of the daily issues confronted. It is a bringing together of faith and life in a way that has serious implications for the whole ordering of their human historical state of affairs.

The whole political commitment of the theology of liberation expressed especially in its emphasis on preferential option for the poor and conscientization has been one of the areas that has resulted in strong



criticism of it. The basic criticism is that it is reductionist or that it is based on reductionist conclusions about the reality of the human situation. This is often stated in different ways and from different perspectives but invariably meaning the same thing.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Dennis P. McCann has charged that the Theology of Liberation has merged the themes of liberation and salvation or sees them as correlates. This has ended up politicizing the gospel. The ever present temptation to identify the Kingdom of God with one side in the political struggle or with one socio-political cause becomes very attractive as a result. See Christian Realism and Liberation Theology, Orbis, New York, 1981; "Practical Theology and Social Action": or "What can the 1980's learn from the 1960's" in Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World, ed. Don S. Browning (San Francisco, 1983), pp. 105-25.

Richard Neuhaus, in an extensive review of Gutierrez's seminal work, A Theology of Liberation, also sees the Theology of Liberation politicizing the Kingdom of God and committing itself to narrow partisanship which no longer sees the church as "a meeting place where understanding can be sought, ideas shared and communion celebrated among those on the opposite side of the barricades. The Church must decide for some people against others". Neuhaus gives the impression that in fact the theology liberation is no more than a social ethic - See "Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus" in Mission Trends, No. 3, Gerald H. Anderson, Thomas F. Stransky (Eds), Paulist Press and Eerdmans, New York and Grand Rapids, 1976.

These criticisms are made inspite of the fact that Gutierrez for example, seeks to set out a three-level relation between redemption and liberation which is aimed at showing an identity-in-difference relationship between liberation as historical transformation and salvation in the fullest sense as an eschatological reality - (See A Theology of Liberation, SCM, 17, cf pp. 145-189).

See also Jose Miguez Bonino's contributions in which he displays among other things, awareness of both the danger and charge of reductionism and seeks to

The universality of God's love is at stake. It no longer appears to be a love that reaches out and embraces all equally. The appeal to the universal love, however, does not necessarily undermine the basis of or contradict the need for the preferential option. The very use of the qualifier "preferential" rather than the unqualified "option" hints that the universal love is still in place. Oppression and injustice are themselves contradictions of the overall purpose of God's love. Where they are in evidence people are victimized and if God's overall purpose is to be fulfilled then there must be a strategic concentration on the victimized. It is also part of recognizing that it is of the nature of God's love to take justice seriously which means that care for the disadvantaged is in order. On this basis it is felt there is no place for neutrality. Any attempt at neutrality becomes support for the status quo. It is a form of taking sides - the wrong side. For Gutierrez the option is a declaration concerning the gratuitous concern of God and not primarily as suggested or as appears a romanticization of the poor. However, it must be seen

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address them (See for example his "Historical Praxis and Christian Identity", in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, Rosino Gibellini (Ed.), 1980).



that the option is at the same time a judgement against the life-styles of the rich and against the oppressive structures that support them.<sup>21</sup> Segundo Galilea takes this even further when he writes:

... The poor include racial classes such as blacks and native Indians, and also all those alienated on the margin of society: the lower proletariat in the cities, the unemployed, and the disabled of all sorts. While that does not exhaust the Christian meaning of the term 'poor' those people are the privileged subjects of liberation ...

... All these people require the privileged service of the Christian community, which nevertheless remains open to love in all its universality ...

There is another category of human beings that is an equally privileged object of Christian liberation, i.e. sinners. They too can hope for salvation, and the proclamation of that fact and that hope is also an essential component of evangelization ... Just as we must incarnate the idea of the "the poor" without draining it, so we can and must do something similar with the notion of "sinner" on our continent. In liberation terms they are the exploiters and those who act unjustly. A message of liberation is addressed to them also, though in different terms. They must undergo conversion and become poor, abetting the liberation of the poor rather than hindering it. They must become poor along the lines spelled out by Jesus ... 'None of you can be my

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<sup>21</sup>Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, SCM, 1974, pp. 300ff. See also, The Power of the Poor In History, SCM, 1983, pp. 46-48.

disciple if he does not renounce all his possessions' (Luke 14<sup>33</sup>). The point is illustrated in the parable of the heavy eating rich man and the poor Lazarus. Thus the "liberation of the rich" also has its place in Latin American Theology and spirituality. Such liberation is possible for them in so far as they are willing to become poor - This means that the Church in its work of Evangelization, must utter summons to conversion from the basic standpoint of identification with the poor and their significance in salvation history rather than identification with the rich and then hold on to power.<sup>22</sup>

The charge is frequently made that the Theology of Liberation is wedded to the use of violence as a means of effecting socio-political change. This is associated

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<sup>22</sup>Segundo Galilea, "Liberation and New Tasks Facing Christians" in Frontiers of Theology in Latin America. Rosio Gibellino (Ed.), SCM, 1980.

Interestingly Desmond Tutu, from his own particular background and perspective also makes the connection between the bias of God for the disadvantaged and his wider concern for all in his gracious saving love. He declares - "God revealed Himself then as a God who had a bias. God was not neutral. Pharaoh and his people would have had a great deal to say about God's imagined neutrality. No, the God of the Bible, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ showed Himself to be thoroughly biased in favour of the undeserving, of the unlikely and by extension, on behalf of the weak and those who could do little for themselves. God was concerned for all His people, but the Exodus showed that He had a peculiar concern and specific caring for those who did not have any one to care for them, those who were victims of agents and circumstances more powerful than themselves. It was because of this caring that God came to the aid of sinners against the devil and the powers of evil - See his Von Hugel Lecture, 1989, also reproduced in the Month, November 1989.



with its assumed totally Marxist orientation and its passionate commitment to the oppressed in their struggle against the powers and forces of oppression and injustice. It is a misrepresentation of what the position really is for it to be claimed that the theology of liberation is unequivocally and uncritically committed to the use of violence and that all liberation theologians see a place for violence in the scheme of things as far as their project is concerned. The Marxist connection has already been dealt with which ought to have some bearing on the perception of the theology as inevitably committed to violence. In addition it needs to be pointed out that there are differences to be found amongst liberation theologians over the question of the use or place of violence as there are to be found among others generally. However, if a representative viewpoint were to be set forth, then it would be that liberation theologians are committed to the point of view of the "Just Revolution" closely akin to the well known "Just War Theory" but even with this there are still shades of differences as to what is exactly meant and how it is understood. Basically, violence is not regarded as a first choice. Realism, apart from anything else,

dictates the necessity of restraint, bearing in mind the force of arms and other resources of military and police power that are at the disposal of the oppressive powers. There is a sense nevertheless in which fundamentally there is no choice as to whether they are implicated in or committed to violence. Violence is a fact of life in the contexts to which they are accustomed. It is systemic and so people are either victims or beneficiaries of it.

Dogmatic commitment to non-violence simply reinforces the violent structures or the way things are ordered in service of oppression and injustice. There is, therefore, an openness on the part of liberation theologians to the fact that the time may come when there is no alternative, but to resort to violence in one form or another in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed. The particularities of the given situation will determine whether this is to be engaged in or not. There is no place for any predetermined rule to be used to impose an absolute ban on the use of violence in the struggle for liberation and moreover for such rules to be defined, dictated and imposed from outside the situation. Even though this is not a non-violent position it still



is not the rabid violent position sometimes ascribed to the Theology of Liberation and it is in fact in line with what many others who are not liberation theologians hold and not as pro-violence as some of its critics actually are for example, in their anti-communist stand.

In the fifth place, the Theology of Liberation has a strong and abiding sense of the corporate. It represents a rediscovery of the corporate dimension of the faith not least in terms of the nature of the theology itself. Even though there are names of well-known exponents of it, such individual exponents are quite anxious to point out that they are essentially representatives of a larger body that has done the basic thinking and reflection in community and solidarity. The theologians are themselves largely animators, facilitators and clarifiers. They do their work in solidarity with the people in their struggle, suffering and basic reflection. R. McAfee Brown has stated that the Theology of Liberation is essentially a Theology of the People, a by-product of the ongoing struggle of the

oppressed to overcome their oppression and realize their human potential.<sup>23</sup> It has been said:

... Liberation Theology could be compared to a tree. Those of who see only professional theologians at work in it see only the branches of the tree. They fail to see the trunk, which is the thinking of priests and other pastoral ministers, let alone the roots beneath the soil that hold the whole tree - trunk and branches - in place. The roots are the practical living and thinking-through submerged and anonymous-going on in tens of thousands of base communities living out their faith, and thinking it is a liberating key.<sup>24</sup>

This bears out the fact that liberation theology sees itself as a Church theology, ecclesially based though not ecclesially bound in that its concerns are not exclusively about the welfare and well-being of the Church.

The corporate sense with which the theology is marked makes it critical of the phenomenon of the interiorization and privatization of the faith which

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<sup>23</sup>See "After Ten Years" prefaced to Gustavo Gutierrez, The Power of the Poor in History, SCM, 1983, p. vi.

See also Leonardo Boff, Church, Charism and Power, SCM, 1985, pp. 8-10. Enrique Dussel's "Theology by the People" in Ministerial Formation, Vol. 31, Sept. 1985.

<sup>24</sup>Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, Burns and Oates, 1987, p. 12



discount the corporate nature and commitment of the faith or plays it down considerably and gives pre-eminence to the individualistic dimension. The political theology of Europe is also critical of this of which it is very much aware in secularized Europe. Johannes Metz, one of the pioneers of political theology on the continent, sees one of its aims as bringing privatized religion to an end.<sup>25</sup> The privatization of the faith has led to the gospel and its message seen as predominantly concerned with matters of the individual soul and personal, private, individual morality. The fact that the Church itself is a corporate entity with corporate significance, influencing and being influenced by social and corporate factors in the world, particularly the context to which it belongs, does not seem to be a matter of significance. There is a sense in which the gospel does not seem to have any meaning for the Church as such. Sin and salvation are seen as essentially and fundamentally matters of an

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<sup>25</sup>J.B. Metz, Theology of the World, Herder and Herder, 1969, p. 9. The marginalization of Religion as a result of secularization is in a measure responsible for the privatization that has taken place in Europe. In Latin America and the Caribbean the constant influence of conservative and neo-conservatist religious groups and teachings has always been prone towards individualization and privatization.

individualistic nature and are treated as such. This means that there is an inevitable retreat of the Church from its mission of social responsibility, which would take it beyond the "charity principle" and commit it to knowing and understanding the causes of the things that made charity necessary and participating in the struggle for change.

The Theology of Liberation draws attention to the fact that the gospel of the Kingdom is more than a transaction between God and the individual human soul. When the gospel is read from the perspective of the oppressed, its corporate thrust becomes clear. Both sin and salvation are seen to have corporate dimensions. Sin is seen as capable of being embodied in structures, systems, institutions, groups and orders of society that disfigure, manipulate, oppress and crush human beings. Salvation also has a historical-social dimension which is the liberation of human beings in historical praxis, the transformation of society on the way to total salvation in the established kingdom of the new age on earth in the fulfilment of God's purpose by God Himself.

The corporate emphasis has also been the object of serious criticism. The fact that the individual seems to



be on the point of being swallowed up in some corporate whole and above all there is the danger of sin being divorced from personal human will and simply encased in impersonal social structures or institutions of one kind or another. This criticism of the view of sin is implied for example in the Vatican document, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation", which stresses that only persons sin. It is not structures that sin and structures are unjust as a result of human decision and action to exploit and oppress. The document comments as follows:

... Having become his own centre sinful man tends to assert himself and to satisfy his desire for the infinite by the use of things: wealth, power and pleasure, despising other people and robbing them unjustly and treating them as objects or instruments. Thus, he makes his own contribution to the creation of those very structures of exploitation and slavery which he claims to condemn.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that there have been instances when liberation theologians seemed to have played down the individual dimension of sin to the point where it seemed to have been non-existent. And it may be that at other

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<sup>26</sup>"Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" published by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, March 1986, See paragraphs 37-42, esp. 42.

times when they try to state the connection between human sin and structural sin they have not been clear about the relationship. This, however, has been receiving attention and they are insistent that there is an important factor to be borne in mind that has long been overlooked in what they regard as the over-emphasis on the individualistic and privatistic understanding of the faith in their own context. This they feel has immobilized Christians or made them in-different to the situation of oppression as it is and for the Church to take sides appropriately. In the end they would not necessarily dispute that sinful structures came about by human choices and decision-making. They, however, would wish for greater recognition and acknowledgement, that over time the structures could allow injustice to become institutionalized in such a way that they could victimize people terribly while at the same time not leaving anyone currently responsible in the primary understanding of the term. Alistair Kee puts it this way:

... But we know that evil is also institutionalized so that individuals can with integrity and clear conscience, operate impersonal policies which advance



the interest of the rich and powerful  
 against the interests of the poor and  
 weak.<sup>27</sup>

This is what liberation theologians are eager to draw to attention along with its implications for the life of people within their context and also in the relationship between the rich and poor countries and the continued colonial and neo-colonial structures that often express and determine the relationship.

The sixth thing about the Theology of Liberation is that it is committed to a new hermeneutic in its approach to the Scriptures. This hermeneutic in a real sense embodies and exemplifies many of the features already discussed and demonstrates decisively the paradigm shift that the whole theological project represents.

In the first place, the over-riding interest and aim of the hermeneutic are related to the meaning of the scriptures for the contemporary context in which it is being interpreted. It is, therefore, never satisfied with simply ascertaining a purely historical understanding of the scriptures, grasping the original

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<sup>27</sup>Alistair Kee, "Mystery and Politics: The Explorations Continue" in God's Truth - Essays to celebrate the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Honest to God, Ed. by Eric James, SCM Ltd., 1988, p. 122.

meaning and knowing the original intention of the writer. What the text has to say in terms of the contextual issues and realities, questions, problems, demands and challenges with which it is confronted is seen to be of paramount importance in terms of meaning for guidance, direction and understanding of the purpose of God and the call to action in the given context. The text is not faced from a position of detachment with the intention of discovering truths, answers, explanations, ideas and concepts that are pre-eminently universally applicable. It is faced from a position of commitment, that is commitment in which the issues with which the scriptures are faced were first encountered and out of which they emerge. There is no purely objective, detached or neutral stance by which the scriptures are approached, even though this is often claimed and encouraged as the truly scientific approach. The interpreter is already conditioned and where this is not admitted as a matter of choice, then the conditioning is invariably by the dominant culture, so that in an oppressive context it is the associated conditioning that takes place, that which sanctions the status quo. This is why for the theology of liberation there is considered need for both



ideological and exegetical suspicion in the hermeneutical process. The idea of suspicion does not necessarily impute or imply deliberate ulterior motives on the part of anyone. It really rests on the conviction that predetermined interpretations or interpretations based upon settled revelation available to be applied to the context with particularities of its own begin by being already ideologically deficient, lacking in vital human data necessary for the elucidation of the contextual situation. This is so because the commitment and engagement related to the issues and realities of that writer would have been lacking.<sup>28</sup> What is clear is that the contemporary meaning of the text for the particular context in which the interpretation is taking place and the location of the interpreter are of vital importance.

In the second place, the hermeneutical approach places great emphasis on similarities between the experience of the people of God in the story of the Bible and the experience of the poor and oppressed here and now in situations in which oppression is an ordered and

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<sup>28</sup>Juan Luis Segundo's hermeneutic circle is outlined in such a manner and has influenced what has been stated. For a full exposition of the circle see The Liberation of Theology, Orbis, New York, 1976, pp. 9ff.

structured way of life. Gustavo Gutierrez speaks of the relevance of the Exodus paradigm or metaphor today, because there are contemporary historical situations that are similar to that experienced by the People of Israel. The correspondence of experience or the structural correlation between the people of the Bible and the people in the context in which the interpretation is taking place is given importance in the reflections of the people in the present context. Seeing, reading and interpreting the scriptures from their perspective and seeking to grasp their insights and reflections in the interpretive process afford fresh insights and offer new resources of understanding. There is a place then for learning from the poor who are said to have special "hermeneutic privilege" or "access of understanding" to the scriptures. Carlos Mesters has the following to say concerning this:

... The example of popular interpretation given shows a deep familiarity with the Bible. It is not the familiarity of someone who knows the Bible from end to end, but that of someone who feels at home with it. Before the renewal movement began the Bible was always something that belonged to those who taught, commanded and paid and was explained in such a way as to confirm them in their knowledge that enabled them to teach, the power that enabled them to command, and the possessions of money



that enabled them to pay. Now the Bible is beginning to belong to those to the side of those who are taught, ordered and paid. They are discovering that there is nothing in the Bible to confirm the others in their knowledge, to control the impoverished people ... Despite all its faults and uncertainties, the interpretation of the Bible these people are making can make a great contribution to Exegesis itself. The peoples' contribution is made not through spectacles but through their eyes. The eyes of the people are recapturing the sure vision with which Christians should read and interpret the Bible. So this popular interpretation is a warning to manufacturers of spectacles - the exegetes. Spectacles have to be made to suit eyes, if vision is to be improved. When eyes have to be adapted to suit spectacles, vision is spoiled and the world grows dark.<sup>29</sup>

In giving prominence to the "hermeneutic privilege" of the poor and oppressed or seeing the text from their perspective, there is no wish to make any exclusivist claims, which would mean regarding other perspectives and approaches as having been supplanted altogether, replaced or rendered irrelevant. Admittedly, there have been claims made on behalf of the approach in some instances that have conveyed the impression of such exclusivist claims. This, however, is not the basic claim generally.

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<sup>29</sup>Carlos Mesters, "How the Bible is Interpreted in Some Basic Communities in Brazil" in Concilium, October 1980.

There is the keen desire, however, for the approach to be given a rightful place within the scheme of things because it does have very definite advantages at least in the context known to the liberation theologians. It recognizes a correspondence of experience between the original hearers of the word and message and the hearers today. This it is believed offers insights that are not readily grasped by others reading the text from another position or perspective. The poor are considered less likely to divert, deflect or stand against the word and message that call for radical change since they are victims and not beneficiaries of the status quo. It can be understood, therefore, why theology of liberation shows interest in the socio-political realities, questions, actions and movements that stand behind the texts and narrative of the Bible. The structural correlation between the past and present situation and conditions which include the social formation which the text calls into question, challenges or affirms is instructive and helpful for the interpretive process. In this sense then, the way the story of the Bible dovetails with the story of the people in the context of its



interpretation, the correspondence of experience and correlation of conditions along with the social location of the interpreter within the context are of paramount importance.

Thirdly, the hermeneutic maintains a strong sense of the corporate recognizing that the message of the Bible has relevance beyond the realm of the individual. This aspect of the story has already been looked at and reference was also made to its approach to the scriptures. It only remains for the basic point to be repeated that as far as the theology of liberation is concerned the message of the Bible is not isolated from matters of a socio-political nature and reserved only for matters of individual morality, inspiration and private spiritual nurture. The message of the Kingdom speaks to and deals with human life and the orders of existence which include the socio-political order. And even when individuals and their hope are addressed this is not done in isolation from their life in community.

The Book of Revelation and the  
Theology of Liberation

It is from the perspective of the Theology of Liberation, especially in terms of the emphases and

insights that have been looked at and which first brought to mind the shortcomings of the previous study of the Book of Revelation that had been undertaken in the local congregation and the possibilities that there were, that the book will be examined in this study. It will be essentially a theological examination of an interpretive nature of the book as a whole. This is not to say that there will be none of the critical considerations and exercises that are associated with the work done in the historical commentaries. Attention will be paid to these where necessary and at points considered appropriate, throughout the study. This means also that such matters as date of writing, authorship, sources, provenance and textual integrity usually treated as introductory features of commentaries will be dealt with in the study where they are considered essential to the discussion at the given point.

The study will proceed on the basis that in a very remarkable and most significant manner the Book of Revelation anticipates the theology of liberation in terms of its methodological process and its emphases. This is seen to be so as the Book is seen in its context. It will be noted that there is structural correlation



between the contextual situation of Book and the "Third World" contextual situation in which this examination is taking place and that the book is itself the fruit of response to and reflection upon that situation in which the writer and his fellow-believers found themselves, under the inspiration of the spirit and in the light of the word of God. The situation will be affirmed to have been one of oppression and the engagement in struggle that the book reflects upon and represents gives rise to themes and features that are consonant with certain of the features that are associated with the theology of liberation - contextual orientation, practical commitment, prophetic consciousness, political sensitivity, ecclesial connection, biblical vision and hope. And so the book is considered to be of particular relevance to the Third World situation such as it is generally known and characterized. There are surely wide and varied contextual particularities within each individual society and yet there is a community of experience past and present shared by most of the societies that can be spoken of together and in general. These common features will be referred to as the study proceeds.

This of course does not mean that the importance of the book is limited to this specific contextual relevance. It also bears a definite universal significance and it is here believed that this is one of the enriching contributions that it can make to theological thinking that is self-consciously contextual. It is a contribution that will be seen to be both a reminder and a corrective. The contextual and the cosmic are brought together in a most remarkable manner in the book which shows that these are not mutually exclusive realms or dimensions of human life and vision. It is hoped that this will be demonstrated in the examination to be undertaken.

Even though it is hoped that the whole study will itself confirm the appropriateness of the approach adopted and the correctness of the claims made, there are certain questions that may arise and likely criticisms based on presuppositions formed once the approach is noted that are best anticipated and dealt with at the outset. There are two things in particular which are even more significant because the Book of Revelation is involved bearing in mind the kind of treatment it often receives from popular interpreters. The first thing is



that with the emphasis placed on the over-riding importance of the meaning for the context in which the interpretation is being done, the chances are increased that meanings to suit the desire and the wish of the interpreter may be imposed upon the text. The manipulation of texts to legitimize or endorse projects, ideas, attitudes, causes, programme, is a well-known practice and the Book of the Revelation has often been manipulated in this way. And where there is an underlying assumption that the text itself has a "reserve" meaning or a "reserve of meanings" which is beyond or separate and apart from the history or original meaning, as some who lay emphasis on the contemporary meaning hold, the risk is there that the door may be opened to unrestricted plurality of meanings assigned to any text with resulting confusion of application.

The second thing is that when emphasis is placed upon correspondence of experience, structural correlation of situations or the dove-tailing of the Bibles world and the contemporary context in which the interpretations being done there is the risk of both mischief and grave injustice being perpetuated. There is the basis for great confusion being caused by theories being put forth,

identifications being made and campaigns being carried out on the strength of superficial resemblances and simplistic transference. Sometimes similarities are emphasized and major schemes of interpretation are built on them without any attention being paid to quite important differences that are also present in the same narrative or elsewhere in the scriptures, which if taken into consideration, the conclusions arrived at on the basis of the resemblances, would be radically altered. It is well known that the Book of Revelation, has been used in this very manner. Identifications have been made of contemporary events, places and persons as being representative of symbols and figures in the Book of Revelation on the flimsiest of references, the most superficial resemblances and in spite of great differences otherwise.

These dangers are real and are known to make subtle intrusions into interpretations or examinations of Books of the Bible even when it is believed there is no risk of it happening. Attempts will be made to safeguard against the dangers referred to by making use of the historical critical method, lessons gained from the history of Biblical interpretation in general and particularly of



the Book of Revelation, and insights gained from the use being made of the social sciences, especially sociology, in analyzing the Biblical world and environment and also knowledge of the contemporary context gained by similar analyses. The original meaning or what comes nearest to it, made possible by the historical-critical method will be borne in mind. It is accepted that this will have some bearing on whatever other meaning the text may be considered or discovered to have. Because it represents the intention of the writer himself, it will be seen as a kind of touchstone that will determine where there is arbitrariness in the imposition of meaning on the text that simply suits the whims and fancies of the interpreter or where there is manipulation of the text to serve whatever purpose or causes one wishes. At the same time the original or historical meaning will not be allowed to impose such a stranglehold on the interpretive possibilities that other levels of meaning in the text separate and apart from or beyond it, and relevant for the context in which the interpretation is being done may not be grasped and given good effect.

Contrary to what is sometimes thought and expressed by some critics, the approach to the scriptures inspired

by the theology of liberation is not so pessimistic as to think that there is an unbridgeable cultural gap between the ancient world and the present one that makes it impossible to ascertain the original meaning of the text or what approximates to it as much as possible. Neither is it so cavalier as to believe that even if the original meaning is ascertainable it makes no material difference for it is considered irrelevant to the contemporary context and its issues. It recognizes that the original meaning can give guidance and direction in relation to grasping or discovering the meaning for the contemporary situation here and now. And in a sense the original meaning both restrains and liberates. It restrains by giving indication of arbitrariness, where meanings assigned bear no link whatever in form, substance and spirit to the direction it points and the impulse and inspiration that it gives. It liberates because it points in the direction of other meaning-possibilities where there may be the tendency to finalize or absolutize any single meaning. This will be borne in mind as the study is pursued.

Lessons from the history of interpretation as stated will be kept in mind. These will be considered



important for information and guidance. Traditions that have developed, parameters that have been established and consensus that has evolved which are all useful to prevent repetition of past mistakes or unnecessarily making new ones will be heeded, while at the same time seizing the interpretive possibilities offered by the particular hermeneutic approach adopted. And then it is hoped that benefits of the increased knowledge of the Biblical world, in this case the world of the New Testament in particular, and also knowledge of the context in which the interpretation is being done afforded by social analysis, will eliminate or reduce considerably the chances of simplistic transference from the past to the present. The inevitable differences between the worlds will be noted and what can be learnt from them will also be noted. Limited or modified correspondence or similarities will be recognized for what they are, just as more full blown or complete ones will be acknowledged. It is recognized that data and details that are gained from the sociological study of Biblical world are in some cases tentative and uncertain and also the reconstructions of the social world are often conditioned by the ideas and even political

commitment of the ones doing them. Yet it does seem that a credible body of information has been made available sufficient for discernment of the meaningful correspondence of experience and structural correlation between the past and the present controls where they exist.

The degree to which the pitfalls referred to have been safe-guarded against can only be judged in terms of what follows in the study. No claim has been made and no impression is wished to be given that the method of hermeneutic adopted is the only one that can be taken with the hope of gaining a proper understanding of the book or that the final word will be said on the Book. Any claim of this nature would simply have indicated that despite what has been said about learning from the lessons of the history of interpretation, particularly of the Book of Revelation, one of the most important of such lessons would not have been taken to heart. So often it is those who have claimed that they possess the only key to the true interpretation of the book have been the ones who have created the greatest confusion in relation to it. What is being claimed here is that the approach



being adopted seems to possess some distinct advantages for gaining the relevant meaning of the book for the particular context in which it is being read and with significance beyond it.

There is an ever-increasing number of books appearing about the theology of liberation which are very helpful in increasing knowledge and understanding of its nature and character and of its potential for increasing understanding and clarifying vision of the faith and its out-working in ordinary, everyday life. There are not as many books, however, that are showing and demonstrating the theology at work especially in relation to the interpretation of the Bible in terms of the specific Books of the Bible, though the theology is itself Bible-centred. It is hoped that this study of one of the most feared, neglected, abused and controversial books of the Bible will be a contribution towards correcting the perceived deficiency. It is also a recognition and acknowledgement of what is seen and regarded as a promising and potentially resourceful perspective for the study of the Bible awaiting further urgent exploration. This will be useful in the constant search for authentic understanding of what God is saying in His Word for today.

and what He is calling His people to join Him in doing in the outworking and effecting of His liberative purpose in a world in which people wrestle with the life and death issue of fulfilling their humanity in face of overwhelming odds against them doing so. The further hope is that much of this will be done in those parts of the world where the pain of the wrestling and struggle is most acutely felt. Indeed this study is undertaken from within such a context with the belief that the Book of Revelation offers a relevant, meaningful and powerful message of challenge and hope in such contexts but with accompanying significance that reaches far beyond the immediate context and its particularities.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN CONTEXT

There is no basic agreement concerning the general outline, order of material and the nature of the content of The Book of Revelation. A variety of suggestions has been put forward that reflects differences of opinion concerning the origin and nature of the material, the structure and purpose of the book and editorial activity in its compilation. It means, therefore, that the outline of the content that will be offered here at the beginning of our discussion, is by no means regarded as the only one possible. It is offered nonetheless in the belief that on a whole, the integrity of the book as it is ought to be accepted. Generally speaking as the book now stands it is marked by a basic consistency of purpose and unity of style to support the belief.

The book is based upon a series of visions, which are more or less related directly to the historical framework in which it is written. This it is hoped will

be demonstrated at a later point in this chapter. The immediate introductory statements establish the source, nature and status of the work. It is the revelation (apokalypsis) from God through Christ Jesus and it is prophetic. The writer who gives his name as John also establishes his authority and credentials. He is a servant of God and a companion in experience of those to whom the book is addressed. The Book is expected to be read publicly and its content taken seriously. A beatitude is pronounced upon those who accord it such a treatment 1<sup>1-3</sup>. What comes out here is that from the very outset the church-relatedness or congregation-based connection of the book is presupposed in this regard. (1<sup>1-8</sup>)

The inaugural vision came to the writer on the Island of Patmos where he was 'because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus'. The exact cause of his being on the Island has been a matter of debate and will be the subject of later discussions. In the vision he saw the exalted Lord in his awesome splendour and heard the call and commission to address the seven churches in the province of Asia Minor by writing to them. The seven churches are generally held to be local congregations but



which at the same time collectively represent the church in general, the number seven being significant in relation to this. (1<sup>9-20</sup>).

Letters are addressed to all seven churches, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The letters follow a somewhat general pattern with few exceptions. The angel of the church is addressed. Opinions vary as to the exact identity of the angel. These range from reflections of belief in the existence of a guardian angel related to God's People, with each of the churches, therefore, having its own angel, to belief that the angel represents the bishop or elder of the church. Whatever may be the identity of the angel, it is clear the letters were meant for the congregations and not simply for the angels' perusal. The churches are addressed by the exalted Lord and appropriate aspects of His Person taken from the inaugural vision are highlighted in the case of each church. Suffering and the risk of unfaithfulness are two challenges facing the churches. The letters combine commendation, rebuke, warning and encouragement in what

they constitute. At the end of each there is a common refrain which exhorts obedience to what has been said (2-3).

The writer is then transported into the heavenly realm and invited to see what was there and to hear what was taking place. He saw God in all his majesty enthroned and heard him acclaimed by the twenty-four elders and four wing creatures representative of four major categories of creature life who made up the heavenly company, as sovereign Lord of creation and of history. The vision seems to be directly influenced by Ezekiel 1<sup>5-25</sup> cf Is.6. God is the one who determines the whole purpose of history and the destiny of humanity. And decisive to the unfolding of this and the grasping of its meaning and significance for human life and the whole creation is the role of the one who is spoken of as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the seed of David, and who appears as a lamb bearing the marks of having been slain, standing at the throne. He alone is able to unlock the scroll secured by seven seals and held in the hand of God. He is worthy because of his sacrificial redemptive work wrought on behalf of the world and humanity in the purpose of God, (4-5).



The contents of the scroll which could be opened only by the lamb now become the focus of attention. There is a cycle of three visions which disclose the judgment that those who are unfaithful and the rebellious powers will incur upon themselves as the effect of God's holy displeasure towards them. Seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls are associated with and symbolic of the series of events that constitute the judgement upon the unfaithful and rebellious. Elements of nature and features that recall the plagues that fell upon Egypt are instruments of the judgement. The exodus motif is a characteristic feature of the book. There are those who believe the seals, trumpet and bowls represent separate and independent acts of judgement following upon one another in time and at the same time each representing an intensification of the punishment. On the other hand there are those who think that they portray a single event looked at from different angles. This latter understanding is the one adopted in this discussion (6; 8-9; 11<sup>15-19</sup>; 15-16).

It is characteristic of the Book to have certain interludes in the narrative where seemingly unrelated matters are given attention. These interludes do seem to play a decisive role in the scheme of things as they are

unfolded in the book and in effect they are not as unrelated to the rest of the material as they appear to be. In them the Elect, in spite of the tribulation they experience, are guaranteed security symbolized by God placing His own mark or seal upon them as both a mark of identity and protection, (7). The writer's own prophetic role is not only underscored but the prophetic ministry of the whole church is set forth. This latter is done in relation to the appearance of two mysterious prophetic figures of obvious Old Testament association, whose experience illustrates what is in store for God's People as they perform their critical prophetic role in the world. They will have to face hostile reactions, nevertheless they are assured that God has the final word which means that their destiny is secure with Him (10-11<sup>14</sup>).

The encounter and confrontation of God's People with the hostile forces and powers of evil are described and shown to assume new dimensions. It begins with the somewhat enigmatic revelation of an impressively robed woman pregnant with child who was confronted by an awesome and seemingly enormously powerful red dragon whose sole intention was to destroy the child. The child was snatched away to safety. The woman also escaped and



received protection. The dragon was defeated in what is set forth as a conflict in heaven. The actual identity of the woman is debated and there is no general agreement concerning it. Suggestions tend to vary from Mary, the mother of Jesus, to Israel the nation of the Messiah and also to the Church which gives testimony to the messiah by its very existence and its ministry. There is fairly general agreement, however, that the incident represents a very highly compressed account of the life of Jesus with attention focussed on His exaltation. The hostile power made the very Redeemer and Saviour of the Church the object of his attack. The power was defeated but not totally vanquished and it committed itself to menace the life and existence of God's People (12).

The defeated dragon in its resolve to make life difficult for the people of God became the moving power and force behind two closely related enemies that emerged against the people. One of them a beast that emerged from the sea and the other another beast that emerged from the land. The one that emerged from the sea is considered to represent the imperial power and the other the local representative of the imperial cult which is part of the imperial culture that is enforced by the imperial power and supportive of its claims. These

beasts are the very embodiment of evil power. They are uncompromising in their challenge to and demands upon the people who were faced with persecution, sanctions and even death if they did not respond positively to the blasphemous claims of the beasts. This brings into very sharp focus the decisive struggle in which the people were caught up in the world. (13).

In one respect it is a life and death struggle in which the people are engaged but in another respect those who do not give in and so do not compromise the integrity of their faith are assured of vindication. Victory is assured the faithful and judgement pronounced upon the powers and forces of evil that oppose and oppress them. (14).

There is then spelt out in greater detail the fall of Babylon which is actually the code name for Rome. The reaction of those who benefited from the political, economic and social life, policies, practices and existing structures associated with the Roman establishment is described. The response of those who were victims is also described (17-1910). This is followed by an account of the decisive and final showdown, when the Lord took the fight to the massed armies and forces of the hostile powers that have always



stood in opposition to Him and His people. These forces were no match for the Lord who demolished them with the sword of His mouth. (19<sup>11-21</sup>).

The stage is then set for the establishment of the messianic kingdom rule in which the saints are given a share with their Lord. They saw not only the interim restraint of the power of evil, but also its final burst of activity brought to an end and its fate sealed forever in total banishment (20).

The book ends with an all-embracing vision of a new order, God's own work and gift of a Heavenly origin but an earthly reality. It is a new heaven and a new earth which at the same time is identified with a city, The New Jerusalem with implications for life in community of a perfect nature. The distinction between heaven and earth is no more. God now dwells in the midst of his people which is in contrast with the first vision with God enthroned in heaven. Purity of life fitting for the new order is emphasised along with the thought that nothing that is of genuine worth and value in the present order will be lost to the new order but will be received into it and become part of what it is, 21<sup>1</sup>-22<sup>5</sup>. There are closing words which reaffirm that He who is to come, is

coming in the fulfillment of his promise and the prophetic nature and integrity of the book itself must be observed and kept intact, 22<sup>5ff</sup>.

#### CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE

At a glance the Book of Revelation does not necessarily seem to have much to do with the world of ordinary experience and life in general and even much less with a specific context, environment, issues and challenges. Yet one of the striking things that a more careful look and examination will reveal is that contextuality is a dominant feature of the book. For example, the sense of urgency and immediacy of certain of its exhortations and warnings conveys this impression, 2-3; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>. This means that it was written with serious intention and purpose to deal with issues and matters of concern that arose in the life situation of the churches to which it was written. Such issues and matters of concern constituted a crisis for them. It was a crisis in which they needed to make sense of their life and faith, mission and witness, and the purpose and will of God in the face of their daily experiences and the circumstances with which they had to contend.



Something that is very significant is that the crisis was not exclusively internally generated, in the sense that it was not related to such things as church order, structures of ministry and traditions and customs. It was generated largely in terms of the life of the church in the community and the wider world. In line with this it is noticeable that there is not much emphasis placed on the private life of the individual. The corporate life of the believing community as that life is worked out in and impinged upon by their dominant culture is what receives attention above all. So also it is more with corporate political, social, economic and cultural forces, structures and powers that it is concerned as these become part of the order dominated by the power of evil. The symbolic representation of the powers in the form of beasts, both in terms of their background and immediate connotation supports their corporate understanding, 11<sup>7</sup>; 12<sup>3</sup>; 14<sup>11</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. Babylon is also used in a corporate rather than individualistic sense, 14<sup>8</sup>; 16<sup>9</sup>; 17<sup>5</sup>; 18<sup>2</sup>; 19<sup>20</sup>. Immediate contextual relevance is very important as far as the book is concerned. Adele Yarbro Collins writes in relation to this:

Perhaps the hardest won and most dearly held result of historical - critical

scholarship of the Revelation of John is the theory that the work must be interpreted in terms of its historical context - the context in which it was composed.<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Revelation is, therefore, not simply exploring religious themes in the abstract. Neither is the writer simply writing for a general readership without any concern for the contextual realities and particularities of his readers' situation and the issues such realities and particularities raised for them in terms of their own self understanding as a believing community and their relation to the wider society and the powers-that-be and the structures of that society. The writer's sensitivity to how contextual factors impinged upon the life of the church is an important factor in understanding the book. Both H.B. Swete and W.G. Kummel have been helpful in comments they have made respectively. Swete writes:

The Book starts with a well defined historical situation, to which reference

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<sup>1</sup>"Political Perspectives of the Revelation of John" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 96/2 1977 pp. 241-252. It is interesting that Dr. J.A.T. Robinson also makes the observation that even though the Book may not seem to have much to do with the secular world, paradoxically it is more particularly addressed to making sense of that world than any other book of the Bible. "Interpreting the Book of Revelation" in Where Their Ways Meet SCM 1987, p. 36



is made again at the end; and the intermediate visions which form the body of the book cannot in any reasonable theory be dissociated from the historical setting. The prophecy cries out of local and contemporary circumstances. It is in the first instance at least, the answer of the spirit to the Asian Christians towards the end of the first century.<sup>2</sup>

Kummel writes:

The Apocalypse is a book of its time written out of its time and for its time, not for the distant generations of the future or even the end time. It is an occasional writing, as much as are the epistles of the New Testament and which, therefore, as a matter of principle should be understood in relation to the history of its time.<sup>3</sup>

These two comments are quite positive in their convictions that the writer of the Book of Revelation wrote with deliberate reference to his immediate historical setting and that the book ought to be understood in the light of that setting. The historical and socio-political setting was not incidental to the writer's purpose neither was its impact merely indirect. Such factors as its own self-understanding, mission, witness, worship, patriotism and decision-making procedures were raised for the church in the light of the

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<sup>2</sup>H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John.

<sup>3</sup>W.G. Kummel, Introduction to the New Testament, SCM London, 1966 p. 324.

historical cultural and socio-political realities it faced in its historical setting. This, therefore, gave a distinct contextual orientation to the book.

#### CONTEXTUALITY CHALLENGED

The contextual orientation and relevance of the book that is here being set forth is not, however, something that it can be taken for granted that everyone has accepted. There have been challenges to such an understanding of the book across a fairly wide spectrum of students of the book. Therefore, there cannot be much progress made towards looking at the contextual realities and issues with which it is believed the book deals and which make it fit to be looked at from the particular perspective here undertaken until there is some examination of the challenge to the contextuality claimed for it.

There are those who have understood and interpreted the Book in such a way as to deny it any contextual orientation and relevance whatever or such contextual orientation or relevance that may be detected is played down considerably as of being little or no significance. In this sense, therefore, the book has been completely decontextualized. This is done in more than one ways.



Sometimes the book is understood in a completely futurist sense. This is the sense in which all the events and issues to which it refers are related to the end-time, which is in the future, if even for some it is the not too distant future. This of course immediately makes it one of little or no direct meaning and relevance for its first readers since it was written basically for a later generation. The evidence is, however, that the writer expected the book to be read, heard and obeyed by persons in his own day and age. It was considered to have been a matter of great urgency and significance that the appropriate response be given, 1<sup>3</sup>. It would be somewhat strange to expect this kind of response to a book that bore no direct and immediate relevance to their situation and current experience in terms of the things that constituted a challenge to and for their faith at that time.

Another way in which the book is sometimes decontextualized is for it to be regarded as purely and simply a literary creation of the writer's imagination and fantasies. This is to be distinguished from the psycho-sociological analysis of the book based on the view that in response to the actual issues and realities that were faced in the situation, the writer is seen to

employ poetic and imagistic language and literary forms to create an alternative symbolic universe to deal with the crisis of faith caused by the said situation that they faced.<sup>4</sup> The position being referred to does not think that reference to actual events or critical concrete issues lie behind the experiences that produced the book. Admittedly there are always those unconscious conditioning features in any social setting that influence the mind and the thinking process. However, there is nothing else beside such unavoidable social and cultural conditioning that is to be attributed to the writing as far as contextual factors are concerned. The Book is felt to have the kind of artificial structure and complicated pattern that betray the lack of sensitivity or reasoned response usually evoked by burning issues that are troubling the minds of people and affecting their life and faith deeply. It is more representative

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<sup>4</sup>Such names as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgement Fortress, 1985 pp. 181ff; Adela Yarbro Collins in Crisis and Catharsis, Westminster Press 1984, pp. 141 ff; John Gager in Kingdoms and Community, Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs 1975; David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment" in Interpretation July 1986 pp. 243ff are all associated with this approach. Of course they differ among themselves as to the exact purpose served by the symbolic universe created.



of when the imagination is given full rein and its flights of fancy shaped into its own artificial pattern.

That the Book betrays definite signs of poetic imagination which the writer uses to good effect in certain parts of it is undeniable. This, however, does not mean that it is necessarily cut off from concrete experience. In fact the book still represents the writer's direct and deliberate response to contextual issues which needed to be addressed in terms of their effect and impact on the life, faith and witness of the church community. Contrary to the claims that there is an artificiality of structure and lack of spontaneity, the book definitely conveys a sense of urgency and passionate feelings. It is that sense of urgency and charged feelings that is invariably associated with awareness of being in the midst of crisis along with an anticipation that there is more to come. There is also a keen sense that something must be done to put things into proper perspective and make the appropriate response. The urgent exhortations to repentance, the call for faithfulness and endurance and the pronouncement of God's judgement on the state of affairs that created the crisis, all point to the fact that concrete experiences, live issues and immediate challenging concerns are behind

the book. This is supported by the allusive nature of certain of the symbols to known or identifiable contextual realities of the time. J.A.T. Robinson is quite convinced that there is more to the book than its just being a literary creation of the writers imagination. He comments:

One thing of which we may be certain is that the apocalypse, unless the product of a perverfid and psychotic imagination was written out of an intense experience of suffering at the hands of imperial authorities represented by the beast of Babylon.<sup>5</sup>

This underscores the fact that the book was written with a passion and urgency which gave it an immediacy that links it to real experiences of real events. To decontextualize it is to misrepresent it.

There are those who would not deny that actual and valid experiences of issues and events are associated with the writing of the book, but this fact is seen to be of little or no real significance as far as its general outlook and purpose are concerned. For some, what it is seen to do, is to offer a blueprint or programmatic outline of world history down to the point of the

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<sup>5</sup>J.A.T. Robinson, Redating The New Testament, SCM London, 1976 p. 231.



expected end. The symbolism and imagery are, therefore, linked to what are perceived would take place in the course of world history, including events and movements in the life and history of the church down to the consummation of the age. This view assigns historical basis to the book but the relevance of this is of greater interest to readers of much later generations than to its first readers and hearers, those to whom it was originally addressed. This remains one of the major weaknesses of this approach to the book. If its primary focus was on forthcoming events and issues in succeeding periods of history, then it would remain largely meaningless and irrelevant for the most part to its first readers. There is no doubt that the writer was interested in making sense to those to whom he first addressed what was written. J.M. Court makes the following insightful comment:

It is at least a more reasonable argument to suppose something is applicable to more than our concrete situation because it is in a sense timeless, rather than imagine that work composed in the first

century A.D. must of necessity contain a 'blueprint' for events in the distant future whether of later persecutions, the Middle Ages or the Reformation.<sup>6</sup>

Court speaks of it being more reasonable to assume that along with the concrete historical reference of the symbols and imagery, there are also timeless references which would offer possibilities of identification with later events, though he himself is not unmindful of the subjective, even arbitrary, manner in which later identifications have been made over the years and the confusions that have resulted. This is an essential characteristic of the symbols and imagery of the book. Its symbols and imagery have the capacity for both immediate contextual and wider application. To this we shall return.

The reference to the timelessness of the symbolism and imagery does deserve to be looked at in its own right. This is so because there are those who in fact give emphasis to this at the expense of immediate contextual relevance. They contend that if there is any immediate contextual relevance to be noted it is nothing but a subsidiary or indirect aspect of the writer's purpose. The writer is conceived of as operating with a

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<sup>6</sup>J.M. Court, Myth and History in the Book of Revelation, SPCK, 1979 p. 8



much wider vision and painting on a much larger canvas than that which would allow for any seriously meaningful correspondence between the symbols and imagery of the book and local details of his immediate historical context. Really the point is not to deny or affirm whether there are any such local referents for the symbol and imagery. It may even be conceded that these do exist. The important thing, however, is that the overwhelming purpose of the author is not to afford such one-to-one correspondence between the symbols and imagery of the book and local historical referents. It is rather to portray archetypal and trans-historical realities. These by nature are of a more universal and timeless significance. It is the portrayal of a much larger issue of what has actually taken place, what can take place and what will take place on a universal scale, transhistorically.

At the end of the last century, T.W. Milligan warned against the danger of interpreters looking in the Apocalypse for what is not in it and running the risk of becoming prey to hasty and idle fancies. He was of the opinion that the Apocalypse shared something of the nature of prophecy as known both in the Old and New testaments, which in his view, contained mainly the

setting out of great principles of God's sovereignty over men and women and not the prediction of special events. Even if special events are predicted, it is as a rule, less for their own sake than for the general principles they demonstrate or illustrate. In Milligan's own words:

Thus, then we are not looking in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the church.

The book bears no necessary significance in relation to immediate contextual realities. It is more a philosophical idealism that sets forth the perennial struggle between forces of the kingdom of evil and the forces of the Kingdom of God. This does give the book a timeless universal significance but diminishes its immediate concrete historical grounding.

The stress on the timeless nature of the symbolism and imagery of the book and the playing down of its immediate contextual relevance as an integral part of the writer's purpose find a very strong and persistent advocate in Paul S. Minear. He is certainly not

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<sup>7</sup>T.W. Milligan, Lectures on The Apocalypse, McMillan & Co., London and New York, 1892 pp. 154-55. In his commentary, The Book of Revelation (The Expositors Bible) Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1909, Milligan adopted the approach he stated earlier on in interpreting the symbolism of the book, see p. 153, for example.



unmindful of the fact that the symbols and images do have immediate contextual referents but he thinks these are actually secondary to the writer's primary purpose and so must not receive any serious emphasis. He writes:

It would probably be quite wrong to dissociate the imperial rule entirely from the mythological entity of Babylon. Indeed the prophet attributes many traits to Babylon which do seem to reflect the conflict between the church and the empire, yet his full descriptions of the eschatological city of rebellion does not allow us to construct a one to one correlation with Rome. The realities are related but not identical.<sup>8</sup>

Miner believes that for a direct equation to be made between Babylon and Rome it would smack of literalism and historicism of the worst kind. Babylon as a symbol does not need such a direct identification with Rome to convey the message the writer wishes to communicate and to give an indication of his own thinking. It is certainly not necessary for us to possess knowledge of the historical circumstances that prevailed at the time of writing to grasp the message of the book. Knowledge of certain of the immediate historical details and experience will enhance our appreciation and perception of the all

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<sup>8</sup>p. Miner, I Say a New Earth An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse, Corpus Books, Washington/Cleveland, 1986 p. 244.

embracing and realistic nature and significance of the symbols. This is how Minear expresses himself on this point:

(But) to substitute Rome where he meant to say Babylon would lead to vast distortion and reduction of meaning. The Whore, the Beast, its horn and heads, the Seven Hills and Seven Kings of 17<sup>9</sup> are realities which must not be subjected to such arrogant and self-confident violence. The invisible struggle among the transcendent powers is for the prophet himself a fully contemporary reality. Yet the struggle itself could not be compressed within the bounds of specific circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Again referring to the vision of heavenly warfare in the book, Minear warns against turning the vision into an allegory, which he refers to as -

An algebraic formula in which one may detect a one-to-one correspondence between each detail in the vision and a corresponding historical entity.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that for Minear, the writer of the Book of Revelation is dealing more profoundly and deliberately with realities of 'a primordial and eschatological order'. This being the case, the universal relevance of the symbols and imagery in particular and the book in general is considerably more important than any more

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid p. 233.

<sup>10</sup>p. Minear, New Testament Apocalyptic, Abingdon, Nashville, 2nd. Edition, 1983, p. 93.



immediate contextual relevance. This, it is felt is what the writer intended in using symbols and imagery that transcend the more concrete historical realities by pointing to archetypal transhistorical realities.

This point of view also receives support from persons who are themselves not professional New Testament scholars as Minear, but who nonetheless write with great theological insight and sensitivity. Two outstanding examples are Jacques Ellul and William Strongfellow.<sup>11</sup> They wish to see the symbols of the dragon, the beasts and the harlot, 12<sup>9</sup>; 11<sup>3</sup>; 13<sup>1,5</sup>; 14<sup>8</sup>; 16<sup>19</sup>; 17<sup>11</sup>; 18<sup>2</sup> related to more generalized understanding of the nature of evil and human sin. They think we have a challenging reminder of the susceptibility of human structures, systems and institutions to assume demonic proportions as they take on shapes and forms that rebel

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<sup>11</sup>Jacques Ellul, The Apocalypse, Seabury Press 1977. William Strongfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land, Word Books 1973.

Ernst Lohmeyer is of a similar view. He does not see the beast as having any temporal significance either. It is then a mythological symbol. Representing subterranean forces that transcend history. *Offenbarung des Johannes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1953 published after his death by G. Bornkamm. See Cullmann's criticisms of Lohmeyer's point of view, The State in The New Testament, SCM Lond., 1955 pp. 72-93.

and militate against their human initiators and creators. Instead of trying to make specific identification in the immediate context which was not the writer's intention we must learn how almost, if not inevitably our human institutions and structures become possessed by this demonic factor.

Our politics, economics, institutional relationships, our cities and what they represent tend to become demonized. This is the general and universal truth that ought to be grasped from the symbols and imagery in the Book. Ellul argues strongly that to make the direct identification of Babylon with Rome is to misunderstand the symbolic way of expression in the book by treating it as a secret code. What we need to see is that Babylon stands as a permanent archetypal transhistorical phenomenon of corrupt, idolatrous power and Rome was in turn a symbolic, historical example and expression of that larger and ever present reality. It was a demonstration of that larger reality that everyone ought to be aware of and what the writer wanted to bring to the consciousness of his readers as he urged them about their life and attitude in the world. Rome



represents cities in all ages, cities as creation of human culture and civilizations and what they can turn out to be.

This position represented by those who either deny it entirely or who do not do so, but play down the importance of immediate contextual relevance of the book by placing much greater emphasis on the timeless universal meaning and significance of its symbol and imagery, such as the beasts, dragon and harlot is one that must be given serious thought. It certainly ought to be appreciated for the contribution it stands to make to the understanding of the book both in terms of the grave errors it exposes and protects against in certain other instances and also in terms of the prominence it gives to certain important aspects of the writer's thinking and purpose. Yet its actual playing down of the importance of immediate contextual relevance as a serious and integral part of the writer's purpose where he is seen to be referring directly to and addressing specifically serious challenging concrete, historical realities that faced the people is a weakness. This is unfortunate, for contextual relevance need not be played down or sacrificed in maintaining universal application. And it is just the same that universal application need

not be sacrificed by prominence being given to contextual relevance. This is indeed valuable insight to be gained from this book and which will be seen as the discussion develops.

When the symbolism and imagery are seen to be referring principally to archetypal and transhistorical realities and thus bearing universal and timeless relevance without significant, direct correspondence with actual immediate contextual realities, it certainly avoids the possibility of the book being reduced to having nothing but informational value. Surely, if the meaning of the symbols and imagery is considered to be totally exhausted by particular events, institutions and personalities of the writer's time then the present-day relevance of the book would be only to inform us about such events, institution and personalities. And if the specific identities of the events, institution and personalities cannot be established then even the informational value would be severely diminished. This of course would be an unwarranted and unnecessary restriction of the value and importance of the Book.

It is also true that if the symbols and imagery are considered to be exclusively linked to a one-to-one correspondence with specific personalities, institutions



and movements throughout history, it does have the danger of leading to interpretations that are at times mischievous and invariably confusing. Specific institutions and personalities have throughout history been identified with the beasts for example and this has been used for propoganda purposes of very dubious value. A constant feature of this has been the conflicting and contradictory identifications made by various interpreters. This of course has not made the book any easier to understand in terms of its overall message and purpose. Paul S. Minear points to an additional danger, where deception, diversion and complacency could quite easily result from direct identification of the symbols with historical realities and entities. This is what he has to say:

In every generation, including the first, interpreters are tempted to locate the ultimate enemies of the churches in some visible entity, a particular nation or race or economic or religious system, ignoring the fact that while those who wield power over others are always visible, the source of their power is always invisible. To treat human enemies as ultimate enemies or to be defeated by them is not the definition of victory or defeat that John had in mind. Communities adopt such goals without help from prophets. Only when the enemies are invisible and when a community is

deceived by them is the work of a prophet essential. He must bring a word from the only God, who can rightly claim to be Almighty.<sup>12</sup>

The dangers and pitfalls that the understanding of the symbols and imagery as timeless, universal and archetypal exposes and seeks to avoid are real. Yet it suffers from a one-sidedness or overemphasis that impairs its own effectiveness. It goes so much against those who see direct correspondence between the symbols and imagery and contextual realities that it reduces the contextual relevance of the book totally or does not give the writer's purpose of dealing directly with the contextual realities the significance it really warrants. Scant attention is paid to the contextual particularities and issues which the writer seemed quite definitely to have been responding to and hoping to make sense of for those to whom he wrote. This has in fact led J. Kallas to observe about Minear's views on the matter on a whole that he seemed to have been so keen to make the Book

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<sup>12</sup>p. Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2nd Printing, 1983, p. 99.



relevant to our times that as a result he has been led to an over facile dismissal of questions of date, occasion and the like.<sup>13</sup>

The words of Adele Yarbro Collins already cited (see p. 8) must be recalled at this point. She indicated that perhaps the hardest won and most dearly held result of historical-critical scholarship in relation to the Book of Revelation was the theory that the work must be interpreted in terms of its historical context - The context in which it was composed.<sup>14</sup> This is a judgement of weighty significance and one that justifiably demands that any understanding of the book that belittles its immediate contextual relevance be seen in its light. The book had serious meaning for its first readers. This was directly related to what they were there and then experiencing and the implications it had for their faith and witness. The symbolic and imagistic language had concrete historical referents which those who uphold the transcendental and transhistorical understanding of the symbols and imagery have certainly not given

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<sup>13</sup>Journal of Biblical Literature, 89 ('70) pp. 510-11.

<sup>14</sup>See p. 13 above.

sufficient attention. Indeed in the attempt to maintain the universal, archetypal and transhistorical significance of the symbols and imagery there seems to be an actual reversal of roles that has taken place. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has quite rightly pointed out that what has happened is that in the attempt there has been an overlooking of the fact, for example, that it is not Rome but the image of Babylon that is the symbolic representation in the book.<sup>15</sup> The writer's vision and insight are in a specific way related to Rome and Roman imperial rule. Babylon is for him illustrative of Roman power and authority and not Rome that is first and foremost illustrative of the universal, archetypal and transhistorical reality that Babylon represents and with which he was more preoccupied. The people were to know what they were up against in their situation. This was the matter of immediate importance and which prompted in the first place the reflections the book represents. It was not some abstract or universal concern about transhistorical realities and archetypes of power and abuse of power that prompted the reflection and then Rome

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<sup>15</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation Justice and Judgement, Fabulous Press, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 185



and its imperial authority was seen as a particularly good illustration of this at the given moment. It was concrete realities there and then that created crisis for the faith of the people illustrated by the symbol of Babylon and other such symbols in the Book. By these symbols they were helped to ground their experience contextually and so helped to understand what was happening and to take appropriate action.

It is important to go further, however, and point out that whether any particular symbol or all the symbols were exhausted by the immediate contextual referents is doubtful. Stuart Hall has made the observation that one of the features of religious discourse or ideology is its "multi-accentual" character. In explaining this he says,

The same repertoire of concepts, symbols, imagery and doctrine can articulate a variety of meanings and positions depending on how the elements are combined and accented. Symbols like 'The Promised Land' - do not carry a single,

unilateral meaning. They belong to rich connotational chains of meaning, which can be differently inflected or positioned.<sup>16</sup>

One feels that it is something of the same nature that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is pointing to in direct reference to the Book of Revelation when she speaks of the book in terms of being a poetic - rhetorical construction.<sup>17</sup> The poetic form of the book with its imagery and symbolism means that by the very nature of its language, the historical particularities and realities do not exhaust the meaning possibilities of the symbols and imagery. Indeed they do open up possibilities of such other meanings. On the other hand the rhetorical side of the combination is directly related to the existing situation and was aimed at evoking the appropriate and desired response of the

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<sup>16</sup>S. Hall, "Religious Ideologies and Social Movements in Jamaica" in Religion and Ideology, A Reader, Eds. Robert Boccock and Kenneth Thompson, Manchester University Press in association with the Open University 1958, p. 293. Hall gives examples of how Rastafarians (a millenarian group, originating in Jamaica) uses "well-established signifiers" in the way he has spoken about. For example 'The Promised Land' signifies at one and the same time, more than one things that are held together in their discourse.

<sup>17</sup>E.S. Fiorenza Revelation Justice and Judgement, Fortress, 1985, pp. 185ff.



churches to the situation there and then. In seeing the book in such terms then the choice has not got to be made between seeing the symbols as a secret code bearing a one to one correspondence with specific historical persons and events and with seeing them as referring to transhistorical and universal realities. The symbols while illustrating the contextual reality have meaning-potential beyond themselves by the very nature of the poetic or imagistic language. In the rhetorical situation they are grounded in history and give specificity which is most significant and which will not be unrelated to further possible meaning. Even if one does not agree in totality with everything that Fiorenza has concluded in terms of the concept of the poetic-rhetorical construction the book is perceived to constitute, her view concerning the nature of the symbolism and imagery is most helpful in underscoring the contextuality of the book while allowing for possibilities that prevent the reduction of the book to uses purely of an informational nature but of ongoing theological significance.

G. Eldon Ladd refers to the fact of the writer's prophetic perspective. He claims that a characteristic that the Book shares with Old Testament kerygmatic

prophecy is the double focus of the prophetic perspective, where the events of the present and the immediate future are successfully held in creative and dynamic tension with a more long range perspective.<sup>18</sup> This allowed the prophet to speak in a way whereby they achieve supreme contextual relevance but at the same time what they had to say had a range beyond their immediate context. The writer's prophetic perspective will be the subject of further discussion. However, it should be noted here that the comment made by Ladd is not without significance and does underscore that contextual relevance need not be sacrificed for more long range or universal significance the book bears.

It would seem that the various attempts that have been made wittingly or unwittingly to decontextualize the Book of Revelation altogether or to limit considerably its contextual relevance have no real basis on which to do so convincingly. The book stands as an early example

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<sup>18</sup>G. Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on Revelation of John, W.B. Eerdmann's, Grand Rapids, 1972, pp. 12-13.



of theological reflection with a definite self-conscious socio-political contextuality while not becoming narrowly parochial in the process.

Another factor that in a measure impinges on what is being discussed is the date of the writing of the book. It is no doubt quite possible to maintain that whether we are able to ascertain the exact date or not it would still be possible to establish that it was the writer's intention to deal with matters of contextual interest. Nevertheless to situate the book as precisely as possible in the period that it was written, does give greater point to its contextuality. It brings into sharper focus the issues and problems that were matters of concern and enables even better understanding and appreciation of the response and action of the Christians. An observation of a similar nature is made by Christopher Rowland when he pointed out that in some respects arriving at the exact dating of the book does not radically affect its exegesis, as the issues which seemed to have confounded the writer could be understood in broadly similar terms whatever the date was finally said to be in terms of the dates that are actually being

debated.<sup>19</sup> However, knowledge of the general setting could help with understanding why particular subjects should be matters of greater concern to the writer than others.

Whereas there have been those who have questioned the geographical location of the book in Asia Minor and have sought to locate it for example, in Palestine, this has not really seriously won support and so Asia Minor as its locus remains without serious and convincing challenge. The same cannot be said about the date that has for sometime enjoyed quite general acceptance. The general consensus that has long prevailed, dates the book within the Domitianic Rule, possibly the latter part of it.<sup>20</sup> This date has, however, come in for serious questioning within relatively recent times, which in fact is a reopening of an old question. J.A.T. Robinson is one who has done so in earnest.<sup>21</sup> He has argued most

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<sup>19</sup>Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven SPCK, 1982 p. 403. Actually the date that Rowland opts for is earlier than the one settled for in this study.

<sup>20</sup>Domitian Ruled in the period 85 - 96 A.D.

<sup>21</sup>J.A.T. Robinson, Redating the New Testament, SCM (Lond.) 1976 pp. 221ff.



vigorously and plausibly that the book does not belong to the Domitianic period but rather earlier, probably to the end of or immediately after the Neronic period, 63-65 A.D.

The key argument is that the Book of Revelation presupposes a situation of general and sometimes severe persecution and there is really no evidence that any systematic formal and officially sponsored persecution took place during the time of Domitian. It is admitted that the Emperor is known to have issued an edict enforcing Emperor worship and tradition has it that Flavius Clemens and his wife, relatives of Domitian, were persecuted at his command. Flavius was actually executed and his wife exiled on the grounds of atheism. Yet there is no real evidence of persecution on any large scale at that time as presupposed by the book. There is not even any certainty that Flavius Clemens and his wife were Christians and not Jews. And even if the case was established that they were persecuted as Christians, it should not be taken as necessarily representing full-scale persecution extending to the provinces. Accounts that attribute full-scale persecution to Domitian are considered to be grossly exaggerated and probably not

without malicious intent on the part of later persons who were keen on improving their image at the expense of Domitian.

On the other hand the Book of Revelation does reflect a situation of people being under severe pressure. Its sense of urgency and passion betray this and makes it hardly likely that it is purely an imaginary creation. The only period, therefore, that Robinson thinks is suitable is that nearing the end of or



immediately after the Neronic period.<sup>22</sup> If Robinson is right about this and there continues to be commitment to the Domitianic period as the historical setting then such a commitment would have to rest on some contrived reason for the persecution that was taking place and the contextual relevance envisaged would be altered in some respect.

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<sup>22</sup>A recent suggestion that would account for the persecution and yet not locating it in the Neronic period and at the same time denying a Domitianic date has been that made by F. Gerald Downing. He locates the Book of Revelation as well as 1 Peter in the time of Pliny. He writes:

There was no large-scale action against Christians in the courts of those parts of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation and 1 Peter, before the cases heard by Pliny and referred to in his letter, Xxcvi, and in his copy of Trajans reply, Xcvii. If Revelation and/or 1 Peter were occasioned by the commencement of judicial action, then 'publication' dates from this time; and this is most likely. Their respective attitudes to the human world around, however, are in all probability much less 'occasional' and are based on mature though divergent analyses of human society in the light of Early Christian life and faith". JSNT 34(1988) p. 105

He makes much of the absence of any precedent upon which Pliny could draw in his quest as to how to proceed against the Christians. The fact of the matter is, however, that this does not mean that Pliny was totally devoid of information. This will be referred to at a later point in the discussion. The dating of both books at such a late period seems to go against most of the other evidence available.

The fact that there was persecution of a severe nature in the Neronic period is quite well attested. There are, however, at least two things that are to be noted in relation to this persecution as over against that presupposed by the Book of Revelation. Firstly, the persecution to which the Christians were subjected in Nero's time was not directly and immediately related to the confession of their faith as such. They were rather seen as most suitable at the given moment to be made scapegoats by Nero for his own alleged misdemeanour of setting the city on fire. In the Book of Revelation the persecution that is presupposed is more directly related to actual confession of their faith over against contrary demands made by the governing authorities. The Christians came under serious pressure because of their refusal to participate in activities of the imperial cult, including proclaiming Caesar as lord,<sup>19</sup>; <sup>2</sup><sup>13</sup>; <sup>13</sup><sup>7-10,17</sup>; <sup>14</sup><sup>9</sup>. Therefore, whereas it is claimed that the degree and extent of the persecution do not fit the Domitian Rule, the cause of it does not fit the Neronic Rule. It is in fact more in line with the edict that is known to have been issued by Domitian demanding that he be honoured and hailed as lord and god. Secondly, there is no clear evidence to indicate that



Nero's persecution had really extended in the provinces. The persecution referred to in the Book of Revelation is persecution that was experienced in the Province of Asia Minor. Of course, there are those who would argue that it would not necessarily be the Neronic persecution as such from which the Christians in Asia Minor would have suffered. It would probably have been more an offshoot of the hostility aimed at the Jews during or in the immediate aftermath of the Palestinian uprising. The hostility had spread to the provinces and at the same time the identity of Christianity was still not sufficiently distinguished from Judaism. Christians came in for their share of hostility largely on the basis that their identity was not clear. Again the problem with this explanation is that it does not fit the reason for the persecution that is indicated in the Book of Revelation. As it has already been pointed out, the persecution to which the book refers was one that was aimed at Christians because of their refusal to participate in the imperial cult and to accord honour to the Emperor as lord, as he had wished and decreed.

Probably a greater effort should be made to understand the situation mentioned by the book itself a little more sympathetically. If this is done there might

well not be the urgent drive to dismiss the Domitianic period as unsuitable for its historical setting. And this does not mean that if the Domitianic reign is considered to be the period of writing that it must then be conceded that the book is wrong about the persecution or one must try to prove that it does not witness to a general persecution. Some have claimed that the persecution was imminent but had not yet taken place. this is based for example on the words of Chapter Three verse ten:

Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world (RSV)

This is claimed to mean that the severe and generalized persecution was considered imminent but not yet. The expectation of future persecution of a severe nature does not necessarily mean that persecution of such a nature had not yet been experienced or was not being experienced, 2<sup>9-14</sup>; 6<sup>9</sup>; 17<sup>14</sup> cf 17<sup>6</sup>; 18<sup>24</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. In any case it is agreed by many that quite apart from differences of opinion concerning the degree and extent to which persecution took place during the reign of Domitian, that the condition and state of the times had become one of serious tension between the authorities and



Christians. Domitian seemed to have become quite clearly enthusiastic about the "state religion" and about his personal place in relation to it, especially in what turned out to be the closing years of his reign. He was not the man to tolerate religious deviations. He stood out as a shrewd but jealous-minded ruler, a strong upholder of public right and the state religion, whose prejudices and fears for his own safety increased with age. He enjoyed people ascribing him the title "Lord and God". He demanded the title as a right with the accompanying exercise of worship which gave expression to the veneration and honour it was meant to evoke.<sup>23</sup> It is known that the Imperial cult flourished in Asia Minor and apparently took on even newer and greater dimensions in the Domitianic period for example at Ephesus, the capital of the province.<sup>24</sup> In such a situation people's loyalty and trustworthiness as far as the state in general and

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<sup>23</sup>Suetonius Domitian XIII<sup>1-2</sup>. The Title Lord and God also appeared on coins of the period.

<sup>24</sup>W.A. Ramsay notes that most of the cities to which the Book of Revelation was written were committed to the promotion of the Imperial cult. (The letters to the seven churches at Asia, N.Y. 190y).

the Emperor in particular were concerned would be judged by their response to the cult and the demands of the Emperor. Rejection of the cult would be tantamount to an act of disloyalty and even atheism, bearing in mind the Emperor's own edict in which he obviously saw himself as divine. One can see that there was the basis for persecution to take place at least on the local level if not on a more generalized and centrally directed basis. Bo Reicke, referring to evidence of religious trials which seemed to have taken place during the last years of Domitian's reign had the following to say:

... The religious trials that were intended to contribute to the security of the Roman Empire and its Emperor finally made Domitian appear a tyrant. This period is probably reflected in the Jewish Apocalypse of Ezra<sup>25</sup> and the Christian Revelation of John.<sup>25</sup>

Of course he believes that exaggerations occurred in the second century in terms of portrayal of Domitian's reign and its tyrannical nature. Nevertheless he has no doubt that persecution took place and it is reflected in the Book of Revelation. Clear evidence of persecution as it took place in the province may be gleaned from Pliny's

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<sup>25</sup>Bo Reicke, The New Testament Era, A & C. Black, trans., by E. Green, 1968 p. 282



Letters. These letters were of a later period than the one under discussion but based upon certain comments made in them deductions can be made concerning the earlier period discussed.

Pliny who was Governor of the Province of Bithynia and who undertook religio-political trials against Christians in the second century wrote to the Emperor Trajan concerning what was taking place. In his report he indicated that in the trials that had taken place there were some persons whom he had discovered had probably renounced their faith some twenty years ago.<sup>26</sup> The time of such renunciation would have been in the last years of Domitian's reign judging from the time Pliny himself was writing, (A.D. 113). Though this referred specifically to Bithynia, it might well be that people were under the same pressure elsewhere in Asia Minor around the same time. It is also true that in writing to Trajan Pliny gave the impression that the particular encounter with Christians had a history and he was simply seeking further clarification on certain details of dealing with them. The charges that were brought against the Christians were two-fold. Firstly, it was claimed

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<sup>26</sup>Pliny's Epistulae 10, 96<sup>5</sup>

that they were violating the decree against their associations. Secondly they were refusing to participate in the imperial cult of images and sacrifice.<sup>27</sup>

The understanding of the charges laid against the Christians might well have been gained by Pliny from local authorities that had previously participated in the persecution and harassment of Christians during Domitian's reign, since it seems as if in fact he was really perpetuating a practice that preceded him and Domitian is known to have had special interest in the cult being observed in the province. If this is so, the Book of Revelation would quite likely be reflecting persecution of a nature that is not necessarily out of keeping with the spirit of the times especially in the last three or four years of Domitian's reign. The book portrays both the actual persecution and the threat and expectation of it. The writer's own experience of exile and reference to himself as fellow-sufferer with those to whom he wrote are significant,<sup>19</sup> The execution of Antipas, obviously a prominent figure in the church at Pergamos who might well have been but a specific example

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<sup>27</sup>Pliny's Epistulae 10, 96<sup>5,6,7,10</sup>



of others who suffered a similar fate, whether the persecution was generalized or local, must also be given serious consideration,<sup>213</sup>.

There is an important factor that needs to be considered in the assessment and reporting of persecutions. It is the factor of the point of view from which the persecution is seen and assessed. Who decides at what level persecution hurts? Who decides when it is not persecution but rather mild irritation or harassment? Is it those who are at the receiving end or those who are charged with the act whose report and assessment must be taken? The perspectives will invariably differ. However, one of the things that is sure is that those who are at the receiving end may not be inclined to discuss the experience from the point of view of whether it was generalized or local, formal or informal, persistent or ad hoc. They would be more inclined to speak of it from its painful effects whatever its status and range. What appears to be mild or relatively harmless may not be experienced as such especially by people who believe that they ought not to be suffering for their faith in such a manner, even with the existing laws and decrees being what they were. And in addition the irritating and the nagging may well be found to be more tormenting and

irritating than a full scale onslaught once and for all. The difference in perspective on the nature and character of the suffering experienced and reported is one that often emerges when people become subjects of their own story and history in an oppressive situation over against when they are made objects of someone else's story. The Book of Revelation came out of the people's own experience. The writer was himself one of them.<sup>19</sup>

In addition C.J. Hemer has quite wisely warned that over simplification when dealing with the subject of persecution in the Early Church is a temptation that those who make conclusions about it must be concerned about. He indicates that persecution is a more complex phenomenon than is often recognized or acknowledged and the criteria for determining what is persecution are also not very simple. In some instances persecution may be a matter of complex pressures exerted within certain historical contexts which are put in force by authorities that are not predisposed to persecute as a rule but who at a given moment feel constrained for one reason or another, to adopt or enforce policies that impinge



painfully on a vulnerable group. Hemer thinks that this might well be the case represented by and reflected in the Book of Revelation.<sup>28</sup>

The adjudged level of the severity of the trials that were taking place and were considered to be imminent is not something that is to be used to deny that it was persecution from the point of view of the Christians who were undergoing them. These people could have had no other explanation for what was being meted out to them or what they were being threatened with over against the treatment others were receiving. It must further be

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<sup>28</sup>C.J. Hemer, A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches with special reference to their local background. John S. Pabee has made comments of a similar nature about the understanding of persecution. He points out that it need not always to have been of a judicial kind. Sometimes it was no more than caprice on the part of those who were in authority. At other times it would have been mob violence, with a quasi-legal character. He further indicates that generally by persecution what is meant are disabilities imposed or encountered because of one's convictions, particularly one's religious convictions. These disabilities were not always bloody or violent. It is, however, another question whether the one who inflicted disabilities saw them as acts of persecution or due process of the law being carried out against law breakers. The fact is that the use of the word persecution presupposes the point of view of those who suffer the disabilities. See 'Persecution and Martyrdom in the letters of Paul' NTS Journal of New Testament Studies, Supplement 8, Series 6 pp. 11ff, 18-19.

noticed that people are inclined to judge and assess whether persecution actually took place in the reign of Domitian from the point of view of what was actually taking place at the Imperial centre. The assumption is that what was taking place there or the official position maintained there, was exactly what obtained in the provinces. Those who have experience of life in colonial situations will quickly recognize that this is not necessarily so. Enthusiastic officials in the provinces or colonial territories who are anxious to demonstrate their competence and loyalty may zealously or overzealously enforce dictates and decrees which are not enforced to the same extent at the Imperial centre. It may also be that a sense of insecurity on the part of such officials may have the same effect. Even in post-colonial societies there can be evidence of such a strong inclination toward neocolonialism on the part of national leaders that they continue to enforce more rigidly inherited rules and regulations than are currently enforced in the former imperial centre. It is quite possible that greater pressure was felt in the province of Asia Minor by the Christians than would have been evident in Rome in itself. This is something that must



be borne in mind. All things considered we may well concur with Klaus Wengst who speaks for quite many others when he writes:

It is still the most probable hypothesis that Revelation was written about the end of the reign of Domitian, i.e. about A.D. 95.<sup>29</sup>

#### CONTEXTUAL ISSUES AND REALITIES

The case has been made out that the writer of the Book of Revelation wrote with the deliberate intent and purpose to address and deal with certain contextual issues and realities that confronted the people to whom he wrote within the wider community to which they belonged and in which they worked out their life. The intentional contextuality of the book and the scale on which it was conceived does make the Book a matter of great significance for a theological project like the Theology of Liberation whose methodology is distinctively

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<sup>29</sup>Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ, Trans., by J. Bowden, SCM 1987, p. 118. Adele Yarbro Collins after quite detailed examination of the question came to the same conclusion even though she agrees that there was no sustained officially promoted persecution during the reign of Domitian and that the purpose of the Book was not directly related to confirming and encouraging the Christians in the face of any such persecution. See *Crisis and Catharsis - The Power of the Apocalypse*, Westminster Press, 1984 Chap. 2 - See especially pp. 76 - 77.

and self-consciously contextual. And the book itself seen from such a point of view stands to contribute richly to the specific theological understanding and methodology. It becomes even more decisively so when the contextual issues and realities themselves that confronted the people and were addressed in terms of their challenge by the writer are examined.

The contextual issues and realities have been described and represented in many and different ways. They have been seen from different angles and perspectives. However, the most basic and general character ascribed to them is of a socio-historical political nature. It was factors largely of this kind that created the greatest and most crucial challenge for the Christians. There were such other factors as the relationship the Christians shared with the Jewish people from whom at one stage they were not generally distinguished, but who later became anxious to dissociate themselves from the Christians both to divert growing suspicion and hostile attention from themselves and also because they found the Christian faith and confession incompatible with theirs. Rival teachings and attitudes within the church itself at the time were also a factor



that troubled the Churches' life. These, however, were not themselves unrelated to the wider question of the church's relationship with culture, society and politics.

### Oppression

The concept that is considered best suited to sum up the situation that faced the people to whom the book was written is that of oppression, which it is believed expresses what is meant by "tribulation" as used by the writer to sum up his and his readers' experience, 1<sup>9</sup> cf 7<sup>14</sup>. Klaus Wengst refers to the author and his situation, in the following terms:

He calls himself a 'brother and colleague' of Christians, whom he addresses as 'brothers who share in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance ...' When he immediately goes on to say that he was on the island of Patmos on account of the Word and testimony of Jesus (19)) it seems reasonable to assume that he had been exiled there because he was a Christian. So he is writing from a distressing and oppressive situation. The fact that he describes his readers

as brothers who 'share' with him in tribulation means that he does not understand his situation as an isolated fate, but connects it with their own.<sup>30</sup>

It must be admitted that the concept of oppression is one that is open to be understood in many and different ways and is often used in reference to situations that are of a very varied nature. This does allow for instances of its usage, especially by many who claim liberation as a goal of their action and pursuit, that do not give any fair indication of where they consider that oppression begins and where it ends or why they set the boundaries where they do. These are questions that are of significance for the present discussion and must be faced as the claim is made that the situation in the contextual background of the book is one of oppression.

It has already been noted in the discussion concerning the nature and degree of persecution that the book presupposes that there are those persons who would

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<sup>30</sup>Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ trans., by J. Bowden, SCM 1987 p. 118. There are those who understood the writer's situation in Patmos differently and so would not support the idea of the oppressiveness of his situation on the basis of that experience. This will be discussed later on, but it is sufficient to say at this stage that Wengst is considered right from the point of view of this study.



most likely disagree altogether with the appropriateness of the term oppression. Those who believe there is no evidence of full scale persecution in the period that the book was written and indeed the persecution reflected in the book is no more than occasional local harassment as should be expected in the circumstances (including evidence of martyrdom) would claim that oppression is inappropriate to describe the situation. Even with the widest connotation given to the term, it would still be inappropriate. There are others who would not wish to dismiss the appropriateness of the terms and concept altogether but they would wish to qualify it, so as to show that it was not oppression to the extent that the word tends to suggest when used in certain quarters today. In such quarters, the word suggests living under conditions that are made utterly desperate, people are made to live in dire circumstances of suffering and hopelessness. They are made to undergo life-diminishing, life-distorting and life-threatening experiences of deprivation, destitution and tyranny. Their rights and human potential are disregarded in the process of maintaining the privileged status quo of others. When oppression is understood along lines such as these, then it is felt that the oppression suffered and experienced

by the people to whom the Book of Revelation was written was at worst "a relative oppression". There were the obviously influential and wealthy in churches at Sardis and Laodicea for example 3<sup>1-5</sup>, 14-21. There were those who did not by any means despair of the possibility of accommodating themselves comfortably to the socio-cultural environment as can be seen in certain teachings that were allowed and followed in the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, 2:12-17, 18-29. It was, therefore, neither a situation of utter deprivation and hopelessness for all the people nor one that was found utterly unacceptable by them all. The thought of oppression must, therefore, be qualified, if oppression is understood in the ways referred to immediately above.

There is no doubt that exaggerations can take place for one reason or another when people are reflecting and reporting on sufferings they are undergoing or have undergone, especially when they are convinced that the sufferings are unwarranted and unjust. It is also true that people can behave as if all the dimensions of oppression have been displayed and exhausted in their own sufferings of it or in the sufferings of those on whose behalf they are protesting. On balance, however, the greater danger is often that of accommodation and



adjustment to the conditions of oppression, explaining it away, playing it down, deferring hope not without the help of the oppressors themselves along with legitimating associates and structures including religious ones. There is also the temptation for those who are not themselves sufferers and who have never experienced oppression to play down or explain away oppression suffered by others. The voice of those who speak out of the actual experience cannot be ignored. There is a limit to the logic and the reasoning that those from the outside and those who have never had such experience can apply to the agony as it is actually experienced in their attempt to measure it. Indeed this is why self-identification and solidarity with the suffering and oppressed are considered so important in responding to their need. For many who have had to live under conditions of domination and oppression a responsive chord is touched in them by the reported situation of the people to whom the Book of Revelation is written. They know that the experience of oppression is not made any more bearable or palatable by the knowledge that there are those among them who are not suffering in the way they are or that there are those who believe that conformity rather than protest and resistance is the

better way out. If anything, the negative psychological impact of these tend to increase their sense of the oppressiveness of the situation. The experience of prosperity or the possession of influence of members of the churches of Laodicea and Sardis or the willingness of some members of the churches at Thyatira and Pergamum to conform to the socio-cultural environment does not make the oppression any lighter for those who came under its full weight.

The point of view here being expressed is that the Book of Revelation presupposes a context of oppression that was real. This the writer was responding to in terms of what it meant to the life of those to whom he wrote, the issues and challenges it raised for their faith and the threat it posed for their humanity. He was responding to its challenges in the light of insight into the Word of God and discernment of the spirit. The fact that oppression of the nature was a matter of deep interest to the writer in the way that it was, must be seen as significant. In the church today there are those who teach and those who adhere to beliefs that would claim that concerns about oppression of a socio-political nature ought to be avoided, especially if certain freedoms are granted for the pursuit of their own



religious interest. A theological project like that of the theology of liberation which gives prominence to socio-political engagement has earned its fair share of negative criticism for its particular interest and orientation. It has even been denied the title "Theology" by some critics who believe its commitment to reflect on socio-political realities that impinge oppressively on the life of vast numbers of people in their given context and on the challenge that this constitutes for their faith witness and mission, is not a proper function of theology. The Book of Revelation with its own concern, commitment and interest helps to put this into proper perspective. The manner in which it has reflected on the threat, challenges and evils of the oppressive forces and powers symbolized by such figures as the dragon, beasts and harlot, 11<sup>7</sup>; 12<sup>8</sup>; 13; 17 is most significant and helpful. The dichotomizing or compartmentalizing of life that makes a division between the spiritual and the socio-political and then goes on to put the latter beyond the bounds of serious theological commitment, reflection and witness does not have the support of the book.

The oppression that the book presupposes was largely of an institutional and structural order. It was

not purely the work of isolated individuals who carried out their private vendettas against individual Christians or groups of Christians. It was oppression of a nature that was entrenched in the way life was ordered and received support from existing institutions, organizations and systems that were instruments of social control and political administration. As far as the writer was concerned, he saw such instruments as they were then operating as representative of or embodiment of powerful forces of evil working within history, and standing as an enemy of righteousness and justice in rebellion against the will and purpose of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Sin is, therefore, not primarily understood in an individualistic and privatistic sense. It is understood in a more collective sense. This being so, transformation of the situation is also not seen simply in terms of the more over optimistic and anthropocentric tendencies that can be detected among some Theologians associated with the struggle of liberation among others or in a purely individualistic sense.

What then were some of the identifiable forms in which the oppression manifested itself?



a) The Arrogance of Power: The abuse and corruption of power in the historico-political realm became the underlying factor in relation to all the other expressions of oppression that we shall see were evident in the situation. There is every indication that the people to whom the book was written were subject to a painful experience of extreme arrogance of power on the part of the constituted authorities. This, of course, meant a severe challenge to their life, faith and witness. The symbols and imagery resorted to by the writer in his portrayal of the powers-that-be and of events and experiences present Imperial Rome as the chief source of this, 13<sup>1ff</sup> cff11<sup>7</sup>; 14<sup>9</sup>; 17<sup>3</sup>. It was argued earlier that the link of the symbols to historical reality was a deliberate and self-conscious part of the purpose of the writer as he sought to put his readers historical contextual experience into proper perspective from the point of view of the revealed purpose of God. It seems that the immediate source of influence for the

writers message concerning the beast and its socio-political significance is the Book of Daniel, Dan. 7<sup>3ff</sup><sup>31</sup>. It also gives an indication of the writers and his own use of scripture as it is shaped by his own experiences. While remaining faithful to the basic meaning he accepts the direction in which that meaning points, and gives creative and meaningful expression to his experience in an independent and effective manner. In the Book of Daniel there are four beasts representing successive political kingdoms or world powers. What is remarkable is that from the point of view of the writer of the Book of Revelation, Imperial Rome turns up and embodies all four in a single powerful entity that the empire represented then. Speaking of this, Wolfgang Schrage indicates that it is clear from the apocalyptic point of view, of the writer, which is also seen to be God's point of view, all the atrocities and all the evil powers of earlier empires culminated in the Roman Empire.

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<sup>31</sup>Many think the ultimate source of the mythology is ancient Babylon, such as is associated with Tiamat, Behemoth and Leviathan and which is seen reflected everywhere in scripture and apocalypses. Syriac Baruch 29<sup>4</sup>; Test of Judah 21<sup>7</sup>; Ps of Sol 2<sup>15</sup>; IV Esdras 6<sup>49</sup>



It became a solitary beast of prey appearing in bestial form and devouring everything. It is a debased political power.<sup>32</sup>

The writer was unsparing in his build-up of the picture of Rome as powerful and arrogant. He paints a picture of power being self assertive and dangerous. The authority and influence exerted were immense and extensive, 13<sup>4</sup>, idolatrous and demanding, 135,8,14,16, intimidating and tyrannical, 13<sup>5</sup>,7,15-17. It was power that was conceived of as essentially satanic. The moving spirit behind it was the dragon, the primordial embodiment and source of evil and aspiring usurper of divine power, 13<sup>2</sup>; cf 12<sup>1ff</sup>. This same power is referred to as the devil and Satan, 20<sup>2</sup>. The writer also

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<sup>32</sup>Wolfgang Schrage, The Ethics of The New Testament, T. & T. Clarke, 1988, p. 344. See also J.A.T. Robinson, "Interpreting the Book of Revelation", in Where Three Ways Meet - Last Essays and Sermons, SCM, 1987, pp. 50-51, where he writes referring to Rome as the beast,

"It embodies and recapitulates all the world empires that preceded it".

Klaus Wengst, Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM, 1987 p. 123, who writes:

This means that Imperium Romanum is the accumulation of all the monstrosities and anti-godly powers of the earlier empires.

used the symbol of Babylon to portray what imperial Rome represented which again is part of his purpose to give effect to what he wants to convey of the power and its character, 14<sup>8</sup>; 16<sup>9</sup>; 17<sup>5</sup>; 18<sup>2,10,21</sup> cf 1 Pet.5<sup>13</sup>. In the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, Babylon is perceived of as a nation of great wealth, power and tyranny and a corrupting influence, always standing against the people of God and under the judgement of God, Is. 13<sup>6</sup>ff; 21<sup>1</sup>ff; Jer. 5<sup>17</sup>ff. Rome has now come to be seen in this light.

Special attention is given to how the arrogance is displayed in pretensions to divinity and almightiness. There was demand for worship of the beast which came out of the sea and which is widely considered to represent the Emperor. This demand was enforced by the other beast which came up out of the earth, generally considered to be representative of the local functionaries of the imperial cult, probably to be identified with the senior Priesthood of the cult as suggested by Wengst. He points out that the religious rather than primarily civil nature of their office is probably confirmed by the fact that the writer identifies the second beast with the false



prophets, 16:13; 19:20; 20:10.<sup>33</sup> It has already been pointed out that the imperial cult enjoyed great popularity in the province of Asia Minor. Its demands were pressed with a great measure of enthusiasm and zeal. The Emperor's own interest in and obsession with being regarded as divine was a leading factor. The arrogance was further played out in what appeared to have been a direct and studied attempt to parody the Godhead on the part of the powers-that-be. What emerges with great force is that as power became arrogant and overreached itself, it inevitably invested itself with all kinds of self-deluding tokens of its perceived greatness and almightiness. This became an important basis for its oppressive tendencies, for it must get others to share its own self-delusions and distortions of reality and it will resort to any means to ensure this. Any form of dissent in such circumstances is destined to be crushed.

Allegiance to the imperial cult was as much a political statement and even more so than it was a religious one. Quite apart from any religious sentiment that the confession of the Lordship of the Emperor may

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<sup>33</sup>K. Wengst, Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM 1987 p. 122.

convey, it was quite definitely a test of loyalty to him and the Empire. Dissent stood to be seen as dissidence, which was in turn seen as traitorous. Political allegiance and religious commitment were intertwined in this respect. The state shared the ultimacy for which religious devotion and allegiance are appropriately expected and demanded. In such a situation the vulnerability of Christians become patently and painfully clear. The vast majority of the population of the province seemed to have had no problem with meeting the requirements and demands of the imperial cult. They were so impressed or so anxious to demonstrate their loyalty in order to eliminate any suspicion, that they acclaimed the beast as incomparable and unconquerable - 13:4. Christians who were faithful could not in any good conscience follow suit. At the same time they were not covered by any special privilege of exemption as was enjoyed by the Jews. Of course, for as long as Christianity was regarded as a sect of Judaism they would sometimes escape the pressure. However, the more their separate and distinct identity become established, the



more they were expected to participate in the cult, though not necessarily foregoing their own religious allegiance.

It was a situation of great challenge and temptation. The Christians could well have been tempted to argue as some might well have done, that since they were not prevented from practising their own faith then there was nothing to prevent them from showing external allegiance to one who claimed to be god but who in reality was no god. Pandering to his vanity without commitment and conviction would do no harm. The writer of the Book of Revelation would have none of this. He knew that that was exactly the kind of false compromise and accommodation that the arrogance of power displayed against people forced them into and which would undermine the integrity of their faith and life. It was the thin edge of the wedge. Fundamental issues were involved when human power was claiming ultimacy which was essentially a distortion of the reality of history and life as God had purposed it. Such realities stood to become paganized through the influence and manipulation of arrogant power.

The arrogance of power is one of the contextual realities of the oppressive conditions in which people have to live in many Third World countries and in which

the theme of liberation has assumed great importance in theological reflection. There is no blatant demand for worship of the powers-that-be. On the contrary they are likely to confess religious commitment and to claim that they are defenders of true religious values and fundamental religious rights. At the same time, however, it will become clear on closer examination that the religious values and rights they profess to defend are not distinguishable from the values and rights that are supportive of the interests of their own oppressive regime and its allies and supporters. Power absolutizes itself under guises of one kind or another and demands are made that are considered appropriate to its self-perception. And when the expected responses are not forthcoming or when the claims are openly contested, it exercises what it considers to be its right to enforce its just demands. The claims are pressed by a resort to victimization, harassment, imprisonments, torture, banishment and executions.

What is known as National Security Ideology has become a kind of Theology for the powers-that-be in such situations. It offers emphatic and seemingly logical support and justification for the autocratic regimes or for their various limitations or outright denials of



fundamental human rights that are decreed from time to time and maintained for extended periods, even permanently. All of this is done in the interest of national security. Writing of this Ideology Jose Miguels Bonino says:

Basic to the doctrine is the notion that the state is an organism with a life of its own. This concept of the state in turn evokes two further ideas. The first has to do with the integrity of such an organism: The state consists of a territory, a population and sovereignty. The last of the three elements being naturally the decisive one. The presentation and enhancement of sovereignty determine the use of territory and the organization of population. Besides the idea of integrity there is the idea of growth of such organism: every state is in permanent conflict with others in order to extend its Lebensraum and to impose on them its will.<sup>34</sup>

In further discussion Bonino remarks that the key concept behind this kind of thinking is power which relates to the ability of the state to impose its will and make what it wills come to pass. It is not difficult to see how such a National Security Ideology could be abused and certainly not surprising that it has been abused by many

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<sup>34</sup>J.M. Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics, SCM 1983, p. 69. See also Jose Comblin, The Church and the National Security State, Orbis Books, 1979, Esp. Chapters 4 - 6.

oppressive regimes. Insight from the Book of Revelation that we have already exposes the kind of arrogance of power that such a theory would readily legitimize. Religious rhetoric is often used by those who are committed to National Security Ideology. They often claim that they are acting in defense of religious rights and values as they conceive of them. What happens in practice, however, is that the ideology is really used to enforce loyalty, support the maintenance of the most oppressive conditions and to thwart the just claims of the oppressed. There is an ultimacy and sovereignty given to the state and its chief representative that does not pause to give consideration to justice. While vested interests are defended, peoples rights are suspended and deprivation and disadvantage are perpetuated all in the name of national security and the need for patriotism. Military and police power is displayed with full force in the name of the enforcement of law and order, loyalty and protection of the state. And so, national security ideology has a way of undergirding totalitarianism and the arrogance of power associated with it.

When power becomes so arrogant, takes itself so seriously and overreaches itself in its claims and demands, a parodying, counterfeiting and distortion of



the ultimately real is inevitable. Idolatry becomes a fact of life. It is in this light that it is understandable when Jon Sobrino writes the following:

In Latin America, conversion does not mean a turning toward God in the face of Agnosticism and atheism, but rather a turning toward the true God in the presence of other gods who cause death... Thus conversion as a Theological experience is not a turning toward God in the face of atheism but rather in the face of idolatry.<sup>35</sup>

It is no wonder that it is said that Domitian in his time did charge and subject to severe punishment certain of those who opposed his claim to divinity with atheism. However, they really knew that it was idolatry that was involved not atheism. It is the idolatry which is associated with the arrogance of power. The Book of Revelation is adamant that such idolatry should not be countenanced whatever the cost.

Another feature of the oppression that characterized the context is:

(b) Deception. It is obvious that deception was part of the oppressive apparatus and strategy of the authorities and their representatives and agents. There is testimony in the Book of Revelation to the effect that

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<sup>35</sup>Jon Sobrino, The True Church of the Poor, SCM, 1984 p. 146.

in more or less subtle ways deception was built into the socio-political religious system, thus becoming institutionalized and a very powerful instrument of oppression. The deception itself worked by manipulation and enticement through propaganda. And the chief agent of the deception was the beast from the land, 13:11, to which reference has already been made. This beast is entirely dependent upon the beast from the sea. It receives its authority and influence from that beast and is entirely in its service. 13:12. Its main aim is to get the people to venerate and worship the beast thus demonstrating their absolute loyalty to it. And so its words and deeds are aimed at persuading and convincing the people of the appropriateness, and value of doing so. Its deceptive and manipulative skills were put to full use in the process. By way of reminder we recall that the beast from the sea is representative of the Emperor and the beast from the land is representative of the local functionaries of the imperial cult.

It is interesting to note that compulsion and intimidation which were used were not the only strategies employed, but as we have now noted deception and manipulation were also used. The beast from the land demonstrated signs and wonders designed to impress the



people with the power of the one that delegated authority to it and which the people were being urged to worship. And it seemed as if many were truly deceived - 13:14 ff. It is not necessary to debate here the real nature and status of the miraculous works performed by the beast, whether they were magical tricks or demonic manifestations. What is important to note is that within the context of oppression coercion and compulsion are often accompanied by deception through manipulation by propaganda. By the latter, attention is diverted from the harsher oppressive techniques and activities or the impression is given that benevolence is the real intention of the authorities and the harsher measures are reluctantly resorted to in the face of what is regarded as unnecessary, willful and dangerous threat to the constituted authority.

The insight of the writer into the psychology of oppression is impressive. He clearly perceived that, however oppressive the powers-that-be and their systems were they were anxious to wear an acceptable face and to demonstrate that they were deserving of the honour and loyalty they claimed. This meant making use of propaganda measures that created the impression of all-sufficiency and effective power designed to evoke awe, instill fear

and reassurance at one and the same time. There is also demonstrated the need that such oppressive systems often have for a religio-ideological support system. It was not totally satisfactory to force people against their will to be committed. And so if by way of a belief-system and within a framework of religious conviction, loyalty and allegiance could also be encouraged and ensured, that would be most helpful. These are strategies that continue to be practised today in context of oppression known especially in the third world.

The deception had a particularly alluring aspect to it which seemed to have been the cultural offerings and life-style associated with Roman rule. In chapter seventeen of the Book, the figure of a harlot is introduced and identified with the city of Babylon, 17:1, 5, 18. Already it has been noted that Babylon is meant to be Rome. Of the things that have been said of this harlot are that she is most attractively attired, she is the mother of all harlots, 17:5 she sits upon waters that represent peoples, multitudes, nations, languages 17:15, she rules over Kings of the Earth, 17:18. Rome as the source of cultural values and influence that dominated and pervaded the whole region is in mind - 17:2. Her appearance was one of glory and splendour reflecting



luxury and wealth. There is an inviting attractiveness about her. What she offered and represented is built up to show the pressure of the enticement to which the people were subjected.<sup>17<sup>4</sup></sup> However, the life-style and offerings as far as they were related to giving meaning and purpose to life in general and even to be attained by many of the people were more a matter of appearance than reality. They were corrupting rather than life-enhancing. They were enslaving rather than offering real liberty. When the invitation to drink of the cup that the harlot bore was accepted it was discovered that its contents were truly undesirable, <sup>17<sup>4</sup></sup> cf <sup>18<sup>4</sup>ff</sup>. Dr. G.B. Caird referring to the nature and level of deception involved said that those who were seduced by the woman dressed like a queen soon discovered that instead of being a queen she was an "old witch".<sup>36</sup>

The distinct impression is given that the writer of the Book of Revelation sensed special danger in this regard, as far as the church was concerned. He was quite keen and concerned that the church was not deceived into embracing the life-style and dominant cultural patterns

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<sup>36</sup>G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black, 1966 p. 214.

as they were then disseminated throughout the province. It was a church not to be seduced by the attractive but corrupting and idolatrous allurements of the society but one that was to be faithful to its calling under God and would expose the pretensions and corrupt nature of the values and life-style being presented. The ineffectiveness of the church at Laodicea showed what could happen when a church became totally conformed to the status quo, 3:14-18.

It is not that asceticism or total world denial is being urged as the way of life, but there is a recognition and appreciation of the fact that there is a spirit of the age that organizes itself without due regard to the values and demands related to the will and purpose of God in Christ as the true and only God. The people of God cannot allow themselves to be dominated by this spirit in the outworking of their lives. The worst thing the church could do is to underrate the deceptive power of this spirit. Therefore, alertness matched with faithfulness was expected of it, 2:10ff; 33; 13<sup>13</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>.

There are signs that there were those in the church who were of the opinion that sharing totally in the life-style of the community would have done no harm. This clearly resulted in some tension among the Christians.



Reference is made to the activities of the Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel who were obviously teaching doctrines and advancing practices that the writer considered dangerous and unacceptable 2<sup>6</sup>,14,15,20. The church at Pergamum was criticized for having within the membership some who gave sympathetic hearing to the teaching of Balaam 2:14 and the church at Thyatira was charged with being tolerant to the teaching and influence of Jezebel, 2:20. The exact nature, of the teachings and practices is not known. It seems, however, that inspite of the different names associated with them they shared a common attitude in terms of the relation of their faith to culture. It was felt that nothing was actually wrong for Christians to participate in certain rites of the imperial cult, banquets at which meats which were first offered to idols were served and in professional groups like Trade Guilds that had patron gods. The belief seemed to have been that the physical realm of life was of little significance as far as the spiritual realm was concerned, and such actions, religious or otherwise, that were physically related and oriented could be participated in without any spiritual harm being done. Some might also have been convinced that in actual fact the pagan gods were really no gods at all and so it

mattered little what was done in relation to them or if participation in activities associated with them took place. In addition there was the constant danger that if participation in such activities did not take place then economic security and survival, and social acceptance would be gravely at risk.

The writer of the Book was of a completely different point of view from those who teach or counsel the possibility of accommodation with the dominant culture then. He was adamant in his opposition to Christians doing anything of the sort. He saw it as an unfaithful compromise and definite undermining of the



faith to which they were committed. Idolatry and immorality were the net result of any such accommodation.<sup>37</sup>

Alertness and faithfulness were urged upon the churches. They were not to allow themselves to be allured into and entrapped by the way of life. G.B. Caird commenting on the writer's appreciation of the danger of the religio-cultural influence the churches had to contend with, pointed out that he is taken out into the desert to view the prostitute - 17:3. This was done not because it was simply there that the prostitute was to be found but rather because it was from a place and point of

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<sup>37</sup>There is a difference of opinion as to the exact attitude of the writer. R.H. Charles, for example claims that the writer insisted that Christians withdraw from the Trade Guilds and Associations. Membership in them was incompatible with their Christian commitment - A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John Vol. 1, T. & T. Clark, 1920 pp. 69-70. On the other hand Beckwith feels that John allowed continued membership but urged that there be no compromise - The Apocalypse of John, McMillan, 1919, pp. 463-464. Charles' case seems to be the stronger when the total attitude of the writer in the circumstances is taken into consideration. For example, the praise lavished upon the church at Ephesus for its attitude to the Nicolaitans is instructive.

detachment and security that she was to be viewed and seen for what she really was. He writes:

Only there could he be safe from the lies of the dragon, the threats of the monster and the seduction of the whore.<sup>38</sup>

This highlights the challenge faced by the church and the tension that marked its existence. If it assimilated the way of life and so accommodated itself to the dominant culture as it was then, its security and other social and economic privileges would have been guaranteed. Yet in doing so, it would most certainly have corrupted its faith, undermined its credibility and so impaired its ability to speak to the society in terms of censure and challenge and to demonstrate the correct alternative in its own life and witness. This is something that the writer of the book was keenly alert to and insisted on pointing out to his readers. The forces and powers-that-be do, however, seek to entrench themselves and perpetuate their influence and hold upon people by cultural penetration and domination among other things. This is invariably the experience in colonial

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<sup>38</sup>G.B. Caird A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John The Divine, A. & C. Black 19.



and post-colonial societies. Louis Lindsay, writing out of a British Caribbean Colonial experience has noted,

... the whole phenomenon of colonialism has been and remains heavily steeped in the practice<sup>39</sup> of organized political manipulation.

He also notes:

Everywhere and at all times, the emergence and persistence of imperialist domination has been inextricably linked to the opera which successfully encourage individuals and groups to accept ideas and orientations about themselves and their societies which bear little or no truthful relationships to the real world situation in which they live.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Louis Lindsay, The Myth of a Civilizing Mission: British Colonialism and The Politics of Symbolic Manipulation. Working Paper 31, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Jamaica, 1981 p. 5. Lindsay has made the additional point that in the process the deception does not remain a unilinear activity. The manipulators end up also deceiving themselves. He cites Erich Fromm whom he points out shows that the manipulators "internalize" their own rationalizations and myths which they create for others and so they become the self-fulfilling opiates which make the manipulators own survival appear as both profitable and worthwhile. If this is so, and there is no reason to doubt it, then all the more the writer, of the Book of Revelation rejection of compromise seems insightful. Compromise would not only aid the enrichment of the claims but would also encourage more and more claims than would prove oppressive and unjust while they support the self-deception of the manipulators.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid 6.

The church is not exempt from being penetrated and dominated, if it is not alert. This has caused the church to be identified with the establishment and to be considered party to the injustice that is often experienced in such situations by many people. And so the deception that is involved that would entrap the church is something that is exposed by the writer and is expected to be grasped and shunned by the church. Deception by seduction is one of the ways by which oppression is practiced and maintained by the powers that be.

Another form in which the oppression that marked the context expressed itself was Economic Injustice. In relation to this Adela Yarbro Collins has written:

Social tensions resulting from degrees of wealth and different attitudes towards wealth are reflected in The Book of Revelation. The issue of wealth should not be treated in isolation, but must be seen as one strand in a complex web of social relations and attitudes.<sup>41</sup>

Rome clearly dominated the whole geographical area economically. Trade and commerce were controlled from her imperial centre. Dr. G.B. Caird observes:

In Ostia, the port of Rome, there was a colonaded square where the companies of

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<sup>41</sup>A.Y. Collins Crisis and Catharsis, The Power of Apocalypse, Westminster Press Philadelphia, 1984, p. 89.



Merchants had their offices and must have been one of the biggest centres of power in the Empire.<sup>42</sup>

The economic fortunes of the provinces and many other nations depended on what the imperial Power did and the economic prosperity of the imperial power itself could not be separated from its policy toward the provinces and other nations. In a situation of economic domination by an Imperial power there were bound to be tensions, injustices and inequities in the relationship between the dominant and the dominated. There was obviously an elite class of great wealth which determined the life-style that was fashionable and who were supportive of the economic policies of the imperial government from which they benefitted greatly. Michail Rostovtzeft writes of people in the province who garnered in great wealth by transportation of goods and commerce. Those people he said became a new class of wealthy provincials during the reign of the family of rulers to which Domitian belonged, the Flavians. He also noted that there were ongoing clashes and struggles in the province of Asia Minor between the rich and the poor

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<sup>42</sup>G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, A. & C. Black 19.

throughout the period down to the time of Hadrian, well into the second century.<sup>43</sup> The usual gap between the minority rich and majority poor existed. This was a fact of life in the province. And even when economic growth and prosperity were recorded during the period, the gap was not narrowed, if anything it widened. This is the conclusion of S. Walton who noted the outstanding economic growth and advancement that took place in the Early Empire. He indicated that the increase of wealth was not distributed equitably. It was rather the case of the minority rich getting richer while the condition of the majority poor was not improving but if anything worsening and causing them to become restive.<sup>44</sup> Eduard Lohse comments that it was well known for many of the Roman officials in the provinces to use their official position to enrich themselves during the period of their

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<sup>43</sup>The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, Oxford and Cambridge Press, 1926, pp. 142-161

<sup>44</sup>S. Walton, "Oriental Senators in the Service of Rome: A study of Imperial Policy down to the death of Marcus Arretius", *Journal of Roman Studies* 19, 1929, p. 51.



tenure. And they often succeeded on their return to Rome to avoid any problem with their rich booty.<sup>45</sup>

Those who refused to worship the beast and were not stamped with his mark of identification would not be allowed to buy or sell - 13:17. Some have seen behind this an actual refusal of Christians themselves to use the coinage that bore the superscription of the Emperor, which meant for them severe economic self-restriction. This is not, however, the impression gained in reading the text and there is no convincing reason to think that it means other than what it says upon reading it. The impression given is one of imposition of an ultimatum, which threatened serious economic deprivation and destitution if there was not due conformity to the expectations of the powers-that-be. No one is quite sure what is the interpretation of the Mark of the beast, though, the Economic significance of the threat associated with it seems quite clear. It seems to indicate a pretension to control people's life which included defining their welfare and well-being against the background of economic totalitarianism. It is not

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<sup>45</sup>Eduard Lohse, The New Testament Environment, SCM Press, Land, 1976, p. 211.

only that Christians were threatened by imprisonment and death itself, but they were also threatened by starvation in the form of economic sanction. This does reveal the kind of economic control that was exercised by those who rule and those who benefitted from their patronage. It at the same time also reveals the precarious economic existence that prevailed for many, no doubt Christians being chief among them. The people must have been so economically vulnerable that to be disallowed participation in basic economic activity for the shortest while would result in immediate and telling suffering, without any serious disruption of economic activity for the more well-off. Their existence was simply marginal economically. This is something that is quite familiar to Third World Societies and on the wider global scene in the relationship between rich and poor countries. The poor are kept in a state of economic dependency and marginality. Trade monopolies and controls, aid policy, the role of international financial institutions dominated by the powerful, technological control all now are part of the economic structure used to keep in place the poor countries, which if they are not political provinces, they are economic ones. They are extremely vulnerable economically and on this basis are open to



economic blackmail, exploitation; manipulation and severe restriction of their rights. When economic survival is at stake carrying out the commands of the economically dominant against ones will is always a factor to contend with. This is a challenge that the church and Christians in such societies have to face and respond to in the outworking of their faith in faithfulness to God. The writer of the Book of Revelation is confronting such possibilities in his context and exposing the challenges involved.

In chapters seventeen and eighteen the distinct impression that is gained is that Roman life was one of great external splendour, glory and luxury. The description of the prostitute and the list of items in which trade was done and which seemed to have been common place to the upper class seem to confirm this - 17:4, 18:12. High life was obviously the order of the day for the wealthy. It is not unfair to say that the kind of life could only have been maintained to the extent that it was because of the economic power Rome exercised and the economic imbalance that existed between the rich and poor within the societies and between Rome and the dependent provinces. Klaus Wengst writes:

So the Kings of the Earth have come to an arrangement with Rome, carry on its business and thus live in luxury. But above all Rome itself lives in splendour and luxury. The merchants of the Earth and the shopholders have grown rich on the great luxury of the city. They have brought just about everything to Rome --- . So whereas Rome and its vassals live in abundance, like those who do business with them, make profits, famine prevails in the province: 'A measure of wheat for a denarius and three measures of barley for a denarius' (6:6). Prices for basic foods climb so high that for a great part of the population that means hunger.<sup>46</sup>

In the report of the fall of Rome, 18:3ff, it is very interesting to note the kind of reaction envisaged. The merchants and traders are represented as weeping and lamenting. It is a picture of those who benefitted immensely from Rome's economic domination believing that life had come to an end, with the prospects of their being no longer able to engage in their money-making activity which afforded them the life of luxury and wantonness they had shared, much at the expense of the poor and disadvantaged classes and peoples. The list of

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<sup>46</sup>K. Wengst, Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM 1987, p. 122. In a note (n 45, p. 223). Wengst indicated that the verse he quoted to confirm the existence of lack of food, is taken from a passage which was projecting what would happen in the end time. But he said the events mentioned even though projected into the future, were in fact events that were already being experienced by the people. He adduced very considerable historical evidence to support his claim.



merchandise in which trade was done was dominated by items of luxury which by then had become symbols of status and privilege 18:11-13. The list also contained slaves as one of the items of merchandise and they came at the end of it, showing the kind of contempt there was for disadvantaged human beings. There is here a glimpse of the kind of mind-set and sense of values that prevailed. They are very much in line with what one would expect to practice and maintain economic injustice.

Oliver O'Donovan calls attention to the manner in which the writer combines a Babylon and Tyre motif in the lament experienced over the fall of Rome. The lament is made up in equal parts of allusions to conquering Babylon and trading Tyre. These are drawn from two main sources, Jeremiah fifty-one and Ezekiel twenty-seven. The combination of the Babylon and Tyre motifs is not seen as accidental. Neither is it seen as simply an attempt to employ diverse material to portray the hold that Rome had on the nations of her Empire. O'Donovan says -

The significance of this marriage of Babylon and Tyre motifs is that trade, too, as much as conquest violates the

integrity of communities which become dominated by cultural influences of the stronger trading partner.<sup>47</sup>

In the same context he advised that it is in order for it to be remembered that one of the ways in which the beast exercised its tyranny was through control of the market. And then he further commented:

In that sense trade is 'fornication'. It is a cultural promiscuity by which one power exploits and drains the resources from many others.<sup>48</sup>

It is not surprising that he sees the writer as one who stands preeminent among those who have seen mercantile enterprise as a tool of empire. And certainly there is

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<sup>47</sup>O. O'Donovan, "The Political Thought of The Book of Revelation" in Tyndale Bulletin, 1986, 37, p. 85

<sup>48</sup>Ibid p. 85. Richard Bauckham has drawn attention to the fact that while the writer of the Book of Revelation has included many of the items contained in Ezekiel's list of things in which Tyre traded, his list of Rome's is nevertheless not a slavish copy of Ezekiel's. Rather his list is an accurate, not exhaustive but representative one of the luxury items that flowed into Rome from all over the known world in John's time. Bauckham also says that while Ezekiel's list shows Tyre to be the middleman in the trade axis, the writer's list shows Rome to be the ultimate consumer. She grew rich from plundering and taxation of her provinces - "It was the wealth of her subjects that she squandered in the extravagant luxuries listed in these verses [R. Bauckham, The Bible In Politics, SPCK, 1989 p. 94.]



implied that the writer sees it with protest for the disadvantage at which it puts a vast number of people.

There is difference of opinion, concerning the motif reflected in the vision of the fall of Rome. It is not everyone who feels that economic injustice was uppermost in the mind of the writer as such. It was more the wrong use made of the wealth, the writer bemoaned. This is for example, the opinion of G.B. Caird who writes:

The cry, "Was there ever a city like the great city?" is wrung from his own heart as he contemplated the obliteration of the grandeur that was Rome. The proof of this is to be seen in the thoroughly material splendours of the holy city into which the 'treasures and wealth of the nations' are brought (21:24). There was nothing sinful about the commodities which made up Rome's luxury trade, until the great whore used them to seduce mankind with utter materialism ... In the meantime it is with infinite pathos that John surveys the loss of so much wealth.<sup>49</sup>

It is hard to believe that the writer had no more in mind than the sorrow that Rome had made such bad use of its wealth and was now paying the inevitable price. There is enough to show that the manner in which the wealth was achieved and the power it gave its possessors which was further used to increase the pressure on the already

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<sup>49</sup>A Commentary On the Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black 1966 p. 227

dispossessed and oppressed were matters of serious concern for the writer. The words of final doom, 18:21-23, gave the reasons for the fall and unjust use of economic power was one of them.

Dr. Allan Boesak is no doubt right when he indicates that Caird's understanding of the writer's mood and attitude simply demonstrates the importance of where one stands when one is reflecting on the struggles for freedom being carried on by peoples in the world.<sup>50</sup> Attempt at detached assessment or reflection will not lead to full appreciation of the oppressed circumstances and experience. Those who have had the experience of sharing in a context of economic injustice and taking their stand with the oppressed in such a context will, however, appreciate the real mood of the writer. And as the writer communicates in his own special way the oppressive effects of an unjust economic system which kept many economically poor and gave great power to the economically dominant, such realities find their counterpart in the experience of many people today, especially in the so-called Third World countries or

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<sup>50</sup>A. Boesak, Comfort and Protest - The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective, Westminster, 1987, pp. 121-122.



countries of the South, where the people are aware of the injustice of their situation and earnestly desire to be liberated. The temptation of the church to accommodate itself to bourgeois values and to side with the economically powerful is also something that is a known possibility and which The Book of Revelation has exposed very powerfully.

#### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Book of Revelation was written as a direct response to contextual realities that confronted the Christians, challenged their life and witness and which had to be dealt with courageously. Such was the nature of the realities that the issue of faith and culture which included the socio-political and economic situation as it bore directly upon the life of the Christians became a dominant factor. Contextual relevance in this wider sense, where it is not simply a matter of dealing with things confined to the inner life of the church but rather with the church as it relates to the wider society and the powers-that-be is something that makes the book of special interest from a Liberation

Theology point of view, an interest that is sharpened by the very nature of the specific realities to which the writer was responding.

It is most instructive and of great value for it to be noted that the contextuality that the book represents and demonstrates is of such a nature that the relevance and impact of the book were not unduly restricted. Indeed one of the notable lessons it has taught in this regard is that contextuality does not necessarily rule out universal significance. It is not unknown for emphasis on contextuality to deny or rule out universal significance entirely. But in the Book of Revelation, contextuality and universal significance are held in creative tension. Whereas contextual particularities and existential issues that affected the life of the immediate readers were the direct interest of the writer, at the same time he had a perspective on history that gave him a vision beyond his immediate context. In this way, all of life and all of history were not narrowed down to the events of the immediate context. If this was done it would represent an undesirable distortion of both life and history.

It was noted earlier in the discussion that the writer's mode of expressing himself in portraying



personalities and events enabled him to operate in such a way that what he says corresponds with historical realities in his context but at the same time opening up rather than restricting meaning.<sup>51</sup> Another way in which he managed to hold together contextual relevance and universal significance was by the vision of the church that he held and maintained. The book begins with letters addressed to seven churches. There are those who question whether the letters themselves truly belong to the rest of the work and others raise other issues that create doubts about the integrity of the Book in relation to the letters. When all the evidence is taken into consideration it is best taken that the seven letters form an integral part of the book.<sup>52</sup> There is every indication that the seven churches represent at one and

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<sup>51</sup>See pp. 24-26, 45-47 above.

<sup>52</sup>J.M. Court, Myth and History in the Book of Revelation, SPCK, 1979, p. 16. Court has actually indicated that with the aid of the mathematical technique of modern computer analysis there is confirmation of the substantial unity of the book. Of the passages which do not appear to belong to the same population as the others, only in the case of chapter 12 can the variation not be explained in terms of special features required by the subject matter.

In a note Court indicated that the computer analysis was done by himself in collaboration with G. Jagger.

the same time local congregations and the whole church. Each of the churches can be fitted into its geographical, socio-political and religious context thus confirming its individuality. At the same time the very choice of seven churches must be considered significant. Of course there are also those who would wish to play down the symbolic significance of this. It is suggested that the seven were addressed simply because they were the ones most willing to listen to what the writer had to say. It is also suggested that they were chosen largely because of their strategic geographical position. Neither of these suggestions is satisfactory. There is no evidence that the seven were more receptive than any others and it is not entirely true to say that their strategic geographical position was so outstanding or obviously decisive to have weighed so heavily in their being chosen to be addressed by the writer.

The number seven is admittedly one of obvious symbolic significance in the rest of the book and there is no valid reason to doubt that it bore such a significance in the case of the number of churches addressed. the writer chose no more or no less than seven churches because he wanted to make clear that he

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was addressing them as the whole Church of God. This conclusion receives support in two other ways. At the end of each letter there is something of a refrain which suggests what is said to each ought to be taken to heart by all, 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22. Speaking to one is speaking to the whole church. The other thing is that elsewhere in the Book one of the visions held of the church is of it made up of a vast multitude from every tribe, every language and every nation, 7:9ff. It is hard to resist the idea that the church as a Universal reality was in the mind of the writer. He has, therefore, managed to address individual congregations in their historical context while at the same time maintaining a vision of the whole church for which his word also bore significance. The vision with which the book ends crowns it all and confirms that there is a wider vision than that of the immediate context. This will feature extensively in the discussion of the final chapter but it is sufficient to say that the vision of the new heaven and new earth, The New City indicates that the concern and the hope go beyond the immediate context but are seen in the light of God's universal and cosmic purpose, 21<sup>1</sup>-22<sup>5</sup>.

Contextuality for the writer of the Book of Revelation did not mean parochialism or narrow individualism. It did not mean being imprisoned in a given context to the extent that there was no openness to the wider church and the wider world. There is a sense in which what is happening in and to the church anywhere is relevant to the whole church. The writer had the vision and it enabled him to hold together in creative tension contextual relevance and universal significance.



## CHAPTER 2

### REFLECTION ON ENGAGEMENT

### SOLIDARITY IN ENGAGEMENT

The contextuality demonstrated by the Book of Revelation is self-conscious and practical in nature. It does not only deal with issues and realities that touch the lives of those to whom the book is addressed, but the book itself emerges out of and represents reflection on practical engagement and commitment and struggle in relation to such issues and realities. It emerges out of and reflects on shared experience and solidarity of the writer with those to whom it is addressed, as together they seek to work out their faith and Christian commitment in a challenging, unjust and oppressive context.

The writer in giving account of his inaugural vision, indicated that it took place while he was on the Isle of Patmos "because of the Word of God and the

testimony of Jesus",<sup>19</sup>. His presence at Patmos and the reason traditionally understood for his being there were that he was exiled by the authorities because of his Christian witness which was considered seditious and subversive.<sup>1</sup>

If the understanding that the witness of John was considered seditious and subversive is accepted, then no doubt it may be surmised that among other things, his witness challenged claims that were made by and on behalf of the Emperor. Emphasis on the Lordship of Christ over against claims of ultimacy on the part of the emperor, refusal to participate in the Imperial Cult that would be both a testimony to the Emperor's divinity as well as an expression of political loyalty to his oppressive regime and the encouragement and teaching of others to follow a similar path of faithfulness to the Lord of their faith might have been some of the things John did. Where and by whom the decision was taken to exile him is uncertain.

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<sup>1</sup>Tertullian, "De Praescriptione Haereticorum" 36 - See J. Stevenson (Ed), A New Eusebius, Documents Illustrative of The History of The Church, to A.D. 337, J. Stevenson (Ed.) SPCK, London 1978, p. 175. Tertullian speaks of John being exiled by Domitian after an attempt at punishing him otherwise had proven ineffective. Eusebius' Church History makes reference to John being released and sent back to Ephesus after Domitian was succeeded by Nerva, III. 18<sup>20</sup>. Jerome also makes comments that are much in accord with what Eusebius said.



It could either have been made in Rome by the Emperor himself or locally by the provincial authorities who it seemed could have decreed certain forms of exile. The Isle of Patmos is associated with a group of Islands that were used as penal settlement especially of political prisoners. If the writer really suffered imprisonment in exile as suggested, then it is clear that the book is indeed related directly to practical engagement and commitment.

There are those, however, who do not think that the traditional understanding as to why John was at Patmos is correct. This is quite apart from the fact that even the very existence of Patmos itself has been questioned quite seriously, being regarded by some people as simply part of the symbolism of the book. The "Patmos experience" is really the factor that attention is focussed on, and not whether Patmos itself was a historical setting or not. It is stated by John that he was at Patmos, 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' The question is, how are these words to be understood? Do they state purpose or reason? If they are actually stating purpose rather than reason, then it could be taken, that John might well have been at Patmos to preach the gospel rather than paying the price of punishment for

his preaching and witnessing. It could also be that he was there specifically to receive the revelation which the book records and to give personal leadership to a Christian community. He was there in response to the call and prompting of the spirit. These are possibilities that cannot be lightly dismissed, even though the weight of the traditional understanding seems to be against them. There are, however, some good reasons that seem to tip the scale in favour of the traditional understanding that John was at Patmos because he was exiled there.

Firstly, in those still early days of the church, it is doubtful whether the island that was then known as Patmos and to which John might have been in fact referring, would have been of such strategic importance for the missionary thrust of the gospel to be chosen for such a purpose.<sup>2</sup> And if it was as strategic to merit the visit and mission of John, it is surprising and somewhat inexplicable that in terms of specific congregations it does not receive any attention amongst the places with

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<sup>2</sup>K. Kraft, Die Offenbarung des Johannes, Handbuch Zum New Testament, p. 41 cited by K. Wengst, Pax Romana and The Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM 1987, Note 8, p. 247. Kraft is of the opinion that Patmos was too largely uninhabited and poor to have been considered as a missionary field then.



congregations addressed by the writer in the book. Secondly, there is evidence within the Book itself that people were already facing persecution or were being made to suffer because of their faith and witness, including the celebrated instance of martyrdom to which reference has already been made, 2<sup>13</sup> cf 6<sup>9</sup>; 7<sup>13</sup>; 17<sup>6</sup>; 18<sup>24</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. This means that the idea of the writer himself having been exiled as punishment for preaching the gospel is not improbable and he does associate himself with suffering being experienced, 1<sup>9</sup>. A. Yarbro Collins has suggested that he might only have escaped execution because of his status, probably that of being a Roman citizen.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, the words 'The word of God' and 'The testimony of Jesus' which explain John being at Patmos are used elsewhere in the book and so their meaning there could give some hint of meaning that may be helpful here. They appear for example in chapter one verse two (1<sup>2</sup>) and there they seem to refer to the content of the witness rather than the situation of witnessing itself. If this is so, then it would suggest that John went to Patmos because he was exiled there for what he was preaching, and not for the purpose of preaching the gospel or, for

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<sup>3</sup>A. Yarbro Collins, The Apocalypse (New Testament Message Vol.22) Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1979 p. 11.

receiving the gospel. Of course while he was there the vision and insight recorded in the book took shape under the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit. Fourthly, R.H. Charles adduces points of grammatical usage and consistency to support the view that the writer was in Patmos because he was exiled for preaching the gospel and not for the purpose of preaching it or receiving it. Charles makes two basic observations. Firstly, the particular construction the writer used (dia with the accusative) is never used by him to mean "for the sake of" but "because of", "in consequence of"; 2<sup>3</sup>; 4<sup>11</sup>; 7<sup>15</sup>; 12<sup>11,12</sup>; 13<sup>14</sup>. This would indicate that the construction under discussion states ground not purpose. Secondly, there are two other instances when the construction is specifically and undeniably associated with death by persecution because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, 6<sup>9</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>)<sup>4</sup> These two points are quite weighty and convincing. When all the factors indicated in the arguments are taken together it seems

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<sup>4</sup>R.H. Charles, Revelation, Vol.I (International Critical Commentary) T. & T. Clarke, Edingburgh, 19<sup>20</sup>, p. 21-22. Klaus Wengst makes quite similar points as Charles and considers them quite decisive in deciding the issue, see, Pax Romana and The Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM, 1987, note 8, p. 221.



that the traditional view that John's presence at Patmos was that he was exiled because of his preaching and witness represents the true situation.

Quite apart from the reason given for the writers presence at Patmos, there is further evidence that he wrote from a position and out of an experience of solidarity in struggle and suffering with those to whom he wrote. In addressing his readers he makes direct reference to himself not only as a brother, a fellow-member of the believing community but also a fellow-sufferer with them in shared experience of tribulation and endurance, as well as in Christ and the Kingdom, 1<sup>9</sup>. If this does not give further evidence of an exile-experience, it certainly does give independent evidence of the writer being caught up in struggle and engagement in response to the issues, realities and powers concerning which he writes and that this struggle and engagement are in solidarity with his readers whom he calls brothers. Tribulation clearly refers to a severe ordeal and the writer even adds the qualifier "great" to it elsewhere to suggest the level of the suffering experienced - 7<sup>14</sup>. Christopher Rowland has also observed that chapters ten and eleven do show the writer to be involved in the unfolding eschatological drama. This is

specifically demonstrated when he was instructed to eat the scroll and commanded to prophesy, 10<sup>9-11</sup>. According to Rowland this is a call for him to become involved actively as a prophet rather than being a mere onlooker.<sup>6</sup> As such the writer was no mere detached observer, commentator, analyst, or thinker reflecting on the current philosophical trend or simply expressing opinion at an intellectual level for the interest of those who are interested in ideas and theories. He himself was involved in the issues and realities of experience he was reflecting on and a victim of what he was protesting against and which needed to be confronted in the name of God. He was a target of suspicion and official displeasure and so were the faithful to whom he addressed the book, though there were also those who wavered or who even saw things otherwise. In quite typical manner the powers-that-be displayed their wrath against them. When the powers that be are given to overreaching themselves, even to the extent of absolutizing their claims, as it was in the writer's day, they tend to treat even the most well meaning and principled dissent as dissidence and subversion and seek to eliminate it in one way or

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<sup>6</sup>c. Rowland, Radical Christianity, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 79.



another. Rights were for themselves and their chosen beneficiaries. This was part of the struggle the writer and his readers faced and had to become engaged in.

#### NATURE OF THE ENGAGEMENT

The Book of Revelation is, therefore, seen to be intimately bound up with direct engagement in a situation of struggle, oppression and injustice. It is in this respect a reflection upon the engagement as it is a response to the total situation then confronting its readers. Questions do immediately arise as to the nature of the engagement involved, whether the reflection itself was part of the engagement by contributing directly to positive, effective coherent action or whether it inhibited or made such action less likely. Does the engagement have any historical-liberative intention and implication? Does the reflection envisage the possibility of any transformation of the existing situation? Are the powers-that-be and their forces challengeable in the present context? There is an understanding of the Book of Revelation that unhesitatingly says, "No" to all these closely related questions. Of course, those who would subscribe to this negative answer, do not all necessarily share the same

point of view generally. They may even have radically opposed views on most things, especially on how things ought to be ordered in life and the response that ought to be made to the issues and realities of ordinary everyday life that impinge decisively on the humanity and existence of people. They nevertheless end up having the same point of view about the Book of Revelation.

The categorization of the book as thoroughgoingly apocalyptic and the specific perception held of the apocalyptic genre in general have been in a large measure responsible for the shared negative point of view. Harvey Cox gives as good a summary of the popular assessment of apocalypticism as any. He writes:-

...Apocalypse creates a mood of world negation, fatalism retreat from earthly chores, and sometimes even a virulent anti-worldliness...Apocalypticism and politics are inherently incompatible. Politics require a goal, a capacity to measure and evaluate the means available to achieve it and a certain confidence that history will provide a reasonably stable arena in which to seek the goal. Apocalypticism denies all these. No earthly goals are worth holding since they are all illusory. One cannot think rationally about the means since life is determined by irrational powers and



malevolent forces. Rational action is useless because powers outside history and beyond human control will quickly bring the whole thing to a blazing end.<sup>7</sup>

When the Book of Revelation is seen as representative of this particular point of view, there is in the first place a very enthusiastic endorsement of it by persons from one end of the theological spectrum. These find confirmation and reinforcement of their beliefs and convictions that this world is irredeemably corrupt. The present historical situation must come to an utter and total end and be replaced by a radically new order as God's own doing in God's own time and this time and event is imminent. The events of crisis and upheavals in human affairs, the stark manifestations of evil and even the threat of a cataclysmic end to human life by the use of nuclear weapons are all considered to be part of what must be expected in the end times. Nothing can be done to change the situation. It is the coming of the kingdom in the new age that will bring an end to such things. At the same time many of these persons believe that they shall not experience the worst of the dreadful conditions that will immediately precede the end for they shall be miraculously transported into the heavenly regions away

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<sup>7</sup>Harvey Cox, On Not Leaving it to the Snake, MacMillan, 1969, p. 36.

from this. Their vision of the future, therefore, actually undermines any sense of challenge to do anything about the present historical situation that they face. The end result is a combination of escapism, quietism and fatalism.

On the other hand there are those who, based on the same perception of the Book of Revelation, reject it as irrelevant to their present situation and concerns. The quietism and fatalism that it is seen to represent and encourage are unacceptable. As far as they are concerned, whatever engagement that the book may be associated with or represent must be very marginal in nature. At best, the faithful are expected and encouraged to hold on dearly, even desperately, eagerly anticipating the imminent end of all things and the birth of the new age. In some cases they are not necessarily totally unconcerned about the situation, but they feel totally inadequate. They can only take comfort in the fact that God is Almighty - more powerful than Satan and will defeat him. The hope is that God will intervene soon and effect the defeat. This is unsatisfactory and unacceptable. Historical liberative engagement or transformative action is a commitment to which God's faithful people are called. Where this is undermined,



whatever undermines it, must remain questionable. However, endorsement, suspicion or even dismissal of the Book of Revelation does take place based on the perception held of its apocalyptic nature its perceived attitude to the present historical situation.

This general perspective held concerning apocalypticism and by which the Book of Revelation is judged, does not really do full justice to the apocalyptic genre, and so to apocalyptic books on a whole. For example, the totally negative attitude towards history and the radical discontinuity between the present age and the age to come that are ascribed to the apocalyptic point of view have been duly called into question. David Russell agrees that the apocalyptic point of view does give prominence to the transcendent and other worldly kingdom, presenting this kingdom as the goal toward which history in its totality moves and in which it finds its fulfilment. He then goes on to say,

...It would be wrong, however, to conclude that to the apocalyptists as a whole, history is unimportant and the events of history and contemporary events are often obscure. As in photography so also in apocalyptic vision, when the focus is on eternity, the immediate foreground lacks clarity and definition. Apocalyptic encompasses everything from creation to consummation, contemporary lack of precision, allusions to people

and places are often cryptic and tantalizingly obscure. Nevertheless, continuity remains, and history as well as eternity has a firm place within the revelation of God's purpose. The contemporary scene is the stage on which divine purpose is even now being worked out and it is in contemporary terms that the kingdom is being understood.<sup>8</sup>

Opinions may vary as to the degree and extent of historical interest to be associated with the apocalyptic point of view in general but it appears to be an exaggerated claim that it represents total indifference or pessimism. Indeed, it is quite ironical that while the claim is made that apocalypticism represents disillusionment over human efforts to make any creative difference to the present historical scene in terms of

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<sup>8</sup>David Russell, Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern, SCM 1978, p. 25. The whole chapter provides an instructive discussion of the matter, where the more positive attitude to history ascribed to the apocalyptic is backed up with quite convincing arguments. Amongst systematic theologians, Wolfhart Pannenberg in particular has placed great emphasis on the historical value of the apocalyptic. If one understands him correctly, he actually sees apocalyptic as offering the key to understanding history itself. He has had his critics but he seems at least to have challenged effectively the view that sees apocalyptic as totally indifferent or irrelevant to history as such (see W. Pannenberg (Ed.) Revelation As History, MacMillan, London 1968, pp. 131 ff).

See also an interesting comment of similar nature on the role of apocalyptic in Christianity, J.G., Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament, SCM, Lond., 1977 pp. 339-40.



the critical moral and socio-political issues and realities that threaten human existence, there are those for whom it has a totally different, in fact opposite, significance. Its vision and hope of a future new state of affairs on earth in which there will be a radical reversal of things as they are here and now, when the mighty will be brought down and the lowly lifted up, have been known to be a source of inspiration for radical revolutionary religious and socio-political movements. The realities of the present are seen for what they are in the light of the possibilities of the future new order of things. Dissatisfaction and challenge become part of the response to such realities and the present becomes a critical moment for action in anticipation of the future.

The Revolutionary Zealots for example, might well have found encouragement and inspiration for their drive towards national liberation in the teachings of the apocalyptic writings that arose in the inter-testamental period. Guenter Lewy has attested to the impact of the apocalyptic vision or point of view on radical revolutionary movements during the course of history. He writes:-

...Religiously inspired revolutionary movements, have occurred throughout history. The search for Millennium often

led by messianic figures has sparked numerous revolutionary movements, many of which have provided significant political and social innovation.<sup>9</sup>

The Book of Revelation itself, seen in the light of its apocalypticism, has been called by Engels, the most authentic and most truly representative of the truly radical point of view of early Christianity.<sup>10</sup> And attention has been drawn to the fact by Rowland that presently in certain Latin and Central American countries, the oppressed peasants have been able to detect in the Book of Revelation a portrayal of their own struggles and also the 'challenge of imminent disaster to an unrepentant world,' and has started to evoke a response in the Western World that is losing faith in the confident certainties of its way of life, sustained and maintained as it is by 'exploitation of land and people'.. Rowland then adds:-

.. The apocalypse has become a means of unmasking reality and exposing the iniquities which lurk behind the blind

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<sup>9</sup>Guenter Lewy, Religion and Revolution, Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 1.

See also, Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium, Secker and Warburg, London 1957.

<sup>10</sup>Marx and Engels, On Religion, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975, p. 188 ff.



utterances of the powerful and evil structures which undergird a facade of humanity in a sick society.<sup>11</sup>

Enough has been said, it is hoped, to show that simply belonging to the category of apocalyptic literature does not make for the foregone conclusion that a book has no historical interests and despairs of the possibilities of the transformation of present history. And so even if the Book of Revelation represents thoroughgoing apocalypticism, it does not necessarily mean that it can represent no serious practical engagement or no engagement that can make any transformative impact or significance on the historical situation. Indeed what seems to emerge quite clearly at this point is that it does make a difference as to who is actually reading the book and from what position in history it is being read. The importance of readers and interpreters now having greater sensitivity to the fact of their own contextual and religio-ideological conditioning will most certainly affect the assessment of whether the Book reflects upon, represents and inspires any engagement that is of liberative and transformative significance historically. Its presumed thoroughgoing apocalypticism will not

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<sup>11</sup>C. Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 67.

necessarily mean that it represents a commitment to quietism and fatalism as far as current evil conditions are concerned.

It must further be pointed out that contrary to popular categorization, the Book of Revelation is in fact not regarded as wholly and solely apocalyptic. Distinction has been made between it and the thoroughgoing apocalyptic. There is no denial that it does have some significant apocalyptic features but it also has features that are quite different from those associated with apocalypticism. There is increasing recognition and acknowledgement of this.<sup>12</sup> The book is often characterized as prophetic - apocalyptic bearing witness to the fact that it combines a distinctive prophetic perspective and sensitivity with apocalyptic forms and imagery within an apocalyptic framework. There is indeed critical and dynamic practical engagement presupposed by the book in terms of its prophetic-apocalyptic nature. The book does not write off the world as hopelessly irredeemable. Admittedly, it encourages and commends endurance and emphasises its

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<sup>12</sup>Further and more detailed discussion of this will take place in the next chapter when the prophetic character and orientation of the book will be the centre of attention.



importance as an essential response of those to whom it is addressed in the situation of oppression and injustice in which they find themselves, 1<sup>9</sup>; 2<sup>2.3,19</sup>; 3<sup>10</sup>; 6<sup>11</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>. This endurance that is both counselled and commended represents a realism that is characteristic of the book's approach to the struggle and conflict with the powers and structures of evil with which its readers were caught up. It is a realism that the readers themselves were obviously expected to display as an integral part of their on-going faithfulness to God and confidence in the outworking of his purpose towards full and final establishment of the new order of justice, freedom and peace, 21-22<sup>5</sup>. The endurance was therefore, absolutely important.

According to the Book, divine judgement is evoked by the injustice, oppression and idolatry practised by the powers and structures of evil. The seals, 6, trumpets 8<sup>6ff</sup>; and the bowls, 16<sup>1ff</sup>, represented this judgement. What is clear, however, is that the powers of evil and structures of oppression and injustice were not quickly and swiftly brought either to their senses or their knees by the punishment that the judgement constituted. Instead of there being any change of heart

in repentance, there was a hardening of heart, 9<sup>20,21</sup>; 16<sup>9,11</sup>. Such stubbornness and rebelliousness no doubt involved plans for greater oppression and further cruelty. There is not going to be a quick and easy way out for those involved in the struggle and who were bearing the oppressive pressures. Suffering and tribulation were an experience that they had to expect and to endure faithfully. Without such faithful endurance it seemed as if there could have been a two-fold risk. Firstly, there could have been the risk of presuming that immediate human action could be taken to establish the kingdom of God in overthrowing the powers of evil. This would have been a presumptuous denial of the eschatological hope which rested on the promise of God's decisive action in Christ of establishing the kingdom. Secondly, there could have been the risk of believing that there was no hope, that is despairing of the eventual fulfilment of the promises of God in the face of the tribulation being experienced. This would also be a denial of the eschatological hope by which their faithfulness ought to be maintained. On the one hand there would have been an overlooking of not only the ambiguities and limitations of human actions and motives but also of the resilience, resourcefulness and



entrenched nature of the evil they were up against. On the other hand, powerful as the forces of evil actually were and appeared to be, there would have been an over-rating of their power and capacity. Faithful endurance stands over against this two-fold risk and was an essential factor in the struggle as far as the writer was concerned.

It is important to note, however, that the faithful endurance that is expected and commended has nothing to do with a passive resignation to a predetermined fate of oppression and tribulation, grimly holding for deliverance which is expected at any time. William Barclay, referring to the meaning of the word that is translated "patience" or "endurance" made the following comment:-

... "Hupomene" does not describe the patience which simply passively submits to the tide of events, it describes a spirit of courage and conquest which leads to gallantry and transforms even suffering into glory.<sup>13</sup>

Wolfgang Schrage goes even further. He does not only deny that endurance means passivity but goes out to say

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<sup>13</sup>William Barclay, Daily Bible Study, The Revelation of John, Vol.1 Saint Andrew Press, 1976, p. 40

that it also does not refer to a general patience amid problems and adversities of life. It refers to,

"iron resistance in the face of trials and tribulations that emerge when there is confession of Jesus Christ, standing fast for his name sake, 2<sup>3</sup>, refusing to deny his name, 3<sup>8</sup> maintaining the testimony, 12<sup>17</sup> cf 14<sup>12, 14</sup>.

It is worth noting that cowardice heads the list of vices which will disqualify from entry into the holy city. It is a failure in endurance. This is the spirit that is called for and encouraged in the Book of Revelation. Indeed endurance is dynamic, active resistance. This is what it is as an essential element of the engagement that the book reflects upon and represents. The endurance counselled is in a large measure endurance of suffering and persecution that came as a result of faithful witness in word and deed. This meant a level of resistance over against the dictates, decrees and demands of the powers-that-be that were unacceptable as far as they were concerned. The actual pressure which the powers-that-be brought to bear upon the Christians and with which they threatened them made

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<sup>14</sup>Wolfgang Schrage, Ethics in The New Testament, Trans. by David Green T. & T. Clark, 1988 p. 341.



it clear that they do not think they were dealing with mere passive fatalistic submission understood as faithful endurance.

The writer has not portrayed a situation where suffering was sought for suffering sake or where suffering itself was merely thought to be an act of witness in itself. The real situation was that they suffered because of witness and not primarily as an act of witness, but it does speak to the fact that the Christians did not retreat into the defensive. They were prepared to take the fight to the powers. A. Yarbrow Collins has drawn attention to the fact that there were two types of resistance in the form of endurance. There was the pure type as represented in the Book of Daniel, where the elect chose a totally passive role in their encounter with the oppressive power. They simply endured and waited for the defeat of the enemy. There was a second type in which there were also endurance and waiting, but there was a synergistic understanding of the righteous suffering. In this, the suffering and death helped bring the moment of victory nearer. This second type she claims, must be associated with the Book of

Revelation.<sup>15</sup> Collins observed further that even though the Book of Revelation does not advocate the methods of resistance preferred and employed by the Zealots, it shares an aspect of their thinking. The Zealots believed that participatory action in God's victory over the evil oppressive powers was possible for the faithful in their being willing to die for the cause of righteousness, justice and freedom. They also obviously believed that the imperial power could be subjected to critique despite its behaviour and attitude as if it was beyond such critique. The Book of Revelation in terms of its understanding of faithful endurance in the pursuit of witness shared these aspects of thought with the Zealots. Faithful patient endurance is positive and dynamic. It means daring resistance to the powers at their cruellest and worst.

There is urgent warning in the Book against assimilation of and conformity to the dominant religio-

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<sup>15</sup>Journal of Biblical Literature, 96/2 1977, pp. 241-52.

See also G.W.H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and Inspiration" in Martyrdom and Suffering in the New Testament, William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Eds), Cambridge University Press, 1987.



cultural practices on the part of Christians,<sup>214-16,18-24</sup>, cf 21<sup>8</sup>. G.W.H. Lampe has pointed out that the issue at stake here is not as in the case of what was considered to be at stake in Judaism where it was just passive resistance to attempts to make them abandon or denounce their ancestral faith, such as forcing them to eat pork. It was a case of active witnessing in terms of the Gospel with its challenge to the powers themselves.<sup>16</sup> The warning also cannot be put down to mere world-denying rhetoric based upon the belief that the material, physical realm is inherently evil and so it must be utterly rejected. As far as the writer was concerned, the evil being contended with was the presumptuous, self-assertive, oppressive and deceptive ruling powers,

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<sup>16</sup>G.W.H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and Inspiration" in Martyrdom and Suffering in The New Testament, William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Eds). Cambridge University Press, 1987

corrupting both people and history<sup>17</sup><sup>1-4</sup>; 18<sup>3</sup>; 19<sup>2</sup>.<sup>17</sup> The symbolic figures of evil that are referred to are sources and agents of power and influence that distorted reality and corrupted the whole order of existence - 12<sup>3</sup>; 13<sup>1ff</sup>; 17<sup>1ff</sup>. Actions of non-conformity meant both resistance and challenge. They meant defiance and rejection. As such they were actions that represented a socio-political and religious radicalism that resisted ideological captivity that would undermine effective Christian witness and authentic Christian identity.

However it is understood, it must be admitted that the Book of Revelation displays a remarkable revolutionary and radical attitude to the state in comparison with other witnesses in the New Testament. The other witnesses display basically a positive and supportive attitude - Rom. 13<sup>1ff</sup>; 1 Peter 2<sup>13ff</sup>; 1 Tim. 2<sup>2</sup>; Titus 3<sup>1ff</sup>. Submission, co-operation, obedience,

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<sup>17</sup>Both Paul and the writer faced the issue of meats offered to idols and what should be the Christian attitude to eating such meats. Though Paul was not necessarily unaware of the larger cultural issue, he was more keen in the relationship between Christians and thought a concession should be made by abstaining from eating such meats for the sake of the more sensitive ones who thought it should not be eaten, 1 Cor. i; 10<sup>28ff</sup> cf Rom. 14-15<sup>4</sup>. The writer of the Apocalypse was utterly uncompromising. It was a straight matter of the relationship between faith and culture and the integrity of the faith was at stake.



intercessions are exhorted and counselled in relation to the governing authorities. The Apostle Paul spoke of the governing authority as "God's servant to do you good". Rom. 13<sup>4a</sup> (N.I.V.).<sup>18</sup> The Book of Revelation displays a very different attitude. Its attitude is basically one of resistance and challenge. The governing authority spoken of as God's servant by Paul is referred to scathingly by the Book of Revelation as a blasphemous and idolatrous beast that waged war against the people of God, 11<sup>7</sup>; 13<sup>6,7</sup>; 17<sup>3</sup>; 20<sup>2</sup>. Instead of intercessions being made on behalf of the governing authorities, prayers were offered for God's judgement to take its course against them, because of the injustices they had perpetrated and

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<sup>18</sup>Attention should be drawn to 2 Thess. 2<sup>1-7</sup>, a passage quite apocalyptic in nature. In this passage reference is made to a restraining power or force at work preventing "the man of wickedness" from wreaking havoc on human society. This restraining power is one breath spoken of in impersonal terms (VS.6), and in another breath immediately it is spoken of in personal terms (VS.7). There is simply no agreement among interpreters as to the identity of this power. One of many suggestions that has found favour with some is that the restraining force (VS6) is the Empire which becomes personalized in its ultimate representative, The Emperor (VS7). If this is the case then this would represent another place where there is witness to the positive role of the state by Paul or someone influenced by Paul, since there are those who believe Paul is not the author of this letter.

were still perpetrating against the people of God, 6<sup>9,10</sup>, cf 8<sup>3</sup>. There are songs and expressions of joy at the envisaged defeat and fall of Rome, which is portrayed not only as a beast but also as Babylon and a Prostitute, titles that are dishonouring and disrespectful to say the least - 15<sup>3ff</sup>; 19<sup>1-10</sup>, cf 18<sup>1ff</sup>. Indeed, at the heart of the struggle is the claim that the Emperor made for himself and the demands he enforced or which were enforced on his behalf over against the Lordship of Christ which deserved the absolute loyalty of the people.

The point has been made that the difference or contradiction between the attitude of the other witnesses and the Book of Revelation is more apparent than real. Oscar Cullmann has indicated that Revelation's opposition was not to the state as such but rather to the state in the act of over-reaching itself by absolutizing its status. Paul in the place and context of the writer of the Book of Revelation, would have reacted as he did and counselled what he counselled. And the writer of the Book of Revelation not having to face a blasphemous and idolatrous state, would have counselled as the others



did.<sup>19</sup> They were all together in the belief that the state is an interim or penultimate institution which will pass away as the present age does. Cullmann also says -

.....'the Christian believer will always place over against the state a final question mark and will remain watchful and critical, because he knows that behind it stand powers which do indeed have their place in the divine order determined by the victory of Christ, but which nevertheless for the time still have a certain possibility of permitting their demonic strivings for independence to flare up into apparent power.<sup>20</sup>

The claim of this underlying consensus amongst the New Testament witnesses may well be the truth of the matter. Yet this does not mean that the difference in attitude portrayed by the writer of the Book of Revelation should not be appreciated for its revolutionary spirit as it is and as it stands alongside that which is actually displayed by the other writers. The speculation that any of them would have acted in a similar manner had they found themselves in a situation similar to that of the writer of the Book of Revelation, may not be as totally

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<sup>19</sup>O. Cullman, The State in the New Testament, SCM Lond., 1955 p. 83ff.

<sup>20</sup>Oscar Cullman, Christ and Time - The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History, Trans., by Floyd Filsin, SCM, Revised Edition, 1962, p. 200.

on target as the impression is sometimes given. In fact, there is a hint that it might not be altogether true.

In the first letter of Peter, one in which submission, obedience and respect for the governing authority are exhorted, 2<sup>13ff</sup>, there is a puzzling reference of greetings sent to the churches to which the letter was going. The greetings read, "She who is in Babylon chosen together with you, sends you her greetings....1 Peter 5<sup>13</sup>(NIV). There are uncertainties about the identity of both the sender of the greetings and the place from which they are sent. Many persons are, however, convinced that the greetings are being sent from the Church at Rome, and so Rome is referred to as Babylon. The exact reasons why Rome is here referred to as Babylon are not know, but it may well be based upon the connotation that the word had come to have, so that here there is at least a glimpse of ambivalence toward Rome on the part of the writer. C.E.B. Cranfield writes in relation to this-

....Babylon here is neither the ancient city in Mesopotamia, nor the Roman garrison town in Egypt, but stands for Rome (cf Rev. 17, 18). Behind its use here there is no doubt the conviction that the capital of the Empire is the contemporary, Babylon, the proud mistress



of the nations and the centre of worldly and pagan power - and perhaps also prudential reasons for not mentioning Rome.<sup>21</sup>

The letter was sent to Churches within the same region of those to which the Book of Revelation was sent, though not to the same Churches. It betrays signs that persecution of Christians was actually taking place or was most certainly threatening to occur. Even though then Rome was seen as Babylon, the writer still retains his counsel in 2<sup>13-17</sup>. He goes no where near the Book of Revelation in attitude. There is too much uncertainty for any dogmatic assertions to be made or final conclusions to be drawn but it may well be that there was greater difference in attitude and a more radical or revolutionary spirit basically on the part of the writer of the Book of Revelation. Having his vision and gaining his insight from the underside of the historical situation in which he and his readers found themselves as companions, in tribulation, understanding his situation in the light of God's revealed purpose from that position meant much. There is no question of withdrawal or

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<sup>21</sup>C.E.B. Cranfield, The First Epistle of Peter, SCM, 1950, p. 123. See also, Ernest Best, 1 Peter, New Century bible, Marshall, Morgan and Scott (Ed) 1971 pp. 178-179.

indifference here. There is resistance and challenge. Ernst Käsemann writes in relation to the Book of Revelation

...Nowhere else in the New Testament is the hatred of Rome thinly disguised as Babylon, loudly expressed as here, where it matches what we have known to have been felt by the Zealots, and may assume to have been present among many subject races in the empire. The hatred contrasts with the prevailing practice in the New Testament of presenting Caesar's representative in a favourable light...The hatred is understandable for Revelation was written at the time of Domitian's persecution at the end of the first century, and in such times sweetness of temper may desert even Christians. Even so it is quite exceptional in the New testament setting, for Rome to appear as a beast out of the abyss and for Christian freedom to be unmistakably combined with a politically revolutionary attitude.<sup>22</sup>

The engagement represented in and reflected upon in the book has historical significance and liberative implications. Far from being a matter of passive endurance, fatalistic and escapist in nature, the faithful endurance is an engagement that ought to be understood in terms of Resistance, Challenge and Critique. These are deeply inter-related and form an integral part of the single basic response of faithful

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<sup>22</sup>Ernst Käsemann, Jesus Means Freedom, SCM London, 1969, p. 138.



endurance. It is resistance to the arrogance of power expressed in terms of compulsions, intimidation, manipulation, deception and persecution which were all on-going factors in an oppressive context in which the Christians found themselves. It is a challenge to the idolatrous pretensions of the powers that over-reached themselves on the basis of their own self-perception and understanding and the resulting demands they make. It is critique in terms of exposure and condemnation. The real nature of the powers and their agents is made known. Their limitations, inherent weakness, insecurity and self-destructive capacity despite appearances to the contrary are what are real about them. The systems and dominant culture created and sponsored by them and their agents to suit their own vested interests are made known for their evil and corrupting influence. Christopher Rowland expresses it in the following manner:

...The characterization of contemporary society in the apocalyptic symbolism of beast and harlot is a vigorous unmasking and denunciation of the ideology of the powerful, by which they seek to

legitimize their position by persecution and economic exploitation; it is an ancient Christian form of the critique of ideology.<sup>23</sup>

Resistance, challenge and critique are, therefore, considered key elements of the engagement represented and reflected upon the book. There is every indication that engagement of this nature will result in suffering, suffering even unto death. This, however, must be borne with fortitude. For engagement that will earn such suffering will in its own way be an essential part of the witness to the righteousness, justice, freedom and peace which God has already acted in Christ to bring about and which will be brought to fulfilment in the new order upon which their vision and hope are set. In this way the seeds of liberation are sown by the faithful.

#### NON-VIOLENCE

In giving consideration to the nature of the engagement that is reflected on and represented by the book, it is important to note that it does not involve resorting to the use of force of arms or any contemplation of or encouragement to such an end on the part of the people to whom it is addressed. There is

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<sup>23</sup>Christopher Rowland, Radical Christianity, Polity Press, 1988, p. 75.



something striking and remarkable about this which merits some attention. There is a real sense in which the book can be said to contain much violence in terms of the conflict that it portrays. Some would even say that it dwells too much upon violence for their liking. In Chapters six to twenty which contain the bulk of the events being discussed, war and the threat of war are dramatically depicted. War in heaven and on earth; war upon the saints and against the lamb; war against Rome and against the anti-Christ are all reported, 12<sup>7ff</sup>; 11<sup>7ff</sup>; 13<sup>7ff</sup>; 16<sup>14</sup>; 17<sup>14</sup>; 19<sup>11-21</sup>. War is carried out against the people and war is pursued on their behalf. And yet there is no evidence that in their engagement the people participated in armed conflict with the powers of evil or were expected to do so. The conflict in battle with the powers of evil and victory over them and their representatives and followers were solely the work of the lord and His heavenly hosts. In Chapter eighteen verse six (18<sup>6</sup>), there is a call for reprisal to be taken on Rome but the call is not addressed to the people of God. It is addressed either to the angels or to the kings of earth who were seduced by her. There is a single instance where it seems as if it could be suggested that the faithful accompanied the

lord into battle and shared in the action, 17<sup>14</sup>, but even here there is no certainty that they actually participated in the battle. It could well be that what they shared in were the victory celebrations. It must also be noted that there are those who think that there is a hint of holy war tradition to be found in the book. This is especially so where the followers of the lamb are described as a "those who have not defiled themselves with women, 14<sup>4</sup>. There is the well attested to ceremonial practice in ancient Israel where religious ceremonial preparation was undertaken before immediate engagement in war. Those who were participating in the war were consecrated for it, Jer. 6<sup>4</sup>; Mic.3<sup>5</sup>; Joel 3<sup>9</sup>. One of the acts was sexual abstinence for a period, Deut. 23<sup>9-10</sup>; 1 Sam. 21<sup>5</sup>; 2 Sam. 11<sup>11</sup> cf Lev. 15<sup>16</sup>. That the writer might have been drawing upon this tradition is one of the best explanations for an otherwise difficult passage, but it does not mean that it must be taken literally. The chapter and the one that follows do have a military focus and in the conflict, God's people are expected to keep themselves faithful, that is morally and spiritually chaste, not compromising their faith, bearing in mind that the sexual symbol was used for idolatry. Given the fact that nowhere else the faithful are seen in



armed conflict as the means of their resistance or offensive, this understanding seems more reasonable. In contrast then with other apocalypses which portray the elect actually participating in at least the final stages of the Messianic battle, it is ostensibly not so in the case of the Book of Revelation.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, therefore, the engagement may be said to be non-violent.

What then accounts for this particular approach to the engagement? No reason is given by the writer himself. There is no indication that the matter itself was an issue or a debate, as it became and continues to be in situations of oppression and injustice in particular, that is whether force should be resorted to in the effort of seeking to break the oppression and liberate the oppressed. Nevertheless, the option itself must have faced the writer and his readers as it had faced others before his time and during his time. And surely the imagery of his book does use the language of force in dealing with the conflict with and eventual overthrow of the powers. But as pointed out, the writer and his readers did not themselves engage in armed revolt and did not seem to have been inclined to do so. One

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<sup>24</sup><sub>1</sub> Enoch 98<sup>12</sup>, cf 38<sup>5</sup>; 91<sup>12</sup>; 96<sup>1</sup>. See also QM  
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explanation that immediately comes to mind and which cannot be ruled out is that it was a matter of straightforward pragmatic restraint. This restraint is the result of a realistic assessment of the whole situation and recognition that in the circumstances it would have been impossible for successful armed revolt to have been undertaken. As it was then, the church was still quite a young and small community. It did not even enjoy a settled and quite independent identity. It was still considered by many to be a Jewish sect, a factor of mixed blessings even then. If they attempted armed revolt they would have been summararily crushed by the superior forces of the authorities and then stood the chance of ruining any further possibility of the emergence and growth of the community for at least a long time. Practical wisdom, therefore, dictated that armed revolt would not be something to embark upon.

The manner and terms in which the writer describes and portrays the forces they were up against indicate that he appreciated the awesome power that was at their command. Dragon and beasts with multiple heads, horns and crowns - 12<sup>3</sup>; 13<sup>1ff</sup>; 17<sup>3ff</sup>, massed forces with great military might, 16<sup>6</sup>; 17<sup>12</sup>; 19<sup>19</sup>, are pictures that portray the appearance of almost unconquerable



power, power that in fact parodies that of God and his heavenly hosts. With this recognition of the power of the forces and authorities that were in charge of the society, to have resorted to armed resistance and revolt would have been foolhardy. It would be no more than ill-considered adventurism. In addition, news and the lessons of the Palestinian revolt might well have reached the province. The disastrous results of this uprising and the fact that the local authorities, if not the Imperial power in Rome, might have been more sensitive to the presence of such groups as the Christian community as a result would also prompt restraint. It is true that it would have been some time that the uprising had taken place, but is also likely that it might have taken some time for the news to reach the province of Asia Minor and of such things the repercussions remain critical for a long time.

It is not unknown for ill-considered adventurism on the part of concerned leaders and groups of oppressed peoples to have caused more problems and sufferings for them than they might have been undergoing and for the chances of any successful protest in the foreseeable future to be severely undermined. As a result, national security states have taken shape, have their hands

strengthened and find even greater acceptance in the name of the defence of law and order and democracy. Dom Helder Camara spells out the basis on which pragmatic restraint is practised by some in Latin America:-

...Armed revolt is legitimate but impossible, legitimate because it is provoked and impossible because it would be squashed. My position in this regard is not based on any idealism, but on a purely realistic, purely political sense...<sup>25</sup>

This states the case for pragmatic restraint in a present day situation where the forces of oppression are very powerful in comparison to any show of strength that could be mustered by the oppressed in the given situation. The upshot of this is that given different circumstances with the possibility of a successful armed revolt against the oppressors then it would be considered a real option. John, the writer of the Book of Revelation, has not spelt out anything of the sort, but pragmatic restraint might well have been a guiding factor. This is based on appreciation of the awesome power of the opposing oppressive forces, the known fate of those who had tried armed uprising in the not too distant past and the fact that the local authorities, if

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted by Juan M. Boniro in Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age, SPCK, 1975, p. 126.



not the central imperial power, might well have been betraying signs of suspicion in harassments that were taking place. The non-violent approach from the point of view of the Christians themselves would not have been a fixed and hard and fast rule. And John himself had shown that he was not afraid to make adjustment as the circumstances warranted it. And certainly the adjustment is not in the direction of fatalism or unconditional submission to the powers.

A. Yarbro Collins has offered an explanation which sees the specific aspect of non-violence as part and parcel of the overall intention of the writing of the book itself. As such the Book is meant to be an emotional catharsis and outlet for the feelings of fear, resentment and hostility engendered against Rome and her representatives. Collins notes that the book definitely does not encourage person to person violence. Yet she admits that the book is amply supplied with violent imagery. There is an attitude of ambivalence towards violence. While the use of violence is not advocated as part of the scheme of the response of the people to their undesirable social conditions, it is still present as a means by which they will be comforted. The way the violence is portrayed, however, must be understood in the

light of the psychological process by which aggression is sometimes controlled and channelled, especially when it is not considered desirable or expedient for it to be expressed in resort to open use of force of arms. There are two ways in which this is done in the Book of Revelation. Firstly, by act of transference whereby the anger, hostility, bitterness and resentment felt by the writer and his readers are transferred to another subject, who in this case, is God in Christ. He will act against the oppressors and aggressors and vindicate the oppressed and aggrieved. When this transference takes place, the anger and accompanying tension become more manageable or dissipates to such an extent that the urge towards violence weakens considerably, if not disappearing altogether. An accompanying feature of the transference is what is referred to as "transposition". This has to do with the timing of the wrath to be visited upon the aggressors. It is transposed from the present into the future. In the present then it is understandable that patient endurance is to be displayed by the oppressed and aggrieved. The second way in which the aggression is controlled is by internalizing and thereby reversing it. The net effect of this second way is that the people should impose very stern standards



upon themselves, regulating very strictly their level of participation in the socio-religious and cultural life of their community. In this way, assimilation of and accommodation to the dominant way of life are safeguarded against. The imposition of this strict discipline upon themselves cuts them off from the dominant culture and by this they actually express themselves against the oppressive powers.<sup>26</sup>

This explanation as set forth is hard both to prove or to deny. The factors referred to may well have been involved both in the intention and the impact of the book. It seems, however, a considerable narrowing of the scope of the book if it is understood solely or

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<sup>26</sup>A. Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis. The Power of the Apocalypse, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 155 ff. See also her "Oppression from Without: The Symbolisation of Rome as evil in Early Christianity" Concilium, Dec. 1988.

A theory of similar psycho-social nature that seeks to explain the intention of the writer along emotional therapeutic lines is that which is set forth by John Gager. He sees the Book as Mythic therapy. The writer uses myth to create a sense of millennial bliss as a present experience, to compensate for the cognitive dissonance created by the lack of fulfilment of the promised messianic age and the expected blessings involved. See - Kingdom and Community, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1975, pp. 49.57. See also, his Essay "The Attainment of Millennial Bliss through Myth: The Book of Revelation" in Visionaries and their Apocalypses, Ed. Paul D. Hanson, SPCK/Fortress, London/Philadelphia 1982, p. 146 ff.

largely in the way it seems Collins has seen it. It would essentially serve the single purpose of emotional therapy for the oppressed and aggrieved. Any impact on the oppressors would be to show or remind them that the oppressed were put at a disadvantage and were facing difficulties because of how things were ordered for their interest and satisfaction. Whereas the book might well have served as a source of emotional accommodations or outlet for anger for the oppressed Christians, it goes beyond this in its intention and thrust. It has a public orientation in terms of the fact that it is responding directly to the socio-political and religious issues as they impinged oppressively on the life of the people. The power-structures themselves came directly within the scope of its intention, where they are exposed for what they are. The basic issues involved are brought to a head and the crucial decision of whether Caesar is Lord or Jesus is Lord stands as a key factor. Those who are addressed, there is a call to action which is more than quietism or passive endurance. There is, therefore, more to the book than it being primarily a source of emotional therapy. It is a powerful piece of resistance literature. Therefore, the account given by Collins for the absence of violent confrontation at the level being



discussed, while it makes an important point it is nevertheless too narrow to account entirely for the intention of the book and so the non-violent approach.

#### THE PRAXIS OF JESUS AS PARADIGM

There is probably more than a hint in the book itself of a really significant factor that might have influenced decisively the particular non-violent approach employed in regard to the engagement reflected on and represented in it. While the tactical approach of pragmatic restraint is not being by-passed or set aside, this factor seems to go beyond it and has a theological basis, if it may be so stated. This factor is the praxis of Jesus. There is a sense in which the praxis of Jesus was seen to be absolutely vital and in this sense it seemed to have been considered paradigmatic for the readers of the book. If someone like Albert Nolan is right, the tactical approach was part of the praxis of

Jesus and it would have had its influence, but it does not seem as if it was the focal point of the writer in this case.<sup>27</sup>

In the Book of Revelation it seems pretty clear that the essential task of the Christians, individually and especially corporately (this is where the emphasis is), is that of maintaining or holding 'the testimony of Jesus' - 12<sup>17</sup>; cf 19<sup>10</sup>; cf 12<sup>9</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. The dragon is said to have committed himself to wage war against the offspring of the somewhat mysterious woman who was pregnant with child, having failed in his bid to defeat and kill her. And the way in which the offspring set to be persecuted is identified, is 'those who hold the testimony of Jesus' - 12<sup>17</sup>. The writer himself was prevented from worshipping an angel who had brought him a message of profound significance. The angel in declining and preventing him from doing so reminded him that he was

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<sup>27</sup>Nolan writes of Jesus: - Jesus was not a pacifist in principle, he was a pacifist in practice, that is to say, in the concrete circumstances of his time. We do not know what he would have done in other possible circumstances. But we can surmise that if there had been no other way of defending the poor and oppressed and if there had been no danger of escalation of violence, his unlimited compassion might have overflowed temporarily into violent indignation.

Albert Nolan, Jesus Before Christianity, Orbis Maryknoll, New York. 1978, p. 111.



a fellow-servant with him and all his brothers 'who hold the testimony of Jesus' - 19<sup>10</sup>. There are references which speak of martyrs suffering because of the testimony of Jesus, 6<sup>9</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. At the very beginning the writer himself is spoken of in terms of his task, as testifying to everything he saw - "that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" - 1<sup>2</sup>; cf 1<sup>9</sup>. "The testimony of Jesus" is not only an obviously absolutely important phrase but it refers to something that is simply crucial.

An important question that arises is, how must the phrase be understood? G.W.H. Lampe argues strongly and persuasively for the objective sense, testimony borne to Jesus. He cites parallels or near parallels to the phrase elsewhere, which are unambiguously objective. He then points out that the subjective sense, that is that the testimony is that borne by Jesus, is not entirely helpful. It is not truly able to identify what is the testimony borne by Jesus that should be maintained. To claim that it is not any specific pronouncement or his teaching in general or his attitude, but his death, may seem acceptable, only that while the death of Jesus may inspire martyrs to give up their life, it is hard to see how it could be the spirit of prophecy - 19<sup>10</sup>. But when the situation and circumstance of crisis portrayed by the

book are taken into consideration, the opponents of the faithful demanding that they worship Caesar as Lord, it is more in order that the Holy Spirit is seen as inspiring prophecy which confesses and proclaims Jesus as Lord. On this basis, it is better to see the testimony of Jesus, as witness borne to him.<sup>28</sup> F.F. Bruce is supportive of this point of view. He argues that it is through Christian prophecy that the spirit of prophecy referred to in 19<sup>10</sup> bears witness. What pre-Christian prophets had predicted was proclaimed as having been fulfilled by Christian prophets. The weight of prophecy that was entrusted to the writer and his brethren was the testimony that was borne to Jesus. Indeed, elsewhere in the New Testament the spirit of prophecy is associated with the confession of the lordship of Christ, 1 Cor. 12<sup>3</sup> and the test of the authenticity of prophecy is testimony affirming the incarnation of Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>See Lampe's Essay "Martyrdom and Inspiration" in Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament, Eds. William Horbury and Brian McNeil, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

<sup>29</sup>See Bruce's Essay "The spirit in the Apocalypse" in Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament, Eds. B. Lindars and S.S. Smalley, Cambridge University Press, 1973.



The argument put forward by both Lampe and Bruce cannot be dismissed lightly but it does seem that when all things are considered the subjective understanding is preferable. When the phrase, 'the testimony of Jesus' is examined in the context in which it has been used in the book, it is to be seen that in all cases but one, 19<sup>10</sup>, it is used in association with the parallel phrase "the Word of God". There is no doubt that "the Word of God" refers to the word given by God and it is better taken that the phrase "the testimony of Jesus" used along with it means the testimony given or borne by Jesus. Therefore, even in the single instance when the phrase is used without the accompanying phrase 'the word of God;', it ought to retain the same subjective meaning unless there was overwhelming reason to think otherwise and there is none. The points made about Christian prophecy and the appropriateness of the objective sense, presupposes that prophecy in the book of Revelation is essentially Christian, namely, New testament prophecy. This is hotly debated and cannot be taken as a foregone conclusion as it seems F.F. Bruce has done.<sup>30</sup> The testimony of Jesus is spoken of as being "held", this

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<sup>30</sup>There will be more on this in the next chapter.

does give the impression of something that has been received or entrusted or committed to the faithful Christians, that they should perpetuate.

The subjective meaning is of a nature where it seems that it could more readily accommodate or imply the objective sense within itself than it would be in the case of the objective meaning embracing the subjective meaning similarly. It seems that it would be well-nigh impossible to bear the testimony that Jesus bore, to pattern life on his praxis, without somehow at the same time bearing testimony to and about him. But it is not inconceivable that testimony could be borne to Jesus without testimony being borne at the same time in terms of following his example and pattern. And there is hardly any doubt that the testimony of Jesus was something that had to be held in word and deed. This leads to the fact that in the Book Jesus himself has been referred to, as a witness that is 'faithful and true' - 3<sup>14</sup>, cf 1<sup>5</sup>. He is one who is worthy to be emulated. It is the pattern he has entrusted to his servants in the



world.<sup>31</sup> The key factor of maintaining or holding 'the testimony of Jesus' seems to involve seeing to the continuity of the witness borne by Jesus on the part of the Christians in the situation in which they found themselves. The Praxis of Jesus was considered a paradigm for the Christians.

What was it then about the testimony borne by Jesus in his life and ministry or what perception of the testimony that challenged the writer to such an extent that made it paradigmatic for him and for his readers? He certainly has not dwelt on details of the life and ministry of Jesus to any extent whatever in the book. Hints, therefore, have to be sought from the crucial references he made or the references that implied knowledge of the ministry of Jesus. When this is done it would seem that the testimony is seen in terms of the

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<sup>31</sup>There is helpful discussion of the subjective meaning to be found in the following:

G.B. Caird, A Commentary on Revelation of St. John the Divine, A. & C. Black, 1965 pp. 237-238.

A. Trites, The new Testament Concept of Witness, Cambridge University Press, 1977 pp. 135ff.

J.P.M. Sweet, "Maintaining the testimony of Jesus, the Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John", in Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament, Eds. William Horbury and Brian McNeil, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 102 ff.

climatic event of the cross and resurrection and the complex of events associated with it. In relation to this, the paradigmatic factor is basically the matter of vindication through suffering, victory through sacrifice, power through powerlessness. G.B. Caird referring to the testimony, said that it referred to that which Jesus bore in himself and his teaching and above all, to the plan of God to achieve victory over the powers of evil through sacrifice and loyalty.<sup>32</sup> This then would be the path that Christians would be expected to follow in their own praxis of resistance, challenge and critique. And so while quietism or fatalistic submission was not the way, they were not invited or encouraged to participate in violent overthrow or resort to force of arms in any way.

In a very important Essay, David Barr has shown how at certain key points in his narrative the writer radically reverses the value of certain symbols of power and conquest by changing them into symbols of powerlessness and suffering.<sup>33</sup> Barr cites three such symbols and it is interesting that in two of them there

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<sup>32</sup>G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, A. & C. Black, 1965, pp. 237-38.

<sup>33</sup>David Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis" Interpretation, January 1984, 38/1 p. 41-42



is reference to 'the testimony of Jesus". The examples cited are worth looking at. Firstly, there is the very decisive event in Chapter Five, where no one was found worthy to open the scroll and at the point where it began to seem hopeless to the writer in his vision, he was told that he should not weep for, "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered". When John looked, instead of the Lion, he saw, "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne...",<sup>5,6</sup>. Barr notes that on one level this is simply an historical reference. Jesus did not conform to the nationalistic messianic expectations of the Hebrew traditions. Yet on another level the writer is making a very important theological point. The Lamb bearing the marks of having been slain is the Lion - a dramatic and complete transvaluation of the symbol. Jesus is indeed the messiah but contrary to the expectations he has accomplished his Messianic task in a completely different way. It was by suffering and death rather than by force and might. Barr then says:-

...Yet his death is not defeat, for it is just this that makes him worthy to open the scroll revealing the will of God. Jesus conquered through suffering and weakness rather than might. John asks us to see both that Jesus rejects the role

of the Lion, refuses to conquer through supernatural power, and that we must now give a radical new valuation to Lamb: the sufferer is the conqueror, the victim, the victor.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, in Chapter Twelve there is an account of a battle in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels. The dragon had attacked the woman with child. The dragon was defeated and in the expressions of celebration, contrary to what was to be expected, the victory was not attributed to Michael and his battling angels but to the blood of the Lamb and by the testimony borne by martyrs. There is again a radical transformation of the symbol and victory is actually through sacrifice and suffering. Here the suffering and martyred witnesses are associated with the death of Jesus in the fight against evil. The martyrs walked in the path of their master. Indeed the dragon is reported to

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<sup>34</sup>Very similar comments have been made by others, for example:-

Alan Boesak, Comfort and Protest - The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective, Westminster Press, 1987, pp. 56-57.

John H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 238.

Hans Reudi-Webur, The Way of the Lamb, Christ in the Apocalypse, W.C.C. Publications, Geneva, 1988, p. 19.



make the object of his persecution those who hold the testimony of Jesus, when he was defeated, 12<sup>17</sup>. The paradigm of resistance is the praxis of Jesus himself.

Thirdly, there is the scene of the eschatological battle, with the battle lines drawn, 19<sup>11-21</sup>. The Divine Warrior, the Lord, is on his white horse set to make war on the beast with his host. But when the battle scene is examined, there is an absence of the conventional battle features, as far as the Divine warrior is concerned. The symbols are again reversed and transformed. There is no actual fighting described. The scene is set, and victory for the divine warrior is announced - vs 19,20. The weapon of victory held by the Divine warrior is his word rather than any conventional weapon of battle - vs 15,21. If the word of Jesus and his testimony, as understood by us are synonymous or parallel then there is yet another declaration that it is by sacrifice that victory was achieved and the blood by which the robe was stained was his own blood. In any case it was certainly not by display of might or force that the battle was won. The reference to those who maintained the testimony of Jesus in verse ten in the same context, is significant. The praxis of Jesus is the paradigm for their testimony.

In the three examples given there is no doubt that there is the transvaluation of symbols or "rebirth of images" in a most suggestive manner, giving emphasis to the testimony of Jesus in terms of vindication in the face of suffering, power through powerlessness and victory through sacrifice. In the cross of Jesus, significantly the only feature of the earthly life of Jesus that receives clear and specific mention, human injustice and oppression were experienced at the same time the judgement and justice of God upon injustice and oppression were being worked out. There was suffering which constituted a real test of the faithfulness, endurance and obedience of Jesus but at the same time there were the defeat of the powers and vindication of the suffering and oppressed. The cross was at one and the same time solidarity with the oppressed and action against the oppressors who were displaying their power but whose real powerlessness, and inherent weakness were being exposed and doomed destiny being sealed. There was a complete redefinition of power. In this respect it is a real feature of the book as to how along with the focus placed on the death of Christ - the decisive place it finds in the scheme of things - there is indeed a corresponding focus on the exalted place given to him.



These are juxtaposed in the thought and reflection of the Book. Attention has been drawn to the fact of what has been referred to as the close identification of Christ with God, the way the voice of God and the voice of the Exalted Lord are at times virtually indistinguishable; the way in which there is ascribed to Christ images that are used of God in the Old Testament and the fact that he does not only stand at the centre of the throne, as a Lamb bearing the marks of having been slain, but he is seen to be occupying the throne - 1<sup>1-2</sup>; 1<sup>13-16</sup>; 3<sup>2,7</sup>; 7<sup>9-10</sup>; 7<sup>7-17</sup>; 12<sup>5</sup>; 22<sup>1</sup>; 22<sup>3</sup>.<sup>35</sup> The Christ who was slain is the Christ victorious and exalted, sharing Divine authority.

    Holding the testimony of Jesus means continuity of the praxis of Jesus in the life and witness of the faithful. It means sharing the experience of cross-bearing in suffering and tribulation that come as a result of faithful witness but open to vindication and victory which the death and resurrection of Jesus have assured them. There is no call in the book for violent

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<sup>35</sup>See M. Eugene Borling's Essay, "The Theology of Revelation, The Lord our God Almighty Reigns", Interpretation July 1986 40/3 esp. pp. 263

revolution as there was none in the ministry of Jesus whose testimony is to be faithfully held.<sup>36</sup> Yet there was also no retreat into a political, quietistic, fatalistic acceptance and submission to things as they were. Certainly in the ministry of Jesus the non-violent approach did not mean an alternative in the form of withdrawal or apoliticism. He was still considered dangerous and seditious to such an extent that he was arrested, charged and executed. In dying the death of the cross He met the full force of evil and won his

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<sup>36</sup>It is well known that there are those who have made out a case and offered plausible arguments to show that Jesus had Zealotic sympathies, if not actually being a member of the party of the Zealots. This position has generally failed to convince most New testament scholars. Basically, it has been felt that it is a case of Jesus having been made to fit a theory and to serve interests that are not supported by a proper understanding of His Person and ministry. Unnecessary exegetical liberties have had to be taken to support the point of view. The traditional understanding of Jesus' life and ministry that does not make him a member of any of the existing parties or an advocate of their viewpoint is abandoned for no good reason than to support the point of view of being put forward with no really convincing supportive evidence.

It is also true that there is the further point of uncertainty as to whether the Zealots were constituted as an organized party at the time of the ministry of Jesus. See J.P.M. Sweet, "Jesus and The Zealots" in Jesus and The Politics of the Day, (Eds. E. Bammel and C.F.D. Moule, Cambridge, 1984; and Richard Horsely, "The Zealots, Their Origin, Relationships and Importance in The Jewish Revolt", in Novum Testamentum, 28 1986.



victory over them through the resurrection power of God. This created a path and inaugurated a new future in which those who were committed to Him could follow and could now anticipate and move towards respectively. Life and hope were put into new perspective and as this perspective became the guiding one for life, the believing community will find that the experience of their master will increasingly become their own experience. The fact of the cross becomes real in the pursuit of their witness in holding to the testimony of Jesus<sup>2</sup><sup>10</sup>; 3<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>.

From the point of view of the writer, the engagement involved, while it inevitably brings suffering, it still does not mean that suffering is glorified for its own sake. There is of course a hint that martyrdom in its own way seems to make its contribution to the hastening of the fulfilment of the kingdom, 6<sup>9-11</sup>. In the meantime, however, in the face of whatever comes courage and confidence in hope must be displayed. There is no promise of quick and easy success here and now in breaking the power of the oppressors openly and publicly and visibly undermining the advantage of the privileged. Success, as the world counts success, is something that itself makes victims of the poor and

oppressed in the search for it or maintenance of it by the powerful. Yet the way of faithfulness must be followed.

There is a cycle or pattern of humiliation, debasement and denial of human dignity upon which the "hubris" of the oppressive powerful and privileged must feed to gain satisfaction, to confirm their superiority and renew their power and privilege. The faithfulness which follows the paradigm of Jesus in challenge and resistance enables a self-respect, strength of character and sense of purpose and dignity that is a challenge to that "hubris", which gains its sense of satisfaction from domination and humiliation of others. This is why persecution is meted out to the faithful. The victory of the powerful is not only incomplete but the very structure of their happiness also shows up its fragility. It is of all things threatened by the weak and powerless not by weapons of the nature that the powerful depend upon for their security and happiness. The powerful will not necessarily relent or repent. They will predictably pile on greater pressure. This is, however, ironical, for it is saying something about a victory being won but not by those who seem to have all the power on their side. It is the way of the cross. It is saying something



about a moral initiative being seized not by those who seem to have the authority to do as they will. It is saying something about power exhausting itself against those who seem to have nothing of the kind with which to fight back. This is the paradigm of Jesus being worked out. More will be said along this line from another perspective in our final chapter.

There is a remarkable demonstration of radicalism and restraint held together in creative tension in the engagement represented by and reflected on in the Book. The radicalism represents a departure from other witnesses in the new Testament as resistance which involves challenge and critique is counselled in relation to the authorities instead of submission. The circumstances in which the writer and his readers found themselves warranted it and the writer was radical enough to respond accordingly. The authorities they were called upon to face were driven and motivated by forces of demonic proportions. They over-reached themselves by claiming ultimacy for themselves and eventually becoming oppressive, unjust and idolatrous in seeking to maintain and sustain their claims. The radicalism meant a willingness to resist even to death. And yet there was restraint. Even though there are otherwise much use of

violent imagery and symbolism and many references to warfare in which the Lord himself was caught up, the resistance to which the people were called was not to the point of attempting violent overthrow or confrontation in resorting to armed revolution. And as radicalism is held with restraint there emerged what could be referred to as the paradox of the Christian existence of those engaged in the struggle and solidarity against oppression and injustice of enormous power, seemingly securely entrenched and determined not to be challenged. It is the paradox of vindication perceived as coming through suffering for righteousness sake, power manifesting itself in and through powerlessness and victory through sacrifice. It is the paradigm of radicalism and restraint seen in Jesus himself who is announced as a Lion but who appears as a lamb with marks of having been slain, standing at the centre of the throne. It is a way of resisting, challenging and exposing the powers without necessarily fighting them with their own weapons, being determined never to yield to the definition of life determined by the powers yet not knowing whether there will be any public and visible breaking of their power here and now but at the same time living and resisting as



if the breaking has already taken place. The reign of God has already begun, confirmed by the vision of the lamb, 5<sup>5ff</sup>.

The radicalism which is demonstrated by the writer himself has been pointed out to be in the way he has differed from what is observed to be the attitude of other witnesses in the New Testament who make direct reference to relationship with church and state. Resistance, challenge and critique emerge in the book as the way of response over against submission and cooperation counselled by the others. Changed circumstances warranted a different response. This means that whereas restraint is a wise principle to go with radicalism, the form which it takes must not be hardened into a fixed, inflexible rule or law of response. This is important for it seems that when it comes to reflecting on and responding to the relationship between the Christian faith and politics and the outworking of the Christian commitment in response to political issues and realities, there seems to have developed a predetermined pattern or certain orthodoxy of policy and approach considered applicable universally in every circumstance. This is especially evident in situations where the powers-that-be are oppressive, unjust and evil

but still speak of law and order, national interest, patriotism and the value of good citizenship. Support and underpinning of the status quo are still considered the way of response and often urged upon Christians without the peculiarities of the concrete circumstances being taken into consideration. Here what is given is restraint without radicalism. This is what the universally applicable rule often championed has come to mean and which is urged upon the oppressed and disadvantaged, a rule that unwittingly becomes part of the oppressive structure. Radicalism and restraint call for openness and critical awareness, taking into consideration the concrete circumstances in confronting the powers of oppression and injustice in the name of righteousness and justice in faithfulness to the life in Christ while practising the kind of patience that is not fatalistic or subservient but is itself challenging in its unyielding firmness and steadfastness. This patience which is part of the restraint will also allow for more systematic, penetrative and extensive search and exploration of ways and means of effective resistance that will not undermine the integrity of the commitment



or corrupt its purpose. This in itself makes the next matter to be considered of great importance.

#### CONTEMPLATION, PRAYER, AND WORSHIP AS ENGAGEMENT

It is worth noting that an important aspect of the engagement represented by and reflected upon in the Book is contemplation, prayer and worship. This means that the Book witnesses to a spirituality that is significant in relation to the engagement.

The customary rigid dichotomy or dualism that many people tend to subscribe to and consider inevitable between those who are committed to the struggle for justice and freedom, and those who are committed to contemplation and prayer or between the experience of encountering God in service to humanity (neighbour) and encountering Him in prayer and worship, is not to be found in the book. Contemplation, prayer and worship are part and parcel of the commitment to the struggle against the oppression and injustice being perpetrated by the powers-that-be and their appointed agents, supporters and beneficiaries. This is an important perspective offered by the Book.

The writer's own personal experience is significant. The content of the book is linked with an

experience in a situation where the writer was not at the given moment at the very frontline of the struggle in terms of physical presence and activity. He speaks in terms of a spiritual experience of an ecstatic nature on "The Lord's Day" while he was in exile on the Island of Patmos, 1<sup>9</sup>,10. But even though that was the situation, the writer saw himself as no less involved in the experience of struggle and solidarity with those to whom he wrote and who were at the frontline of activity. He described himself as a brother and fellow-sufferer in solidarity with his readers, 1<sup>9</sup>. The whole spiritual experience of contemplation and meditation which resulted in the writing of the book in the situation in which he found himself was part and parcel of engagement in the struggle. The writer was separate and apart. In the specific instance with which he associates the insights contained in the book, he said he was 'in the spirit'. And yet he could in the same breath, use the language of solidarity and self-identification with others who were in the struggle actively and physically. There is a direct link between contemplation and meditation and action and engagement.

It has already been noted and discussed that there is difference of opinion about the nature of the Patmos



experience, whether it was for the purpose of witness or it was exile. It was argued that the traditional understanding that it was exile is the most reasonable and convincing understanding. However, even when it is granted that it was exile, there are those who would still raise questions as to whether the kind of punishment to which the writer would have been subjected would have left him the time, physical strength, and energy, and freshness of mind for contemplation, meditation or reflection as suggested. W.M. Ramsay is of the opinion that both the status of the writer and the charge that was levelled against him were of a nature that would have warranted severe punishment.<sup>37</sup> Others have taken this point of view to strengthen their argument that the writer would have been incapable of any serious contemplation and meditation in such circumstances. A sentence of hard labour in the mines was not conducive to or compatible with the exercise of meditation and contemplation. This view has not gone unchallenged and the challenge has been quite successful from our point of view.

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<sup>37</sup>W.M. Ramsay, Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, London, 1904, p. 84.

G.B. Caird has argued that Ramsay's view which has certainly been influential seemed to have overlooked that there was a lighter form of punishment which the provincial government could hand out as distinct from that which had to be decreed by Rome. And quite likely this was what John was called upon to face.<sup>38</sup> J.N. Sanders arguing from a different perspective indicated that even though harsh situations and conditions have been known to provide apocalyptic visions, he did not believe that such were the conditions to which the writer was subjected in exile. Quite apart from the fact that the prospects were that if he had been subjected to the harsher form of punishment, he would hardly likely have survived it to write down his visions later, there is really no certainty that mines were actually operated at Patmos itself.<sup>38</sup> The writer might well have been able to meditate and exercise contemplation during his period of exile. And whatever else is said, given that he was actually in exile, as is accepted, we are in possession of the book that is linked with the experience, while at the same time the writer saw himself as a part of the

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<sup>38</sup>G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John's the Divine, A & C Black, 1966, pp. 21-23.

<sup>38</sup>Sanders, J.N. "St. John on Patmos" in New Testament Studies, 9(1962-3), 75-78.



struggle of his readers. It was all part of the continuation of the struggle from which it was hoped he would have been banished by being exiled.

Contemplation and meditation as seen here did not represent a blinding of the eyes to the plight of the oppressed or a deafening of the ear to their cry for justice, in terms of being cut off utterly from any sense of oneness with them. Neither is it simply detached, disinterested reasoning, analysis or speculation. Being in exile did not weaken the writers commitment or diminish his sense of oneness with his fellow-believers in struggle and suffering. Contemplation and meditation became a means of engagement with powerful effect. There was a sense of incorporation into the divine purpose in a special way, with heightened awareness and deepened insight which offered a perspective on what was actually taking place in the life and experience of the people in the socio-political realm. This was of great importance to understanding the struggle and responding to the issues and realities. Those who seek to defeat and destroy those who struggle against oppression and injustice by banishment and imprisonment often loose sight of the effectiveness of contemplation as a means of engagement. it is also true of those who are prone to

think that their effectiveness has been totally neutralized, negated or severely restrained and undermined once they are removed from the frontline of day to day activity in struggle. Käsemann does not use the language of contemplation to speak of the Patmos experience but he speaks of it in a way that shows that being exiled did not mean the absence of solidarity, concern and commitment. This is what Kasemann writes:-

"Patmos is not an idyllic haven of rest for retired scholars who look back on a hardworking life of piety and integrity, and who, fatigued and already half withdrawn from the maddening crowd, give themselves up to all kinds of dreams. Patmos is the place for exiled rebels deprived of their eager activity, and with every idly spent hour burning into their marrow. For over there on the mainland world history is moving, and the churches are spent and either do not see it or try to come to terms with it... Visions torment the man who can do nothing but cry out to awaken those who are asleep, to arouse those who are idle, to strengthen those who are exhausted and to confront them with the judgement those who are secure".<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Martin Luther King's letter from jail in Birmingham, Alabama, is a case in pint in our modern times. He no doubt was not unmindful of the Book of Revelation and the circumstances of its writing when he wrote.



The visions and the cry are said to be aimed at doing things that are very vital to the struggle.

The writer's own experience is a part of other explicit references to instances in the book of the role of prayer and worship in the struggle of resistance and challenge. The prayers are for vindication, 6<sup>10</sup>, cf 5<sup>8</sup>; 8<sup>3</sup>, and for the coming of the Lord which is the decisive challenge to the powers already defeated but yet to be totally vanquished, 22<sup>20</sup> cf 22<sup>17a</sup>.<sup>41</sup> The prayers for vindication are exemplified in that of the martyrs recorded in 6<sup>10</sup> -

... How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? (NIV).

The content of the prayers of the saints offered up

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<sup>41</sup>In 22<sup>17a</sup> the call to come is not regarded by many as addressed to the Lord, but rather to people who are invited to come to a life of faith and trust in God that they may share the life he gives now and promises in the age to come. This seems to be what is regarded as the more straightforward understanding.

However, someone like G.R. Beasley-Murray has contended that even though it is the less straightforward understanding, a good case could be made out for the call to be seen as addressed to the Lord. In such a case, it would be of the nature of the prayer that is undeniably made in 22<sup>20</sup>. (See G.R. Beasley-Murray, Revelation, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 1978, pp. 343-344.)

before the throne, 8<sup>3</sup>, is not disclosed. It is felt that it might be another reference to the prayer just mentioned or to prayer of the same nature, informed by the same perspective and inspired by the same hope. Of course, the prayer as articulated in 6<sup>10</sup> has been the subject of much discussion. It is considered by some to represent an undesirable, even unchristian or sub-christian spirit of vengeance. Further and more detailed discussion of this will take place in the next chapter. For the time being it is sufficient to say here that whatever else is said of it, it is considered to be a strong and urgent prayer for vindication. It rests upon the implicit faith that God is a God who hears the groanings of His people, sees their sufferings and responds to their cause. He acts in justice to vindicate the cause of the oppressed and disadvantaged. And in offering prayers of such a nature, with such implications, it was not a case of superficial piety of a totally privatised spirituality, which cuts itself off from engagement and waits passively and submissively for something to happen from the Divine side. The prayers are seen to be of those who have paid the supreme price of martyrdom for their faithfulness in resistance, challenge and critique and of those who were still caught



up in the struggle and were faced with the same prospect of paying the same price. They are prayers which are part of a resistance and defiance, focussing on a point where the governing authorities seek to display to the full their arrogance of power, in the judgement they are able to pass, even to condemn the innocent to death, and the seeming unquestionable nature and finality of their judgement. The prayers are themselves challenge and critique. They challenge the finality of the judgement. They imply that those who pass such judgements are subject to the judgement of God. Their judgements are unjust and the victimized will be vindicated by the judgement of one whose judgement is just and true. The powers are being put in their place very courageously.

The prayer for the coming of the Lord, 22<sup>20</sup>, articulates a petition which constitutes a challenge. It may be seen as an escapist wish or an idea thought up simply to play a compensatory role and to give belated credibility to the faith but it is not. It is an alternative vision grounded in the prophetic tradition and above all one that received its definitive shape and form by God's decisive act of redemption in Christ, which sets in motion the dynamics of the ending of the present

age and the coming of the new order. This new order will be of heavenly origin but an earthly reality - 21<sup>1-5</sup>. It is also spoken of in terms of a city, which brings to mind, the idea of an ordered social community, not an other-worldly existence totally divorced from social community. The existence of this new order presupposes the eventual non-existence of the present order and its rulers and managers who see themselves not only as creators of history but also as lords and masters of history for all times. The prayer, therefore, for the coming of the lord, which is also a prayer for the coming of the new age and which bears of the nature of the petition taught in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come", evinces a hope that refuses to accept the present understanding of life and history that is being forced upon the oppressed. It challenges the very basis on which the arrogant and idolatrous powers and managers of culture tend to operate. It calls into question the self-perpetuity upon which they presume and it constituted a threat to their much vaunted power by exposing their impotence to alter the perspective created by the hope which led to faithful endurance and resistance.



Worship is a characteristic feature of the book. Here worship refers specifically to the numerous doxologies and hymns that are to be found in it - 1<sup>6</sup>; 4<sup>8-11</sup>; 5<sup>9-15</sup>; 7<sup>9-12</sup>; 11<sup>15-18</sup>; 15<sup>3-4</sup>; 16<sup>7</sup>; 19<sup>1-8</sup>. Worship like contemplation and prayer forms part of the engagement reflected upon and represented by the book. However, before the significance of the worship in this regard is discussed, a specific critical question must be look at.<sup>42</sup> There are those who would insist that the occasions of worship that are referred to in the Book are confined to heaven and not earth. The worship, therefore, is not reflective of earthly experiences and

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<sup>42</sup>There are other critical questions related to the Doxologies and Hymns, that are not considered since they are not relevant to the present study. No attention is therefore, paid to whether the author has made use of quotations from ancient Christian hymns or from the synagogues of the Greek-speaking Jewish regions or he adapted hymns from other sources for his purpose or whether they are his compositions.

See important discussions on this in, for example, David Carnegie, "Worthy is the Lamb: the Hymns in revelation" in Christ is the Lord, Edited by Harold Rowden, IVP, 1982.

David Barr, "The Apocalypse of John on oral Transformation" Interpretation July 1986 40/3, esp. pp. 253,ff.

E. Stauffer, New Testament Theology, English Translation 1955, pp. 40, 202.

so cannot be justifiably associated with whatever engagement the book may reflect upon and represent. It is true that the worship is confined to heaven but it seems nonetheless that a rigid line is being drawn between heaven and earth that represents an unwarranted restriction of the scope and sphere of the influence of what took place in heaven. This restriction is contrary both to the letter and the spirit of the book. Again and again it is seen that what took place in heaven is reported on earth and has direct significance for life on earth, whether it is the breaking of the seal, 5<sup>1ff</sup>, or the prayer of the martyrs, 6<sup>9-10</sup>, or the case of the woman with child in conflict with the dragon which was defeated, 12<sup>1ff</sup>, or the great climactic event of the new city that came to be established on earth, 21<sup>2</sup>. The worship that took place in heaven is not different in this regard. It is meant to echo on earth, that is to be reflected and represented in the worship exercises of the saints. Indeed, it is felt that even with such an intention, the portrayals of the heavenly worship are in actual fact influenced by patterns of worship which belonged to the writer's knowledge and experience of the worship of the church on earth. This is something for which there is precedent in later Judaism in which there



was the familiar concept of the inter-relatedness of heavenly and earthly cultures, Test. of Levi 3; Enoch XX<sup>4</sup>; Ascension of Isaiah 9<sup>5</sup>. R.P. Martin concludes:

...It is certainly understandable that the Christian seer should resort to the practice of using the forms and cadre which were taken from his own experience. How else could he have made his description intelligible to his readers?<sup>43</sup>

The evidence is such that in one way or another the worship depicted in heaven ought to be seen as having significance for what took place on earth. It is hard to escape the fact that one of the key areas where the struggle and conflict were most intense and the Christians were most severely tested, was that of worship. It was a matter of whether in worship God alone is Lord or whether to grant Caesar similar honour, either regularly or periodically as requested or demanded by Caesar and his agents. The message conveyed by the worship portrayed in the book is that the sovereign God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, He alone is to be worshipped<sup>13<sup>4,8,15</sup>; 14<sup>7ff</sup></sup>. In fact the incident of the

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<sup>43</sup>R.P. Martin, Worship in the Early Church, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1974, pp. 45-46.

writer himself being tempted to offer worship to the angel, the bearer of the divine message, 19<sup>10</sup>; 22<sup>8,9</sup> is an instructive insight which is not dwelt upon by the writer but makes its point. The sacred institutions of the Church could themselves become corrupted by idolatry just as the institutions of government given by God to serve his rightful purpose. No institution, however sacred or however powerful is worthy of worship. They are all, however, corruptible and could become objects of worship. The faithfulness of the Church must be alert to this. This confirms that worship was at the heart of the struggle.

The worship called into question all rival claims that were being made and enforced, and so it became "subversive". Tyrants have always been suspicious of genuine Christian worship and have often sought either to corrupt it and use it for their own ends or to legislate against it and persecute those who are committed to it. But genuine worship gives expression to a freedom that defies their domination and exposes their pretentiousness. Even those who are not tyrants by any reasonable definition of the word are tempted from time to time to use worship or to be irked by genuine worship that challenges their claims and pretensions. Worship in



the Book of Revelation, therefore, inasmuch as it is a celebrative response to the self-disclosure of the sovereign Lord in his acts of creation, redemption, victory and vindication, it at the same time runs counter to and stands as rejection of worship of the beast. The worship granted to God in Christ is exclusive and total. And so, if it is of this nature, then it means none other must be honoured to the extent where the place of God would be usurped. This is so even with angels, the messengers of God, as the writer had to be reminded, 19<sup>10</sup>; 22<sup>8,9</sup>.

The worship of the beast that was demanded was not simply a religious exercise, it was also a way of testing loyalty and commitment to the Empire and Emperor. Domitian appreciated the sanctioning power and unifying force of religion, as well as its usefulness as an indication of political loyalty and commitment. The question of political loyalty tends to become an ongoing sensitive issue wherever there is colonial imperialism of one kind or another. The assurance and knowledge that the subject people are loyal, are very important and so ways and means of gaining that assurance and knowledge while at the same time strengthening the loyalty are developed. Ceremonial days and events bound up with the

history and culture of the imperial powers are celebrated, symbols that are seen to have a unifying force are maintained and respect for heroes is sought. With the expansion and development of the Roman Empire, the imperial cult became very important as part of that development and expansion. One of the purposes it served was as a means of testing loyalty and patriotism. Willingness to participate in the cult was taken as a sign of expressed loyalty. And those who were anxious to show how loyal they were and how grateful they were for the blessings and benefits of imperial rule would not only participate enthusiastically but would be ready to report on those who seemed less enthusiastic or who did not participate at all. And whereas there was generally no objection for people to have their own local religion or cultic practices, it was intolerable for such religions or cultic practices to have the kind of appeal or even the kind of influence that would conflict with and rival the exclusive claims and special political place of the imperial cult. There were also certain specific factors that made the authorities even more sensitive about loyalty and which made them want to be assured of it and which in turn made participation in the cult even more critical. E. Stauffer notes that while



the Emperor was playing the strong and powerful man within the Empire and was making much of his victories, he was watching the east with increasing uneasiness. There was an ongoing fear of the Parthians and so he was ever so keen to know that the people in the Eastern Mediterranean were loyal. Stauffer also noted that Jewish messianic hopes and their accompanying oracles had not abated in spite of the Fall of Jerusalem. If anything they were even livelier. Along with this there were signs of increasing disaffection with Domitian.<sup>44</sup>

Participation in the cult was, therefore, very important in both testing and reinforcing political loyalty and patriotism quite apart from any religious significance it was considered to have. Religion and politics went hand in hand.

Those who have made a special study of ancient cultures and the study of religion in society, have noted time and again the conserving, stabilizing and legitimizing role of religion in societies, especially through its cultic practices and rituals. The value of

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<sup>44</sup>E. Stauffer, Christ and the Caesars, 1955, SCM London 1955, p. 101.

this role has been exploited in both ancient and modern times.<sup>45</sup> Yet there is another side to religion and its cultic practices. There is a revolutionary side where religion through its rituals and worship can make affirmations, mould convictions, and demonstrate commitment that challenge, threaten and expose the pretentious, oppressive, and unjust. The refusal to participate in Emperor worship and the confession of the lordship of Christ in Christian worship relativized the claims of ultimacy and permanence made by and on behalf of the powers-that-be. In doing so it can be said to be subversive and destabilizing.

The confessions of the Lordship of Christ is also an anticipation of the full manifestation of that lordship in the fulfilment of the promise of the new order, symbolized in the Book of Revelation as the New Jerusalem, 21<sup>2</sup>. This confession based upon such a vision and hope, exposes the provisional and transient nature of the order sustained by the arrogance of power and the idolatrous claims. The joy and freedom characteristic of this worship even in the midst of struggle and resistance

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<sup>45</sup>Duncan B. Forrester has drawn attention to some recent endorsement of this role in his book, Theology and Politics, Blackwell 1988, p. 52-56.



are themselves anticipatory blessings and signs of the new order. Worship of this nature also commits the worshipper to righteousness and justice, for the lord who is confessed and acknowledged over against Caesar is a lord who is just and true, 15<sup>3</sup>. His kingdom is one of justice, righteousness, truth and freedom. There will be no place in it for the unjust, corrupt and idolatrous, 21<sup>8</sup>; 22<sup>15</sup>. Worship without or separate and apart from a commitment to justice and righteousness has received the sharpest strictures in the prophetic tradition, which as will be shown in the next chapter, the Book of Revelation shares.

No attempt is being made to claim that the spirituality represented in the book is simply political and nothing else. The fact is, however, that it does form an important part of the engagement of the Christians in the struggle against the oppressive system, and in a more positive and revolutionary sense than is often associated with spirituality. The Book can make a serious contribution to the rediscovery of the important link between spirituality and commitment to justice and freedom in the socio-political context. There are those now living and working in contexts of oppression and injustice who have testified to the new and increasing

awareness of the significant role of contemplation, prayer and worship in the struggle for justice and freedom. For example, John DeGruchy writing against the background of experience in South Africa, particularly of experience in more recent times, has noted that the long-standing traditional disciplines of spirituality such as prayer and fasting, have become very important aspects of the people's struggle for justice and freedom.<sup>46</sup>

Segundo Galileo writing against the background of experience in Latin America notes the following:-

...I believe that there is a spiritual awakening, precisely among those Christians who have committed themselves to the cause of liberation. Of late, there have been solid and widespread indications that many of them are rediscovering the meaning of faith and of prayer and so, through their very commitment, the 'contemplative' is beginning to rediscover his place among the militants.<sup>47</sup>

Leonardo Boff also speaking from a theology of liberation perspective and Latin American background, is of the distinct opinion that prayer and meditation are

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<sup>46</sup>John DeGruchy, Cry Justice! Prayers and Meditations and Readings from South Africa, Collins, 1986, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup>"Spiritual Awakening and Movements of Liberation in Latin America," Concilium, November 1973, p. 131.



indispensable facets of liberation that is truly Christian. It is significant that he has chosen St. Francis of Assisi as a model for human liberation.<sup>48</sup>

It seems clear, therefore, that spirituality is not divorced from commitment in resistance and challenge for justice, peace and freedom. Prayers are not a means of unconditional support for governing authorities and the status quo. They are indeed encouraged for the governing authorities, I Tim. 2<sup>2</sup> but we also learn from the Book of Revelation that they may be on the other hand an important element in Christian praxis of struggle and resistance against oppression and for justice, as the martyrs prayed for vindication, 6<sup>10</sup> and petition is made for the coming of divine rule, 22<sup>20</sup>. Here there is something of the spirit which is expressed by Karl Barth in the words:-

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<sup>48</sup>Leonardo Boff, St. Francis - A. Model for Human Liberation, Trans. by John Diereksmeir, SCM, 1982.

... To clasp the hands of prayer is the beginning of an uprising, an uprising against the disorder of the world,..<sup>49</sup>

The Book of Revelation demonstrates a spirituality in terms of contemplation, prayer and worship which indicates that there ought to be no dichotomy between spirituality and engagement, which in this case, is engagement against oppression and injustice.

#### RIGHT BELIEFS AND ENGAGEMENT

There is a real sense in which the writer of the book was most concerned about the beliefs held by members of the church and the implications they had for their conduct in the society especially in relation to the demands or expectations of the dominant culture. There is an interrelatedness of beliefs and conduct which cannot be ignored. Where it is ignored there is a threat to the response that Christians are expected to make to the issues and realities that confronted them in the society. As the writer sees it, the engagement that the Christians

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<sup>49</sup>Quoted by Jan Milic Lochman, The Theology of Praise: The Kingdom, The Power, The Glory, John Knox Press, Atlanta 1982, p. viii.

See also, Kenneth Leech, True Prayer: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality, Sheldon Press, 1980, p. 68. Leech uses the quotation at the head of a chapter entitled "Prayer and Politics".



were called to is linked with their holding right Christian beliefs. In its own way, already there is the basis of the important insight that "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy", as some have come to refer to the distinction, were not mutually exclusive as far as the outworkings of the faith were concerned.

It must be observed that the use of the term "orthodoxy" or the evaluation and assessment of the status of beliefs as true or false, right or wrong, as applied to such a time or as was seen in such a time, must be understood against the background that there was then no clear-cut creed or doctrinal formula which stood as a test for beliefs and doctrines. R.P.C. Hanson has observed that earliest Christian creeds were very tenuous and so were inadequate as tests of "orthodoxy".<sup>50</sup> It is also true that there is no certain knowledge of the nature of the teaching set forth as false. What has been said of it has been said largely by the opponent which does not rule out distortion or caricaturing. This latter factor often occurs in the presentation of an opponent's beliefs even when there is no deliberate

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<sup>50</sup>See his article on "Orthodoxy" in A Dictionary of Christian Theology, Ed. Alan Richardson, SCM 1969

intention to do so. W. Bauer does not only warn of this but actually calls into question the competence of the writer of the Book of Revelation to exercise judgement in the matter of right beliefs.<sup>51</sup> Such observations are important and ought to lead to the exercise of care in final conclusions about teachings and teachers portrayed as false. Yet for our purposes it cannot be ignored that there is a concern expressed by the writer about the presence and danger of false teachings and teachers as he perceived them among the churches. This concern in its own way illustrates in principle the fact that right beliefs and right conduct belong together, at least as far as the writer of the book is concerned.

It has already been shown that he saw engagement in terms of resistance, challenge and critique in faithful endurance as the key response to the oppression and injustice his readers had to face. Closely associated with this emphasis, indeed an integral part of it, is the emphasis on the leaders and members of the churches not being influenced by false teaching which was seen as a threat. If they allowed themselves to be influenced by

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<sup>51</sup>Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity, Edited by Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krudel, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1971, pp. 77ff.



it, it would make a negative impact on the engagement that was expected of them. Within certain of the seven churches addressed in Chapters two and three of the book, were those who tolerated certain teachings that the writer considered to have been false and they were roundly rebuked, 2<sup>14-16,20-23</sup>. He on the other hand commended the Church at Ephesus for the stand it took against those called the "Nicolaitans".

The exact nature of the false teachings is not known, a matter to which reference has already been made. It seems, however, that even though different names have been attached to them, they were generally of the same nature and constituted the same threat as far as the churches were concerned. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, summing up what she considered to have been the facts concerning the Nicolaitans, writes:

... The Nicolaitans are, according to Revelation, a Christian group within the churches of Asia Minor and have their agents even among the itinerant missionaries and prophetic teachers of the community. They claim to have insight into the divine or more probably, into the demonic. They express their

freedom, libertarian behaviour, which allows them to become part of the syncretistic pagan society and to participate in Roman Civil Religion.<sup>52</sup>

Fiorenza notes that as far as the false teachers were concerned they were not dealing simply with moral praxis but with a certain didache, (teaching) which implies holding certain beliefs. The writer refers to the teaching as "the deep things of Satan", 2<sup>24</sup>. Whether this reference is to an actual claim on the part of the teachers that they knew the secrets of Satan to such an extent that they could indulge the immoral things of the dominant culture without being corrupted by them or it was the writer's own cynical characterization of their actual claim to have special knowledge of the deep things of God which affords them salvation and a kind of freedom which make them able to participate in all the offerings of the dominant culture and remain incorruptible is not very clear. It seems, however, that he disapproved strongly of the beliefs that led to the freedom that allowed for participation in the evil rites of the imperial religion and which would ensure for them security and safety from persecution and related

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<sup>52</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgement, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 117.



sanctions meted out to those who refused to participate. This is an unacceptable compromise as far as the writer is concerned. It means tacit approval of the idolatrous claims and unjust operations of the powers-that-be. It is the kind of compromise that made them allies and beneficiaries (if even unwillingly) of the oppressive and idolatrous governing powers and status quo respectively. Adele Yarbro Collins has noted that it is more than just a matter of difference of opinion about practical problems. It is fundamentally a matter of difference of perspective on the relationship of faith and culture.<sup>53</sup> Again it does show from these observations that the matter of right beliefs was a matter of central importance for the writer. In fact someone like B.W. Newman has claimed that it is the central issue of the Book and provides the key to its interpretations.<sup>54</sup> This

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<sup>53</sup>Adele Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse, Westminster, Philadelphia, p. 84.

<sup>54</sup>B.W. Newman, Rediscovering the Book of Revelation, Judson Press, Philadelphia, 1968.

seems to be an extreme statement but it nonetheless serves to remind us that right beliefs are for the writer, an important factor.

What is seen, therefore, is that the book which is said to result from reflection upon engagement or Christian praxis, actually demonstrates the inter-relatedness of right conduct and right beliefs. The one is not emphasised at the expense of the other. The very danger of separation between them was a concern of the writer, since there seemed to have been a priority given to knowledge by the false teachers that was indifferent to Christian praxis. For the writer, this was unacceptable. In his own way he was very much aware of the danger of cultural captivity that could result from faulty belief along with the quest for safety and security in the socio-political context. Members of the church were seen to be susceptible to being led into what he called "fornication" and "eating goods offered to idols". The type of behavioural pattern represented by fornication probably does not refer to loose or unprincipled sexual conduct, though this cannot be ruled out, but it may be more a reference to idolatry. Precedence for the association is to be found in Old Testament prophetic tradition and the matter of idolatry



is a crucial issue in the conflict that faced the church. Rome is also represented as a prostitute with seductive powers and corrupting influence<sup>17<sup>1-4</sup>; 18<sup>3</sup>; 19<sup>2</sup></sup>. Eating meats offered to idols was part of the cultural conformity that had religious implications that were of an idolatrous nature. The kind of God who stands at the centre of the faith and who receives ultimate loyalty determines whether there will be commitment to and engagement for righteousness, justice, peace and freedom. And where engagement is reflected upon in the light of the revelation of God, it sheds greater light on the nature, character will and purpose of God. This is something the writer witnessed to as he carried out his prophetic task.

## CHAPTER 3

### PROPHECY AND POLITICS

The engagement reflected on and represented by the Book of Revelation in the context of religio-political conflict and the oppression that it presupposes is responsive to and expressive of a profound prophetic consciousness. This is the testimony of the book itself and the impact it makes in terms of the vision and mandate it communicates and carries out respectively. As such then, the book brings a prophetic perspective to bear upon the understanding of the outworking of the purpose of God in judgement and salvation and hope of the fulfilment of this purpose.

The writer does not openly and directly designate himself a prophet, though it seems he came pretty closely to doing so, when he identified himself with others whom he designates as prophets, 22<sup>9</sup>, cf 19<sup>10</sup>; 22<sup>6</sup>. The instance of his being given the scroll to eat and commissioned to prophesy again about, 'many peoples, nations, languages and kings' 10<sup>11</sup>(NIV) also betrays that



he was a person upon whom the role of prophet was conferred with the allusion to Ezekiel's commissioning being evident, Ezek. 2<sup>8</sup> - 3<sup>3</sup>. And even if there is no designation of the writer as prophet openly and directly, there is the designation of his work, the book, as prophecy 1<sup>3</sup>; 22<sup>7,10,18,19</sup>. This must be regarded as significant along with what has already been said<sup>1</sup>. It has also been pointed out that one of the things that religious history has shown is that a very strong characteristic of prophecy is that the inspired prophet often speaks in the person of the god by whom he is inspired. A good number of Old Testament prophetic oracles are said to portray this feature. The Book of Revelation is also said to do the same. The correspondence sent to the Seven Churches is communicated

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<sup>1</sup>David Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in The Revelation of St. John", NTS 18, 1971-72, pp. 403ff. Hill has also drawn attention to J. Comblin's suggestion that in the call to prophesy, 10<sup>11</sup>, there seems to be a renewal or recommencement of prophecy, depending undoubtedly on whether "again" (Palin) in verse 11 can bear such a significance. Hill further thinks it significant that the writer refers to the Revelation that he is called to bear witness to as "The Word of God". It is this very Word of God that came to the prophets and revealed God's purpose and it is essential to note that the writer calls his own witness "The word of prophecy", 1<sup>2,3</sup>.

as dictated by the Exalted Lord, 2-3<sup>2</sup>. The book is filled with Old Testament allusions, imagery and symbols, especially from the prophets, Daniel and The Psalms. Yet it is striking that the writer does not quote the Old Testament directly. This is considered significant in that it reflects his own prophetic consciousness and authority. His own prophetic standing is not subordinate or inferior to any other. He takes his place alongside the other prophets with authority no less authentic and challenging than theirs. The word he speaks deserves to be heard - 2<sup>7,11,17,29</sup>; 3<sup>6,13,22</sup>; 13<sup>9</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

It must be observed, however, that even though there are the references to the work as prophecy and the near self-designation of the writer as a prophet, there is still considerable difference of opinion amongst scholars concerning the prophetic nature of the book and the identity of the writer as a prophet. A wide and varied range of questions have been raised, some of them, quite understandably, important as they are for other purposes, do not have immediate and direct relevance for

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<sup>2</sup>James Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 173

<sup>3</sup>V.H. Campen-hausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible, Fortress Press, p. 215<sup>ff</sup>, 1972.



our study and so do not warrant discussion here. There are others on the other hand that must receive some attention. One that immediately comes to mind is whether the characterization of prophecy can appropriately be ascribed to the book or whether it is not simply and purely apocalyptic. Reference was made to this in the previous chapter and it was then indicated that more extensive discussion would take place in this chapter and more fittingly so.

(a) PROPHETIC OR APOCALYPTIC

It is felt by some persons that the prophetic and apocalyptic must be seen as mutually exclusive categories while there are others who think otherwise believing that

apocalyptic is a continuation or development of prophecy.<sup>4</sup> If both categories are mutually exclusive it means that the book must belong to one or the other in a definitive sense. There is also the further factor that the nature and character of apocalyptic is a matter of different opinions, in that there is no consensus as to what are the distinguishing or truly definitive characteristics of it. Questions still persist as to

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<sup>4</sup>G. Von Rad has drawn a radically distinct line between prophecy and apocalyptic discounting any line of development or continuation between them. He sees a different attitude to history as the mark of distinction between them (Old Testament Theology, Oliver and Boyd, Lond., 1965 p. 303). Ph. Vielhauer also discounts any link between them but this has come about because there was a gap between intention and achievement. Apocalyptic had the intention of being a development or continuation of prophecy but turned out displaying such characteristics as dualism, determinism and pessimism which are as uncharacteristic of prophecy as they became characteristic of this mode of expression (New Testament Apocrypha Ed. E. Hannecke & Schneemelcher, Lond., 1963, 545-547). On the other hand, H.H. Rowley, The Relevance of Apocalyptic, Lutterworth, 1947, D.S. Russell, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, SCM, Lond., 1964, 92 ff; and P.O. Hanson, "Jewish Apocalyptic Against its Near-Eastern Background" RB LXViii, 1971, pp. 31-38, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Re-examined" in Visionaries and their Apocalypses (P.D. Hanson, Ed) SPCK/Fortress, 1982 pp. 37ff, see a direct link between prophecy and apocalyptic in terms of the latter being a continuation or development of the former. See also Paul Minear, New Testament Apocalyptic, Abingdon, 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing, 1983 pp. 48<sup>ff</sup> for a strong case against a rigid distinction being made between the two to the extent where there can be no sharing of features of both categories by any single work.



whether apocalyptic is best represented as a literary genre or as a system of beliefs or pattern of thought or whether apocalyptic is itself best represented in what are referred to as 'apocalypses'. While these and other questions are still being debated it is nonetheless here considered still possible to speak meaningfully in terms of certain general distinguishing marks that are associated with the literary genre and the perspective generally referred to as apocalyptic within Biblical studies while still bearing in mind that there is a lack of precision in terms of the characteristics being outlined and that apocalyptic is not necessarily homogeneous in nature.

What then are the characteristics associated with Apocalyptic?

Extensive use is made of symbolism and numerology. Angels, strange figures, animals, heavenly bodies, specific woes associated with the imminent end of the present age and numbers bearing specific significance recur with regularity. Visions or dreams are largely the means whereby revelations are received and there is an emphasis on the esoteric nature of what is revealed to that what is revealed is still concealed. There is a sense of crisis and there are ethical exhortations which

are directly related to the crisis with a view as to how it will be escaped or overcome in the future. There is a rigid dualistic outlook within a deterministic framework. The transcendence of God is a controlling thought and there is very keen interest in the age to come which will replace the present age which is irredeemable. The visions or revelations are invariably set at a point in time different from that in which they are actually recorded which allows the writer to give a review of history from that point in the past up to the present time of writing but which of course is cast in the form of projections or prediction of what is to come in history. The visions were recorded pseudonymously. They are assigned to the authorship of some famous personality of their religious history.

It is well nigh impossible to deny that a number of the above features are to be associated with the Book of Revelation. A mere glance at the book will reveal such features. The significant thing, however, is that while the book shares obvious similarities with the apocalyptic it also displays distinct differences. Even in the case of some of the shared similarities these are modified to such an extent that they do not appear exactly as they usually are in the thoroughgoing apocalyptic. Very often



it is in the differences and the modifications that the prophetic nature of the book is to be noticed. It bears the name of its author and so there is no pseudonymity about it, 1<sup>2,4,9</sup>; 22<sup>8</sup>. The writer's interest is not to conceal but to reveal the truths that are made known to him, 1<sup>1-3</sup>. Both the dualism and determinism that are to be found in the book are modified by a very strong monotheistic emphasis and the prominence given to freedom, responsibility and accountability in decision-making. It sees history's end as imminent but it does not reject history as such. Based upon its final vision, 21<sup>1-22</sup>, there are indications that there is both discontinuity and continuity between the present order and the new order to come. This along with its self-conscious contextuality and commitment in response to the issues and realities of the context makes any thought of history being swallowed up in eschatology as far as its perspective is concerned a misrepresentation. The attitude to the nature, purpose and place of suffering displayed by the book differs from that which one generally associated with apocalyptic. Whereas in apocalyptic, suffering is basically evil, resulting from hostility and enmity on the part of ungodly powers or forces against God's people, in the Book of Revelation,

suffering is said to be more in keeping with the prophetic perspective, in that it has a retributive element. The people of are themselves open to suffering as punishment because of their failings quite separate and apart from the experience and suffering for righteousness sake.<sup>5</sup>

What the Book of Revelation has demonstrated is that the rigid distinction between apocalyptic and prophetic may in some cases at least, be overdrawn. And it is not only that there is continuity between the prophetic and apocalyptic but that combined features of both can reside in a single work. In the previous chapter, it was noted that some people acknowledged this by seeing the work as prophetic - apocalyptic in nature.

David Aune has written perceptively when he states:-

...While modern scholars may debate whether the apocalypse should be categorized as prophecy or apocalyptic,

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<sup>5</sup>J. Kallas has made out a strong case that the difference in attitude to suffering is one of the most powerful distinguishing marks between the apocalyptic and prophetic. Indeed Kallas tends to treat this as the single most important distinction. What is true is that whether Kallas' insight can bear the full weight he has put on it or not, it is an important one - see "The Apocalypse - An Apocalyptic Book?" Journal of Biblical Literature - Sept. 1968, p. 325-327.



the author clearly intended his book to be taken as prophecy, a point which he makes both at the beginning and the end of his composition, 1<sup>3</sup>; 22<sup>7,10, 18-19</sup>. In a form the apocalypse is a blend of prophetic and apocalyptic elements. Unlike Jewish apocalypses with the exceptions of Shepherd of Hermas, the author names himself, makes no mention of revelations received in dreams and publicly revealed the substance of his revelation.<sup>6</sup>

Aune is convinced that the rigid distinction drawn between the conceptual orientation and perspective of prophecy and apocalypticism that would deny that the feature of both are to be found in the Book of Revelation, cannot be justifiably maintained. G.R. Beasley-Murray shares the same point of view. He is convinced that the writer's use of the style of an apocalyptist does not by any means prevent him from engaging in the thought process of a prophet. This he believes is most patently demonstrated in the Letters to the Seven Churches. In their content and to a certain extent by their style, they recall quite vividly the oracles of the Old Testament prophets. It seems that without discounting the apocalyptic features of the book, it is in order to emphasize its prophetic consciousness

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<sup>6</sup>David Aune, Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, p. 374.

and perspective which is of great importance for understanding the book and appreciating its implications, for the theological reflection taking place today amongst oppressed peoples in particular.<sup>7</sup>

When the prophetic perspective and nature of the book are accepted, it does not mean that all the questions have come to an end. There still remain such questions as whether

(a) If it is prophetic, is its prophetic character more typical of Old Testament prophecy or New Testament Christian prophecy?

(b) If it is more typical of Old Testament prophecy, is it more akin to the kerygmatic type or to the more ecstatic apocalyptic type?

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<sup>7</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible, Revelation, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Marshall Morgan and Scott, Lond., 1974, p. 22

Beasley-Murray in a footnote (p. 102, p 22) cites approvingly E. Lohse's comparison of the Seven Letters with the Seven Oracles of Amos 1-2 (Lohse, Offenbarung des Johannes, Gottingen, 1960, p. 21). He also gives further illustrations in support of his argument, for example, the "Doom Songs" of Chapter 18, which he claims were almost as if they were lifted straight out of the Old Testament prophetic writings. (See also Beasley-Murray p. 72.

See also G.E. Ladd "The Revelation and Jewish Apocalyptic" Evangelical Quarterly xxix 1957 pp. 99-100 A Commentary on The Revelation of John Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1972 pp. 20ff.



(c) If it is more typical of New Testament Christian prophecy, does it reflect a Palestinian-Judaistic point of view grounded in the experience of Asia Minor?

Each of these questions along with the point of view it presupposes, has its advocates who argue strongly for it. For example, David Hill argues that the writer of the Book bears close resemblance to the classical Old Testament prophets as distinct from what is gleaned of the prophets of early Christianity.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is convinced that the writer bears close resemblance to the prophets of early Christianity. She writes:

"The claim of Revelation to be early Christian prophecy should be taken seriously. Its main objective is not reinterpretation of the Hebrew scriptures nor the calculation of the end time events, but the prophetic communication of the Revelation (i.e. apocalypsis Iesou Christou) to the seven communities in Asia Minor. The Book's goal is not instruction in Old Testament classical, Jewish apocalyptic, or early Christian traditions but prophetic proclamation and paranesis. Revelation, therefore,

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<sup>8</sup>D. Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John". *New Testament Studies* (18) 1971-72, pp. 412-413. According to Hill, the authority the author possesses is more akin to that of the Old Testament prophets than of the prophets of Early Christianity. His sense of the presence and inspiration of the Spirit marked him off from those whom he addressed in a way that did not obtain in the case of Early Christian prophets.

should not be misunderstood as only slightly Christianised form of Jewish apocalyptic theology but must be valued as a genuine expression of early Christian prophecy whose basic experience and self-understanding is apocalyptic. If this is the case then we need to understand Revelation in the context of Early Christian Theology and community..."<sup>9</sup>

In fact she sees him as a member and head of an early Christian prophetic community. His obvious knowledge of the apocalyptic-prophetic tradition marks him off as such along with the hint given in such a passage as 22<sup>16</sup>. Here the testimony is seen to have been sent to a community rather than to an individual. Fiorenza thinks that the writer was head of that community.<sup>10</sup> Again it seems as if rigid distinctions are being made in terms of the character of the prophetic consciousness and perspective displayed by the writer that imply that some characteristics are mutually exclusive, when in fact they do not really seem to be demonstrated as such by the book itself. In this respect, a comment made by A. Yarbro Collins about the writer is very helpful:

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<sup>9</sup>E. Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation - Justice and Judgement, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1944, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid pp. 148 ff.



... He played the role of prophet, that is, his function was to mediate an intelligible message to his fellow Christians, a message he claimed derived ultimately from God. He was clearly influenced by the written records and oral traditions about the classical prophets of Israel, but at the same time, he was part of the phenomenon of 'early Christian prophecy'.<sup>11</sup>

This is the more balanced approach that the evidence seems to warrant. The writer manages certain combinations and holds certain things in creative tension that defy "the either/or" categorization that is sometimes suggested and seems quite reasonable otherwise when applied to other writings, thought-processes and perspectives.

(b) PREDICTIVE OR PROCLAMATORY?

It is in order to note that in affirming the prophetic consciousness and orientation of the book, there is an understanding of prophecy that has long and popularly been associated with it that needs to be put into proper perspective. It is the understanding of prophecy that sees it as predominantly, if not, exclusively, predictive in nature. As such, the Book of

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<sup>11</sup>A. Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis - The Power of the Apocalypse, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 49

Revelation is regarded as prophetic because it is considered to be forecasting the whole of the Divine programme for history down to the end of time and the emergence of the new age or it is forecasting specifically those events that would herald in a very special way, the imminence of the end. This approach to the book has already been looked at and seen to be inadequate in accounting for the book's contextual relevance, something which is a strong point of the book itself. Quite apart from this, the point of view represents a defective concept of prophecy itself.

The predictive or forecastive element is certainly not absent from prophecy but it is not the most outstanding factor. The proclamatory or kerygmatic element of prophecy is what stands out above all. B.W. Anderson, referring to the canonical prophets, writes:-

...(They) not only 'point to', they also 'point out', that is, they proclaim the meaning of life now in relationship to the promise and demands of God.<sup>12</sup>

Oscar Cullmann, writing of the same prophets, has the following to say:-

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<sup>12</sup>B.W. Anderson, The Eighth Century Prophets, SCM, Lond., 1978 p. 14



...The decisive thing for the classical prophets of Israel is the fact that their function does not rest on a mere profession but on a concrete calling. Further, the prophet makes his proclamation under a compulsion which does not destroy but intensifies his personality. Yahweh makes use of the prophet's capacity of judgement in order to speak to his people through him. In this activity the prophet does not limit himself as does the fortune-teller, to isolated revelations, but his prophecy becomes preaching, proclamation. He explains to the people the true meaning of all events; he informs them of the plan and will of God at the peculiar moment, if necessary, he predicts the judgement of God.<sup>13</sup>

Prophets of this kind even when they found it necessary to predict, they did so largely in terms of how the prediction bears directly upon the present. This is the nature of the prophetic activity of the writer of the Book of Revelation. To deny that there is a predictive element in the book would be to try to deny the obvious but to treat the book as predominantly predictive, would be to distort its message. J.A.T. Robinson in noting that the book has often been described as 'prophecy' makes the following important comment:-

...We must clear our minds of the idea that prophecy simply means prediction, clairvoyance. Of course, it includes this; but a large part of the trouble is

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<sup>13</sup>Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament, SCM Press, London, 1959, p. 14

that the Book of Revelation (popularly known as Revelations) has been treated as if its primary object were to be a sort of celestial Old Moores Almanac., But apocalypse simply means unveiling - and certainly not only of the future - and prophecy means for the Bible, speaking under the inspiration of God, whether about God of the present or future.<sup>14</sup>

The prophetic point of view is informed by a sense of history. The prophets saw themselves as called by God to declare His will and purpose and interpret how it is being worked out in the concrete events and situations of everyday life. They also brought under close scrutiny institutions that were meant to give expression to the people's faith in and commitment to God and to dispense justice and protect the rights of the people. In the process they were not imprisoned by too narrow or limited a perspective. They shared an eternal perspective which made them see contemporary events against the background of God's ultimate purpose. The prophetic outlook of the Book of Revelation and its accompanying political implications, is very much in line with this.

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<sup>14</sup>John A.T. Robinson, Where Three Ways Meet - Last Essays and Sermons, SCM London, 1987, p. 47.



(c) LORD OF HISTORY

The writer's concern was his contemporary historical situation. It was within and to that situation that his prophetic word was addressed and was a response. He sought to set forth and interpret events and issues in relation to the will and purpose of God who not only acted in history but was himself the Lord of history. He did not, therefore, place himself at some vantage point in the past and from there read history, projecting into the future up to the point where he really was, thus giving the impression that events that were taking place were shown to him long before. Neither were his own private ecstatic experiences which transported him into the distant future, revealing secrets of what were to come really the true point of departure for his prophetic utterances. Admittedly there are definite predictive elements in what he has to say, as noted already, but in true prophetic tradition, his historical context remained his primary framework and the issues, events and experiences within it were the major matters of his prophetic concern. Eugene Boring focussing on this concern, indicated that there seemed to have been two major questions, which were at one and the same time, a single question, that faced the writer.

They were the questions of God and of history; who was it, if any, ruled the world? What was it, if any, was the meaning of history.<sup>15</sup> Klaus Wengst is probably articulating the same thing when he notes:-

...According to John the decisive question with which he sees the Christians of his time confronted is not "How can I survive this situation with the least possible harm?... Rather the question of the possibility of his own survival is completely put in the shade by the one question which is important to him: In this situation, how can I bear witness to the rule of Christ, his claim to the whole world?

The questions were raised, as can be seen, out of the struggle in which the people were engaged in their context of oppression, injustice and idolatry. With his prophetic consciousness and the constraints of the prophetic mandate, the writer brought reflection to bear upon the struggle in engagement and to put into proper perspective what was taking place and what was obviously troubling and threatening the life and faith of his readers. He made it quite clear that things were not meaningless as they might appear to be. However perplexing the pain and suffering they were to experience

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<sup>15</sup>Eugene Boring's essay, "The Theology of Revelation - The Lord God Almighty Reigns" in Interpretation 40/3, July 1986, pp. 237 ff.



as a result of their commitment to God and resistance to the powers and however unstoppable the powers appeared, it certainly did not mean that history was out of control or under their control. Neither did it mean that they, the Christians, should escape from history by retreating into a world of unreality in order to have or maintain faith in God. The fact was that the very arena in which the disturbing and troubling things were taking place was the very sphere of God's redemptive activity. And so the things that were taking place must be seen and understood in the light of the decisive activity of redemption in Christ that has already taken place in history and will be consummated in the new age.

The writer indicates that the beast while it pursues its own self-willed purpose and intention in defiance of God and sets itself up in rivalry to God and subjects God's people to trials and sufferings, was still subject to the determinative and controlling power of God. Again and again in one brief span of giving account of the conduct of the beast the writer emphasizes that what it did, it was given to do and there is no doubt that the One who gave it was God, 13<sup>5-7</sup>. A. Yarbrow Collins writes:-

...Yes, the beast rebels against God, but even that rebellion is part of God's plan. Creation may appear to be out of control, but even the persecution of the faithful is within divine providence.<sup>16</sup>

It is not a case of two equal powers vying for supremacy in history. One is a usurper over-reaching itself and betraying all the tyrannical signs of the arrogance of and lust for power. It has never been and will never be in ultimate control despite appearances and the propaganda it has at its service. In the mystery of the workings of God's own power and grace epitomized in the cross itself, what the powers do is taken up in God's own purpose of judgement and salvation. The very thing that the powers are desperately trying to demonstrate and secure, their ultimacy, is exposed as over-vaulting pride. Whether they know it or not they are in the process of bringing judgement upon themselves as they act not ultimately serving their own ends as they intend but rather they act by the permission of the sovereign lord and to his end and purpose in the final analysis. In a real sense the oppression and injustice that are pursued are not a negation of God's control, though at times they appear as such, but it sets the stage for the

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<sup>16</sup>Adele Yarbro Collins, The Apocalypse, Veritas Publications, Dublin 1979, p. 92



manifestation of God's liberative purpose and power through the struggle and resistance of God's people in the present sphere of history and in anticipation of the full and ultimate manifestation of that purpose in the establishment of the Kingdom by God in the new age. It means, therefore, that in the face of the oppression and injustice that were being experienced, vindication and victory were not to be regarded as impossible or remote.

The prophetic mandate was not only to make known the meaning and implication of what God had done in Jesus Christ, but also to indicate the people's own response and to clarify how they could witness in word and deed to the victory and liberation that already had taken place and will be fulfilled in the new order.

(d) GOD OF THE OPPRESSED AND POWERLESS

One of the things that comes out in the whole prophetic thrust of the book as it seeks to set forth God as Lord of history and working out his purpose of redemption in history, is that God is the God of the oppressed and powerless. This is a conviction that is set forth and echoed throughout and it is in direct line with the classical prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, Amos 4<sup>1-3</sup>; 5<sup>10ff</sup>; Is. 5<sup>8ff</sup>; Jer. 7; Mic. 2<sup>1-10</sup>. The prophets were passionate and persistent

in their attack in the name of the righteousness of God on social, economic and political injustice. In demanding that the will of God be done and his purpose be served, the prophets made it clear that this involved the cause of the poor, the weak and the defenceless being directly served. The people then needed to be reminded that their existence as a covenant people was a tremendous testimony to the fact of God being the God of the oppressed, Deut. 11<sup>1-4</sup>. An unforgettable and key factor of their life and history was the exodus event and experience. This became one of the chief normative factors of their consciousness as a people. It was integrally linked with the covenant-grace that formed and constituted them into the people of God. God heard their cry and groanings under the burden of Egypt's bondage, broke the bondage and set them free Ex. 6<sup>4-5</sup>. This God whose spokesmen the prophets were, was represented by them as remaining consistently and persistently the God of the oppressed, defending their cause and bringing judgement to their oppressors, whether these were outside Israel, or within Israel.

The Book of Revelation in its own way, bears a similar message. It was meant to give assurance and hope to its readers who were in the midst of oppression. It



has already been noted that the redemptive act of God in history in the death and resurrection of Christ is the central and decisive event and point from which the writer takes his point of departure in interpreting history. The writer does not go back into the history of Israel and choose a strategic point in that history from which to offer a survey of world history in the form of projection into and predictions about the future, in order to show the relentless and inexorable succession of historical period. This is one of the distinctives on his part over against the Jewish apocalypses, cf Dan.2<sup>23</sup>; 4 Ezra 3<sup>15</sup>, Assumption of Moses 3<sup>9</sup>. The eschatological hope is grounded on and guaranteed by the redemptive activity in Christ, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>5,9</sup>. This starting point for the interpretive understanding of what God is doing in history and how God is working out his purpose has led some people to gain and give the impression that there is a lack of interest on the part of the writer in the continuity of salvation history with the history and experience of the people of the old covenant. It is almost as if salvation history began entirely and fundamentally with his new point of departure. There is a neglect or abandonment of antecedent redemptive activity on God's part in dealing with His people in

history. For example, Hanz Conzlemann in drawing attention to the eschatological form of the writer has written the following:

"Remarkable though it may seem, precisely in the Revelation of John one can detect a remarkable elimination of time, it is absorbed by the apocalyptic imagery. This is clear above all in the understanding of the church and its place in the world. The church is the people of the twelve tribes, but there was no reflections on pre-Christian Israel. There is no retrospect in salvation history.<sup>17</sup>

It would be a pity if what is quite rightly realized and acknowledged that the writer establishes a new foundation or basis for the interpretation and understanding of salvation history should cause it to be overlooked that at the same time there lies in the background of what he has to say important reflection on salvation history prior to the new decisive epoch-making transformative and liberating act in and through Christ.<sup>18</sup> Grasping this is indeed vital for appreciating the writer's own creative and powerful

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<sup>17</sup>Hanz Conzlemann, An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament, SCM Lond., 1969 p. 313.

<sup>18</sup> See W.G. Kummel, Introduction to The New Testament, SCM. London 1966 p. 323. Kummel affirms this background influence. See also, David Hill, Prophecy and Prophets in Revelation, NTS, 18, 1971-72, pp. 404-406.



presentation of the meaning of history and God's purpose from the point of view of what has been accomplished in and by Christ and what will be fulfilled because of it.

Eugene Boring has drawn attention to the fact that if it is the matter that there is no systematic recapitulation of the details of Salvation history in the book that constitutes the test as to whether the writer situates his understanding and interpretation of history in continuity with salvation history from the Old Covenant Relationship then it may truly and reasonably be claimed that there is no interest on the writer's part in that dimension of salvation history. The fact remains, however, that when the writer's use of imagery, ideas and symbols associated with the Old Testament is examined it does reveal a perspective informed by Salvation history related to the foundational experience of the people of the Old Covenant. Boring comments as follows:

"...It is true that John does not recite "The mighty acts of God" in a chronological narrative of the past, and thus can be misunderstood as having 'no retrospect' in Salvation history' but this is due to the prophetic manner in which John uses the Scriptures. Instead of bifurcating past and present by citing a text as an item from the past and 'applying it to the present', he draws images from the past and represents them

as the vehicle of the prophetic word of God to the present, collapsing them into a present moment yet this does not mean that John has no sense of time, that all history is homogenized and compacted into the present moment...John has a clear perception of the history of God's mighty acts in the past and draws from this tradition the images by which he portrays the present/eschatological act of God...<sup>19</sup>

Most impressively, in our view, is the role the Exodus motif plays in what the writer has to say in the most crucial and decisive aspects of his own interpretation of god's purpose. and this in fact serves to reinforce the prophetic consciousness and sensitivity ascribed to the writer, since the Exodus and associated covenant-features formed an important part of the classical prophetic consciousness of the Old Testament.

Jay Casey in a very insightful and instructive article on "The Exodus Theme in the Book of Revelation Against the Background of the New Testament" has

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<sup>19</sup>Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: The Lord God Almighty Reigns" in Interpretation, July, 1986, 257-269, Boring gives examples of a varied nature to verify his conclusions, see esp. pp. 263-267.



demonstrated beyond doubt that the Exodus motif played a decisive role in the writer's thinking.<sup>20</sup> Casey notes the decisive role the exodus event and experience played in the confession of the Jewish faith, Deut. 26<sup>5-9</sup> and indicates that the writer of the Book of Revelation shares the same sense of the decisive role it plays in understanding God's redemptive activity in Christ and the outworking of His purpose in history. At the same time it demonstrates the writer's own creative and appropriate interpretation of it based on the perspective from which he approached the scriptures. Casey makes the following interesting observation:

With the Jews John agreed, the exodus involved God's redemption of Israel, His judgment upon the oppressors and His granting of an inheritance to the nation. But John departs from the Jewish understanding of the Exodus when he proclaims that it is not history, even sacred history but as hope fulfilled in Christ, and a paradigm of God's continuing activity on behalf of His people. so in the midst of Revelation's apocalyptic images of cosmic evil and

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<sup>20</sup>Jay Casey, "The Exodus Theme in The book of Revelation Against The Background of The New Testament" in Concilium; 1987 pp. 34-43. See also G.R. Beasley Murray, Revelation (The New Century Bible Commentary) Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974. pp. 57, 58, 127, where there is a positive appreciation of the significance of the Exodus for the writer.

struggle, there can be detected John's convictions concerning the continuing meaning of the Exodus. God remains His people's redeemer, the judge of their oppressors, the guarantor of their eternal inheritance.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note the aspects of the redemptive activity and the outworking of the divine purpose in the world with which the Exodus theme is associated. Firstly, there is the concrete and specific act of redemption itself by Jesus,<sup>15,6; 59</sup>. This is set forth in such a manner that the image of the sacrificial lamb is merged or held together with that of the Passover lamb of the Exodus experience along with the attendant covenant blessing of God's promise. See Ex.19<sup>6</sup>, Ex. 12<sup>1-14,24-28</sup>. The death of Christ is seen against this background and its nature perceived of in terms of it but at the same time exceeding it; that is it is nevertheless greater than Israel's redemption from Egypt. Casey writes concerning this,

John draws attention to the Old Testament conceptions of the efficacy and power of the sacrificial blood. But by addition of the phrase from Exodus 19<sup>6</sup>, 'and made us a kingdom, priests to God and father', John without denying the significance of Jesus' death effecting atonement, cleansing, or sanctification' gives

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<sup>21</sup>Jay Casey, "The Exodus Theme in the Book of Revelation Against the Background of the New Testament" in Concilium, February 1987 p. 34.



priority to the understanding of that sacrifice as the blood shed for the liberation of humankind from sin to serve God as kings and priests, a holy people. Jesus' sacrifice is that of a new and greater paschal lamb, whose redemptive death effects a new and greater Exodus.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the judgment of God on the Rebellious and oppressive powers recall the judgment visited upon Egypt in the Exodus event. On a structural level and conceptually it is said that the narrative of the first four trumpets of the trumpet series of judgment,<sup>8<sup>6-12</sup>; 16<sup>1ff</sup></sup> and the whole series of the bowls, show signs of having been patterned on the narrative of the plague story in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 7-12 cf Wisdom of Sol; 11<sup>15ff</sup>).<sup>23</sup> In addition to the structural and conceptual resemblance there is specific resemblance between certain of the elements of the actual punishment used in the narrative of the Book of Revelation with those in the plague narrative of the Exodus, Rev. 8<sup>7</sup> cf 8<sup>8</sup>; 14<sup>3,4</sup>/Ex. 9<sup>23-25</sup>; Rev. 16<sup>2</sup>/Ex. 9<sup>10</sup>; Rev. 16<sup>10</sup>/Ex. 10<sup>21</sup>; Rev. 9<sup>14-15</sup>/Ex. 12; Rev. 9<sup>3</sup>/Ex. 10<sup>12-15</sup>; cf 16<sup>13</sup>/Ex 8<sup>2-13</sup>. The whole process of the overthrow of the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid p. 35.

<sup>23</sup>H.P. Müller, 'die Plagen der Apokalypse. Eine ForomgeschichEliche Untersuchung, Zeit für die neu Wissenschaft, 51, 1960, 268-170. Cited by Jay Casey "The Exodus Theme in The Book of Revelation Against The Background of the New Testament". Conulium Feb. 1987.

terrible and oppressive Egypt, became an important part of the imagery and symbolism used by the writer in setting forth the eschatological act of judgment by God in dealing with the oppressive and rebellious powers ranged against His people and indeed against His purpose in the world.

Thirdly, the aspect of the promised blessings and inheritance of God's people recall features and factors associated with the Exodus event and experience and the related covenant blessings and promises. The association of the church with the twelve tribes, the sealing of the faithful, the Song of Victory given to the Saints, the vision of the new heaven and new earth identified with The New Jerusalem and its blessings do echo The Exodus event and experience albeit at times in less obvious ways and in more complex frameworks, 7<sup>1-17</sup>; 14<sup>1-5</sup>; 15<sup>1-5</sup>; 20<sup>1-6</sup>; 21<sup>1-22</sup><sup>5</sup> cf Ex. 8<sup>22ff</sup>; 12; Ex. 9<sup>5-6</sup>; Ex. 15; Ex. 3<sup>12</sup>; 6<sup>7</sup>. When the whole picture is here taken into consideration it seems as if in the use of the Exodus Theme by the writer, he is indicating that as the power of God was shown forth in liberating Israel from oppression and slavery in Egypt, crushing Pharaoh in the process and opening up the possibility of freedom for the people to experience new dignity and the fulfilment of



their humanity, so now is that power of liberation and redemption completely, perfectly and decisively expressed in the redemptive act of Jesus. In this, he creates new possibilities in the struggle here and now, possibilities of resistance and challenge and the inauguration of the realities of the hope of the promises of God for a new future in a new order. Surely then the Exodus event and experience have a formative role and profound impact on the prophetic consciousness, conviction and hope of the writer as it did for prophets of the Old Testament classical tradition. Eugene Boring makes some helpful comments which are not unrelated to this perspective:

The goal and climax of the mighty acts of God in Israel's history is Christ. Because the Christ is Jesus, the Jesus event is the definitive event by which all history is to be understood. John is a Christian apocalyptic prophet. This means that he reinterprets all his apocalyptic symbolism and prophetic tradition in the light of the church's conviction that the Christ had already appeared in history. The Christ, the anointed King of the endtime who would be raised up by God was not to be a Saviour of individual souls out of the world but a renewer of the world. The hope for Christ was a sacred and political hope for the one who would be given power and

wisdom of God to establish justice and inaugurate the Kingdom of God. The Christ appeared, confronted the kingdoms of this world established on violence and oppression, and conquered.<sup>24</sup>

God is a God to whom His people can cry out. The cry of the martyrs is of interest and significance:

...They cried out in a loud voice "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? 6<sup>10</sup> (NIV).

Whatever else is said about these words, and some negative things are said, which will be discussed later on, they do seem to reflect a deep conviction that God is a God who acts on behalf of those who suffer unjustly. There was not only a desire for God to act but there was an expectation that he would act. The question, therefore, was more a matter of when rather than whether he would act. They were impatient for God to act but not in doubt that he would act. He was known to act on behalf of the oppressed. There is indication also that in time the prayer was considered to be answered, though at the time that it was actually prayed, patience at the out-working of God's purpose was counselled. It is even

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<sup>24</sup>Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation and how our God Reigns" Interpretation, July 1986.



felt that the rest of the book following upon the prayer described its answer and fulfilment.<sup>25</sup> If this is considered too sweeping a characterisation of the rest of the book, then there is the more restricted view that sees the answer to the prayer in Chapter Eight beginning at verse three. Oliver O'Donovan commenting on the prayer writes:-

...When we finish hearing the prayer we hear it only as a cry of impotence. But at the start of the next cycle, we are shown that it is a prayer of power; for it is this prayer and none other that the angel mingles with incense before God (8<sup>3</sup>); and so it is this prayer which, when cast as fire from the altar upon the earth, sets loose the thunder, lightning and earthquake of the seven trumpets.<sup>26</sup>

Whether we take the more general point of view that the rest of the Book is answer to the prayer or the more restricted one represented by O'Donovan, the truth is, it is believed that the prayer was actually answered. God heard the cries, groanings and prayers of the oppressed and acted in response (cf Ex. 3<sup>7,8</sup>). The conviction that

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<sup>25</sup>W. Klassen "Vengeance in the Apocalypse of John", Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 28/3 July '66, pp. 300-311.

<sup>26</sup>Oliver O'Donovan, "The Political Thought of the Book of Revelation" in Tyndale Bulletin 1986, 37, p. 76.

lies behind the prayer and the view that God answered the prayer is that God is the God of the oppressed.

This was something that formed a strong part of the assurance that the writer was confident that he could give his readers and it was in line with the prophetic perspective and commitment that he shared. Karl Barth sums up a conviction such as this in the words:-

...God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and this side alone; against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly.<sup>27</sup>

It must be pointed out, however, that the conviction that God is the God of the oppressed is not left hanging on its own. It goes hand in hand with the conviction that God is a God of justice. It is in and with justice that he takes action on behalf of the oppressed.

#### God of Justice

In the Book, the fact of God who is the God of the oppressed being the God of righteousness and justice, is of great importance. It is a key factor to understanding the outworkings of God's purpose in history, as seen from the prophetic perspective of the writer. Justice is

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<sup>27</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. II Part I Edinburgh, T. Clark, 1934 p. 386.



characteristic of the Divine action and will. And there is no doubt that the expression and manifestation of Divine justice in judgement are portrayed in rather dramatic and in some cases, fearsome ways in the book. Indeed this portrayal of judgement that is visited upon the oppressor and the unjust or is expected to do so, has evoked some of the severest criticisms of the book, to the point of it being dismissed by some as not being authentically Christian. It has been characterized as being a reversion to Judaism,<sup>28</sup> vindictive, inhumane, full of hatred. H.J. Holtzmann comments:

...The Christ of Revelation was 'the warrior', yes the murdering messiah who celebrated triumph in glaring contradiction to the peaceful Messiah concept of Jesus. All this was taken over from Judaism...<sup>29</sup>

C.H. Dodd echoes sentiments of a similar nature by indicating that the Book distorts the character of God and misrepresented the Messiah. It is lacking in the spirit of Christ - his compassion and forgiveness.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Rudolf Butmann refers to the Book as 'Weakly Christianized Judaism' - Theology of the New Testament Vol. 2, SCM London 1958, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup>Cited by J. Goppelt, Theology of the New Testament, Vol. 2, 1975-76, p. 185.

<sup>30</sup>C.H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and its Development, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1936, p. 86ff.

T.F. Glasson sees the potential for greatness of the book undermined by its lack of emphasis on love. He writes:-

...If only John the Seer had found some way of maintaining the principle that love is the strongest power in the world, what a great work this would be! But instead, the victory is finally envisaged as springing from sheer force; the lamb changes to the rider on the white horse, sprinkled by the blood of his foes, smiting the nations with a sword and gaining supremacy by slaughter and divine omnipotence.<sup>31</sup>

The question arises, how far does the book really merit these strictures? How far is it true to characterize it as more Judaistic than Christian, committed to malice and vindictiveness more than to love? There is no doubt that there are parts of the book especially within its main section, Chapters six to twenty, that would seem to bear out the criticisms and strictures. But yet when a close examination is made of what the writer says and how he says it, the criticisms on a whole would seem not to be really justified. Its commitment to justice which expresses itself in belief concerning the vindication of the oppressed will be better appreciated. A fair comparison of the book with other writings in the New Testament and a balanced

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<sup>31</sup>T.F. Glasson The Revelation of John, The Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge, 1965, p. 46.



assessment of it in terms of its literary form, its structure, the situation to which it was responding and its understanding and use of scripture will indicate that it is no less Christian than any other New Testament writing. It will also be seen that it is second to none in its commitment to justice and righteousness served by a vision of God who is a God of righteousness and justice and who is concerned for the oppressed, weak and disadvantaged.

The difference between the Book of Revelation and other writings in the New Testament in terms of conviction concerning the judgement and punishment of God upon the powers, forces and people who oppose God's purpose and will as assumed and put forward by critics is overstated. Much in the other writings of the New Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles will have to be overlooked for the difference represented in such a radical manner to be maintained. Indeed the teachings of Jesus, are not devoid of the fact of judgement even though the spirit and attitude of Jesus are so frequently and readily contrasted with those of the writer of the Book. G.R. Beasley-Murray notes that the Sermon on the Mount begins with Beatitudes and ends with a parable on judgement and then he concludes:-

...Such a complementary presentation of kingdom and judgement is characteristic in the teaching of Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

Beasley-Murray further states that references to judgement abound in the Epistles, too numerous to allow for enumeration. As far as he sees it, the difference between the writer of the Book of Revelation and the others is not a difference in Theology. It is rather a difference in contextual realities. This is why in the case of the writer the emphasis seems more intense and prolonged. The powers of evil that were ranged against God and his people were of demonic proportions. They were seeking to have evil triumph over God's purpose in the world. In the face of this nothing less than the full weight of divine judgement as understood from the prophetic perspective could be expressed. It is noted that when Paul faced a situation of the kind or contemplated it in terms of apostasy, he too resorted to language that was extremely severe, 2 Thess. 2<sup>1-17</sup>.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>G.B. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible Commentary, Revelation, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1974 pp. 27ff. He gives many scripture references in support of his conclusion - Matt. 8<sup>11ff</sup>; 11<sup>5-24</sup>; 12<sup>28-32</sup>, 38-42; 13<sup>10-17</sup>, 24-30, 47ff; 18<sup>1-9</sup>; 25<sup>1-13</sup>, 14-30, 31-46. See also his Essay, "How Christian is the Book of Revelation?" in Reconciliation and Hope, Ed. R. Banks, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1974 pp. 275ff.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. 28.



The same view point is expressed by Christopher Rowland who is of the opinion that even though the Book may be a work that comes out of Jewish Christian culture of Asia Minor, there is much evidence within it that indicates that it also 'reflects the belief of mainstream Christianity'. Among the things that Rowland sees it reflecting that is shared by mainstream tradition is its conviction about the hostile powers. He admits that there is a contrast between the Book's attitude towards the Roman State and that of other New Testament writers, however, "the conviction that all that was opposed to God would ultimately be uprooted and destroyed, so graphically portrayed in 17<sup>20</sup>, is at least implicitly stated elsewhere in the New Testament". Paul's reference to the Anti-Christ, his activities and eventual doom, in 2 Thessalonians 2<sup>3ff</sup> and the Messianic woes and cosmic upheavals as are set out in Mark 13, are examples of what are stated elsewhere in this regard.<sup>34</sup> It is not only then that as far as the readers were concerned what was written would not have been as strange and offensive as they now seem to many, but what was written is not so radically different in conviction from what is written

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<sup>34</sup>C. Rowland, Radical Christianity, Polity Press, 1988, p. 69.

elsewhere in the New Testament. This is not to say that the execution of divine judgement is not expressed in much more colourful and dramatic terms in the Book of Revelation. The apocalyptic imagery used by the writer heightens and intensifies the sense of the punishment meted out and this is not unrelated to how the writer conceived of the realities that confronted them. Indeed when radical distinction is made between the spirit of the Book of Revelation and the rest of The New Testament rather than essentially a difference in tone and method of expression, the following comment made by H.B. Swete seems far more pertinent and justifiable than its somewhat moralistic character would appear to make it-:

...A Revelation of the Severity of God" was needed by the Churches, which were hard pressed by the laxity of pagan life and the claim to Divine honours made by the masters of the Empire. The apocalyptist meets the immoralities and blasphemies of heathendom by a fresh setting forth of the majesty of the One God and a restatement of His sole right to the worship of men. Thus he represents a view of the Divine character which, apart from his book, would be nearly wanting in the New Testament and supplies a necessary complement to the gentler teaching of the Gospels and Epistles.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John, 3rd Edition, London, p. cix.



It should not be surprising, therefore, that the book demonstrates a more sustained and emphatic witness to the justice of God in vindication and punishment than is apparent in some other cases. The context in which it took shape and the contextual realities to which it was responding quite definitely influenced it. It was a situation in which, among other things, there were those who were obstinate in their unjust, oppressive and idolatrous ways. It warranted the clear and unmistakable prophetic insight that "Man's injustice brings God's justice."<sup>36</sup> In a situation of oppression and injustice, the God of the oppressed and disadvantaged, the One who remembers the forgotten and who makes his special concern those who are marginalized and victimized, moves against the evils represented in this. The sharp edge of judgement is inescapable where there is persistent and cruel defiance of the righteousness and justice of God. This is something communicated by the book by its dramatic portrayal of punishment meted out to those who perpetrated injustice and oppression against the people.

It has been claimed with some justification that the peculiarities of the structure of the book itself help to give an even more dramatic and heightened

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<sup>36</sup>James L. Mays, Amos (Old Testament Library) SCM, Press London 1969, p. 98

impression and sense of the severity and intensity of the judgement and punishment portrayed. There seems to be a measure of recapitulation as the narrative proceeds and so the series of punishment associated with the seals, 6, 8<sup>11</sup>; the trumpets, 8<sup>6</sup> - 9; 11<sup>15</sup>, and the bowls, 16, which appear to follow upon one another chronologically and representing successive waves of punishment of increasing severity should not really be seen as such. They are probably better seen as ways of portraying what is essentially the same event and experience from a different perspective. Of course, the cycles do not simply repeat or duplicate themselves. In each case there is variation and there is even addition that intensifies the punishment somewhat but it still does not represent a sequence of punishment with cumulative effect, which extended over as long a period of time as chronological sequence would suggest.

It has been noted already that the writer embraces the prophetic concept of God being Lord of History and active in history; that he pursues his moral purpose in history. It follows that some events in history are not necessarily the direct issue or creation of God's will and purpose but they are nevertheless taken up in God's moral purpose and become experiences of his wrath in the



exercise of his righteous judgement. Wars, social disorder, hunger, disease, ecological disaster and upheavals, (the four horses and their riders 6<sup>1-8,29</sup>); hostile forces in alliance against God turning upon themselves in self-destruction, 17<sup>7</sup>; earthquake 6<sup>12</sup>; 16<sup>18ff</sup>, locusts emerging from the abyss,<sup>37</sup> 9, are examples. J.A.T. Robinson makes a succinct comment in this regard concerning God's action:-

... Even the forces of destruction he uses and takes up into his own design for victory.<sup>38</sup>

This Robinson thinks is consistent with the Biblical doctrine of God as Lord of History. God surely brings judgement upon the unjust and oppressive and sometimes the judgement is the inevitable result of their own

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<sup>37</sup>The identity of the first horseman is disputed. It is contended by some that he represents the triumphant proclamation of the gospel of the Lordship of Christ, while others believe that it represents war pursued by the powers, which was now taking its toll on all. In this case it hardly matters which of the interpretations followed. If it is the triumphant proclamation of the gospel, then the others that followed indicate the disaster that people and nations bring upon themselves in disobedience of the gospel. If it is war it indicates the self-destructive judgement that people and a nation bring upon themselves in rebelling against the just and righteous God.

<sup>38</sup>J.A.T. Robinson, Where Three Ways Meet - Last Essays and Sermons, SCM Press, London 1987, p. 67.

action. The warlike and violent become victims of their own violence. The oppressive and exploitative end up fomenting the kind of social disorder in which their ill-gotten gain cannot be enjoyed in comfort. The powerful see their own power threatened and their status at stake and the fear, anxiety and terror to which they have subjected others, they themselves now experience as a result of their own action. They would suffer destruction which was of their own doing but which at the same time would be judgement upon them. It cannot be overlooked that it was in fact a heavenly creature, who called out each horse 6<sup>1,3,5,7</sup> and it is clear that it is God's purpose being worked out in the alliance of ten kings turning upon the prostitute, 17<sup>15ff</sup>.

The writer of the book does not take time out to address certain questions that may arise in the minds of the modern reader. For example he is not dealing with whether calamitous events do not happen which cannot be attributed to human agency or interpreted the way in which he interprets them. He was simply keen on making what he considered to be the very important point that those who lived in disobedience of God's purpose, pursue their own self-willed path of violent oppression of others and a greedy and idolatrous life-style, in the



process create conditions that undermine the very structures they wish to use to secure their own position. In all of this there is a puzzling situation that remains and is unavoidable in such circumstances. The puzzlement especially concerns the situation of the oppressed. While the self-destructive judgement takes its toll on the oppressors, the faithful, the oppressed, are affected and bear pain in the process. This no doubt is in a measure responsible for the cry that went forth from those who had already paid the extreme price for their faithfulness and who had seen the continuing suffering and oppression of the faithful, 6<sup>10</sup>. John C. Bennett comments on this kind of problem, saying...

...Even the most obvious examples of Divine judgement are confused by the suffering of the innocent, often their massive suffering...<sup>39</sup>

One of the things that made a difference, however, was the fact that the nature of the suffering that the faithful experienced in the process of the self-destructive judgement that the oppressive and unjust brought upon themselves was that which the cross itself represented. In the cross, human injustice was

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<sup>39</sup>John C. Bennett, The Radical Imperative, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 193.

experienced while God's judgement and justice were at the same time being worked out. It was suffering that constituted a great test of faithfulness and commitment to God but at the same time marked the defeat of those who were inflicting the suffering. The victim stood to become the victor. Faithfulness to the testimony of Jesus, as indicated before, meant sharing the experience of cross-bearing which included feeling the pain of human injustice even being crucified, while the source and agents of the injustice were in the process of destroying themselves under the judgement of God.

It seems that there is an assurance to those who would despair of anything effective being done to and about the powers of evil and their agents when they seem so cynical and unstoppable. There is a sense in which the oppressive are plotting their own downfall, and at the same time the resistance and suffering of the innocent are playing their part in God's victorious purpose. Those who sometimes seek to exact their own justice independently of an understanding of and commitment to God's justice in the ways being discussed must also bear this in mind. It should help to elicit a different view of the book if it is sufficiently appreciated that one of the things that the writer seems



to be communicating is that evil contains the seeds of its own destruction and this is one of the ways in which God's judgement is experienced in history and nature.

In an oppressive situation in which the oppressed do not believe their oppressed existence is fated and that their oppressors are their chosen masters with inherently ordained rights to their way of life and status, but the oppressed are aware of the injustice of their situation, and regard it as unacceptable and deeply long for the power of oppression to be broken, the cries and longings for justice and the picture and expectation of how the oppression can be broken can often appear to be simply resentful, malicious and vengeful. Of course, this appearance is not so much to the oppressed as to others. The cry of the martyrs, 6<sup>9-11</sup>, the angels announcement of the people getting what they deserve in the outpouring of the bowls, 16<sup>5-7</sup>, the expressions of joy over the fall of Rome, 18<sup>2ff</sup> and the celebration of the multitude in the face of the manifestation of God's glory and conquering power, 19<sup>1ff</sup> are often put down as some of the instances where the Book of Revelation displays unchristian or sub-christian attitudes of vindictiveness, hatred and malice. It is difficult to deny that there is the appearance of these attitudes in what has been said and done in the

instances mentioned and others, and also that there may be in reality elements of such attitudes present but it does not seem that they are the predominant motivating factor or even self-consciously engendered feelings. The focus of the cry and celebration is really on the justice of God, the vindication of his own integrity in vindicating the oppressed and disadvantaged and the fulfilment of the promise of the establishment of his righteous rule. The martyrs' cry is held up as an example of intense desire for instant vengeance and is an unworthy attempt to identify God with such feelings.<sup>40</sup> Is this, however, the whole story and the correct picture? W. Klassen dealing with the issue, admits there is an element of personal vengeance on the part of the

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<sup>40</sup>A not too dissimilar instance within modern times has been that call to prayer, "for the end to unjust rule" in South Africa, A theological rationale accompanied the call which indicates that it is based upon the proponent's understanding of the justice of God and God's own commitment to the oppressed. This, however, has not prevented the call from being condemned as presumptuous, vengeful and vindictive and wishing to implicate God unworthily. See When Prayer Makes News, Westminster Press, Boesak and Vincezio, Eds. 1986.



martyrs but feels that by far the greater emphasis is on the matter of the timing of their vindication.<sup>41</sup>

R. Leivested puts this into perspective when he writes:-

...To us it is a self-contradiction when souls of the martyrs cry for revenge, <sup>610</sup>. The idea of revenge seems incompatible with the martyrs ideal. The true martyr is led like a lamb to the slaughter. The pattern is found in Is. 53<sup>3</sup> (cf 1 Pet. 2<sup>21</sup>) like Christ we are called to forgive and bless our persecutors and pray for them.

But there is at this point an obvious inconsistency in the attitude of the first Christians (at least many of them). It is certainly the duty of the disciple to forgive those who have transgressed against them, but at the same time belief in the righteousness and justice of God demands the vindication of the cause of the innocent, the punishment, the punishment of the oppressed. It is not, therefore, inappropriate that a martyr should say like Michael (Jude 9), 'The lord rebuke you', as long as the vengeance was attributed to God there can be no wrong. In the context of Jude 9, the utterance of Michael is meant to illustrate his humility. There can be no vindication of the cause of the oppressed unless the oppressor was convicted and punished. It must at least be

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<sup>41</sup>W. Klassen, "Vengeance in the Apocalypse of John", in Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 28/3, July '66. Klassen cites the support of E. Lohse, Die Offenbarung de Johannes, Gottingen 1960, who thinks the prayer is more than a cry for vengeance. It is the prayer for the establishment of God's righteousness on earth (See note 13 in Klassen's article).

demonstrated to all the world who were the real victors in their life, the mighty men of power or the meek martyrs. This demonstration is central to the Book.<sup>42</sup>

A courtroom setting is implied in Leiveisted's discussion. This is something that is itself a feature of Old Testament prophetic tradition and carries strong overtones of a God whose judgement is just and true, beyond reproach, very much unlike judgement that are made in unjust human situations. It is to God's judgement and vindication in God's tribunal that the people who are oppressed must look for vindication, trusting the integrity of God's judgements, 16<sup>5-7</sup>; 19<sup>12</sup>. Indeed without the divine vindication that is sought, injustice would seem to be triumphant and this would confirm the arrogant and idolatrous pretensions of the powers. And yet, the heavenly judgement of God could not be conceived to be effected without the oppressors being pronounced guilty and just punishment meted out to them. This is a disclosure of a realistic human perspective that belongs to the dynamic of the situation of oppression and injustice.

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<sup>42</sup>R. Leivested, Christ the Conqueror - Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament, SPCK, 1954, p. 127.



G.B. Caird, who has contributed much to this particular understanding, has suggested that objections may still be raised against John's legal terminology which may be contrasted with that of Jesus and Stephen. Yet as Caird says, the objection would certainly not be on target. The legal language, which includes references to elements and events of nature and history being regarded as part of the enforcement of punishment and attainment of vindication, is unavoidable. This is so bearing in mind those whom the writer is addressing and their experience with the pagan tribunal or what they could experience at any time. Caird sums up by saying:

...The point at issue here is not the personal relations of the martyrs with the accusers, but the validity of their faith. They have gone to their death in confidence that God's word attested to in the life and death of Jesus, is the ultimate truth, but unless in the end tyranny and other forms of wickedness meet with retribution, that faith is an illusion.<sup>43</sup>

A strong sense of the justice of God, belief in the integrity of the judgements that are associated with that justice and so the belief that God indeed vindicates the oppressed, prompted the longing and yearning for God to

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<sup>43</sup>G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, A & C Black, London, 1966, pp. 84-94.

act. The emphasis is more on vindication than on vindictiveness of the oppressed. It is vindication of the oppressed but also vindication of the promise and the word of God.

The charge of gleeful and exultant vindictiveness or vengeful gloating at the fall and punishment of the oppressor must also be understood in the light of what has been said. There is a joy that is a characteristic response to the triumph of God's justice as far as God's people are concerned. Indeed this is what happened in the Book of Revelation but at the same time the vindication of the justice meant judgement on the unjust and so it is easy to regard the celebration as of the fall and punishment of the oppressors. The delight expressed and celebration that took place must also be seen to have been associated with laments on the part of the oppressors which means that the vindictiveness or malice seems to be more apparent than real - 18<sup>10,16,,19</sup>. In addition, it is of interest to note that when the spirit of the Book of Revelation is compared with that found in other writings such as the Assumption of Moses or of Tertullian's there is a clear difference to be discerned, between what is regarded here as the longing for vindication in Book of Revelation and the hope for or



delight in vengeance shared by the others. In the Assumption of Moses, the saints are given the assurance that they will have the opportunity to look down from above and rejoice that their enemies are in Gehenna.<sup>44</sup> Tertullian speaks of how he will have great fun and rejoicing at seeing the mighty rulers and magistrates groaning in the abyss of darkness and melting in fiercer flames than they lighted for the Christians (De Spec. 30).<sup>45</sup> This kind of personal gleeful reaction to or anticipation of the judgement and punishment of their enemies can hardly be said to be evident in the Book of Revelation. Surely there is a deep trust in God as a God of justice whose judgements are faithful and true and whose righteous purpose is expected to triumph over the injustice and oppression of the rebellious powers represented by the oppressors. There is a sense of satisfaction to be noted on the part of the oppressed when there is indication of the manifestation of God's victory over the powers. Inasmuch as this victory inevitably results in the defeat and judgement of the enemies then the appearance of personal satisfaction at

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<sup>44</sup>Assumption of Moses 10<sup>10</sup>;

<sup>45</sup>De Spec 30. See also, R.H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation, Marshall, Morgan, Scott, 1977 pp. 158-159

their end cannot be avoided in the celebration of the victory, but the element of vindictive gloating does not seem to be a predominant reality. It is really more a sense of God's Justice being triumphant - a justice in which they placed their confidence. This is essentially what the characteristic idiom of the writer implies.

The question still remains to be asked, whether the execution of divine justice and judgement in relation to the oppressors allowed any hope for them. Does the understanding of God being the God of the oppressed automatically exclude any consideration for the welfare and well being of the oppressor? Is there no hope for their liberation and redemption? Are they the hopeless in reverse? Sometimes when there is a great zeal for the righteousness and justice of God and when this is especially related to a situation of manifest injustice and oppression the language used and even the hope expressed do not seem to hold out any hope for the oppressor. The portrayal of God as God of the oppressed tend to be exclusive to the extent where the oppressor does not seem to come within the purpose of the divine concern. This is sometimes the picture that is given of the Book of Revelation. When all things are considered,



however, it does seem that as far as the thought and outlook of the book are concerned, it is not an exactly accurate picture of the book.

The prophetic perspective on the justice of God and of God as the God of the oppressed did not exclude concern for the oppressor. As it stands, the exclusion that appears so evident in the book at points, is actually self-exclusion by 'hardness of heart'. The writer's presentation of the judgement of God that works itself out in history is presented as having the intention of evoking answering repentance from those against whom it is exercised and who were in pursuit of their oppressive ends - 9<sup>20,21</sup>; 16<sup>9,11</sup>. Instead of repenting, however, they hardened their heart. Hardened heart invites further judgement. Each time there is a rejection of the opportunity to repent and hardness of heart results, the chances of there being any repentance forthcoming are lessened and the inevitable consequences in terms of judgement are intensified. A hint of the Egypt-Exodus motif may here be detected. The attitude and spirit are reminiscent of Pharaoh's obduracy and the judgement that resulted, Ex. 7<sup>8-11</sup>. Adela Yarbro Collins remarks:-

... Just as the Egyptians stubbornly resisted the divine will, so does John expect humanity to continue in its idolatrous obstinacy. Chapter 9 verses 20,21 express the prophet's conviction that the people of his day were so alienated from the creator that no crisis could move them to repentance. Events in which the faithful would see divine providence and justice are simply acts of blind fate to others.<sup>46</sup>

In the classical prophetic tradition the prophet Amos gave a recital of seven calamities that God had caused in the experience of his own people in bringing them to repentance but in each instance they did not repent. In such hardness of heart they exposed themselves to the full outpouring of the righteous displeasure of God - Amos 4<sup>6-13</sup>. Again the Book of Revelation reflects something of the perspective.

It is difficult to say that the prophetic perspective in the book shows lack of concern for the oppressor and is dominated by vindictiveness. The problem is that when people have become pressured by their own evil intention and committed to their own evil purpose to such an extent that their whole perception of reality is distorted, they tend to become convinced of the righteousness of their own unrighteousness, the

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<sup>46</sup>Adela Yarbro Collins, The Apocalypse (New Testament Message Vol. 22). Varitas Publications, Dublin 1979, p. 65



justice of their own injustice, and the goodness of their own evil. The action of God in such circumstances is not often met with the appropriate response of answering repentance. Preston and Hanson make the comment:-

... The judgements of God are not vengeful but spring from the impossible mercy of giving us the blessing we hate.<sup>47</sup>

The prophetic emphasis on the justice of God is not without a kerygmatic and evangelical intention and appeal, thus holding out hope for the oppressor providing the oppressor would make the appropriate response to what is at once the judgement and the mercy of God.

The matter goes even further in the eyes of some commentators. They are convinced that there is indication that alongside the demonstration of hardness of heart and its inevitable consequences there are hints that repentance and redemption did occur which would also confirm that the oppressors were not treated and considered as hopeless. In Chapter eleven verse thirteen, it is reported that in response to a manifestation of God's power in an earthquake of great

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<sup>47</sup>R.H. Preston and A. Hanson, The Revelation of St. John the Divine (Torch Bible Commentaries) SCM London, 1955, p. 33. It is actually a quote which is cited from F.P. Maurice.

magnitude, a surviving group of the people feared God and gave glory to his greatness. This response is of course regarded by some interpreters as one of great terror by the unbelieving and rebellious who are now forced against their own inclination to acknowledge the undeniable, that Jesus Christ is indeed lord. There is, however, no penitence. It is reluctant acknowledgement of the overwhelming reality of the lordship of Christ. There is no redemption at work in this regard. On the other hand there are interpreters who are not necessarily in the majority, but who have made a strong case for a more positive understanding of the response. Unlike the hard heartedness displayed in 9<sup>20,21</sup>, 16<sup>9-11</sup> this response is one of constructive penitence and celebration of the greatness of God. The case has been made strongly enough, especially as made out for example by J.P.M. Sweet, A.A. Trites, and G.B. Caird, that it ought to be no longer taken as a foregone conclusion that the enemies and oppressors were excluded from redemption and,



therefore, utterly hopeless.<sup>48</sup> The most consistent use of the word 'to fear' in the Book of Revelation bears a positive connotation, 19<sup>5</sup>; 11<sup>18</sup>; 14<sup>7</sup>; 15<sup>4</sup>;<sup>49</sup>. The usage in 11<sup>13</sup> ought to be regarded as bearing the same connotation unless there was overwhelming evidence to suggest otherwise. The bringing together of praising the greatness of God with fearing God seems to underscore a change of attitude not in a cringing begrudging manner but in a more positive worshipful manner. Indeed giving glory to God invariably meant to acknowledge sin and repent of it,<sup>50</sup> and in the present context it would

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<sup>48</sup>a) See Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus, The suffering of Christians in the Revelation of St. John.

b) A.A. Trites, The New Testament Concept of Witness, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 169 ff.

c) G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, A. & C. Black, London 1966, p. 140

d) G.R. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible Commentary Revelation, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1981, p. 187.

<sup>49</sup>Exceptions are in 1<sup>17</sup>; 2<sup>20</sup> where it is used negatively.

<sup>50</sup>Joshua 7<sup>19</sup>; Jeremiah 13<sup>16</sup>. It is also true that in the Old Testament there are many references to the fear of the Lord in a positive sense, Gen. 22<sup>12</sup>; Kings 18<sup>3,12</sup>; Ps. 113<sup>2</sup>; Hag. 1<sup>12</sup> and people are also in the fear of the Lord, 1 Sam. 12<sup>24</sup>; Deut. 6<sup>2</sup>,13,29. The writer was no doubt not ignorant of this.

involve ceasing from rebellion against God and giving reverence to him. It was also a known prophetic expectation and one that echoed also in the Psalms that there would be a time when the nations would bring their praises to God and acknowledge him, the nations meaning the unbelieving or pagan nations - Is. 45<sup>23</sup>; 52<sup>10</sup>; 66<sup>23</sup>; Ps. 65<sup>2</sup>; 67<sup>7</sup>; 86<sup>9</sup>. There is no real reason to doubt that the writer of the book was aware of this expectation which would have made an impact on his own prophetic perspective. At least Psalm 86<sup>9</sup> is reflected in the song of victory, 15<sup>3,4</sup> and in 21<sup>24</sup>, where there is the expectation of the kings of earth taking their glory or their treasures to the city that came out of heaven. It cannot be said to be proven beyond doubt that the book in the places mentioned, gives unambiguous indication of hope for the enemies and oppressors but at the same time neither can the thought be dismissed and the book be characterized as merciless and vindictive as readily as some have been prone to treat it on the basis that enemies and oppressors are summarily dispatched in punishment without hope.

What surely comes out in the book and seems consistent with the prophetic perspective is the conviction that Divine justice issues forth in judgement



on oppressive powers that persist in rebellion and injustice. All human rule and power ought to be subject to the Divine rule of righteousness and justice. Where there is arrogance, human power and rule pursue other purposes and serve ends inimical to the divine purpose of righteousness and justice, arrogate to themselves ultimacy and visit tyranny and oppression upon their fellow human beings. In doing so they inevitably bring upon themselves the judgement of God that is just and true. The judgement as it operates in history is unto repentance but where repentance is not forthcoming and the heart is hardened as a result the judgement is expected decisively. God is God of the oppressed but he does not automatically write off the oppressors who are themselves oppressed by the powers they serve and who need the divine liberation to which they are pointed and called in judgement and mercy but which they also often reject in hardness of heart.

It is interesting to note that false prophecy was something that had to be contended with and which both directly and indirectly served the cause of the oppressors and the system and structures they maintained. Their direct and indirect role is on a two-fold basis. In one instance the false prophets are ostensibly part of

the official establishment and entirely supportive of the system offering the religious grounding, sanctions and legitimization of the claims and demands made by the powers-that-be. These false prophets are referred to more than once in association with the beast, the imperial power personified in the Emperor - 16<sup>13</sup>; 19<sup>20</sup>; 20<sup>10</sup>. However, the most vivid description that is given of their role does not name them as such but surely their stamp is very much on what has taken place, 13<sup>11-17</sup>. Here they too are described as a beast, which comes out of the earth, obviously indicating that they are native to the local context, 13<sup>11</sup>. This beast was, however, sponsored by the beast which came out of the sea, obviously representing the Imperial power, personified in the Emperor - 13<sup>12</sup>. H.B. Swete refers to prophets and prophecy of this nature as:

... False spiritual power which made common cause with temporal power in doing Satan's work.<sup>51</sup>

In this case the religious functionaries serve under the auspices of the political power, just as the imperial

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<sup>51</sup>H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John 1907, p. 206.



political power is itself portrayed as operating under the authority of and motivated by the primordial source of evil,<sup>132</sup>. In serving under these auspices it means that they served the cause of oppression, injustice and idolatry, as these were pursued by the powers-that-be which knew the value of a civil religious presence and role in maintaining the oppressive status quo.

The emphasis is not on how the beast from the earth looks in appearance. As a matter of fact its presence is less than impressive in comparison with the beast that came from the sea. The religious establishment is subordinate to the imperial establishment. The beast of the prophetic-religious association has only two horns while the beast that represents the imperial authority has seven heads and ten horns with each horn adorned with a crown, <sup>132,11</sup>. The really impressive feature of the beast of the earth is its voice, manipulative skill and deceptive capacity. And it is these that the Imperial power depended on in service to its cause. Effective rhetoric and propaganda activities to engender patriotism and inspire unconditional loyalty to the Emperor, giving credibility to his exaggerated importance and creating fear of his awesome power and ability to inflict punishment on those who do not co-operate, are some of

the functions of the false prophets represented by the beast from the earth. They are essentially court prophets, establishment religious functionaries who operate at the behest of the ruling authority and establishment - 13<sup>13-16</sup> and who clearly enjoyed great privileges at the favour of the establishment.

The operations of false prophets of the kind demonstrate the use that may be made of religion and the role its functionaries may play in support of the status quo, however, questionable it may be. A particular form of civil religion closely identified with the dominant culture may offer justification for the existing state of affairs and be defensive of the powers-that-be. Oppressive powers may be represented as defenders of democracy, upholders of religious freedom and moral values. If admitted for what they really are, harsh and cruel policies, draconian laws and unjust structures that weigh heavily against the dispossessed and oppressed, they may nevertheless be defended as necessary for the preservation of law and order, the maintenance of a civilized community and the upholding of strong religious virtues and principles. Cries of protest and the call for resistance stand to be denounced and condemned not infrequently by the religious establishment and those who



speaking in its name. Their interest being identical with that of the status quo which it gives theological backing and cultic support, they are committed to defend the system. In such a situation the genuine prophetic insight that grasps what is truly at stake and confronts it with the righteousness and justice of God, which involves resistance is not welcomed and stands to be attacked. Prophets working with official blessing and patronage from the political establishment and in the support of the dominant culture form an integral part of the system and so themselves become instruments and agents of oppression in an oppressive situation maintained by the powers. The powers are invariably anxious to have religious backing of a kind for what they represent and are not unwilling to grant favours to ensure this. False prophets do oblige.

There is another instance of false prophets at work as indicated in the book. This is an instance where the false prophets are less directly supportive but are conformist and as such they legitimize the status quo in

the dominant culture. A woman identified as Jezebel<sup>52</sup> and described as a prophetess was said to be teaching and beguiling members of the church at Thyatira to practise immorality and eat foods sacrificed in idols, 2<sup>20</sup>. Jezebel's role along with others who are also named, the Nicolaitans and Balaam, and who are considered to have shared generally the same point of view, raised the question of the relationship between faith and culture. Their belief was of such a nature that it was felt that conformity to the general practices of the society was quite in order. Their view of Christian freedom allowed for full participation in the religio-cultural activity of eating meats offered to idols and making cultic gestures to the Emperor that might have been more an act of political loyalty than of serious religious

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<sup>52</sup>It is not certain but hardly likely that there was a woman at work in the church actually named Jezebel. It is more likely that Jezebel is a characterization of a role, a further definition of the function of prophesying referred to and a value judgment in terms of its nature. This means that Jezebel of The Old Testament is the model of the role. She was one who sponsored pagan prophets and in doing so supported and encouraged false prophecy. Elijah the true prophet of God had to contend with the false prophets associated with Jezebel, 1 Kings 16<sup>31</sup>; 2 Kings 9<sup>30</sup>. He is also alluded to in the Book of Revelation as a model of true prophecy, 11<sup>34</sup>. Jezebel in the Book of Revelation has a role more direct than her Old Testament counterpart since she is portrayed by the writer as actually engaged in teaching and misleading others. She is rejected for this reason.



commitment, but which nonetheless acknowledged the lordship of Caesar. This could be done it was felt, without any serious negative consequences for the faith.

The writer of the book disagreed and chided the churches for having been too accommodating and lenient to the false teaching associated with prophetic activity of the kind typified by Jezebel, 2<sup>14-16</sup>, 20-23. The Christians were warned against the danger and those who were influenced were called upon to repent. In such a situation conformity means compromise which reinforces the idolatrous claims of the establishment and everything else that went with it. Whether there was official patronage of the religion or not or any specific political commitment on the part of the religious teachers or not, the accommodation and conformity left the undesirable status quo unchallenged. Of course, this might have resulted in the churches being given security and assured of freedom from harassment and greater economic stability and social acceptance. In this way the Church by its own self-understanding and the understanding of its commitment may misguidedly accommodate itself to an oppressive, unjust and idolatrous situation. The result then would be that the true prophetic perspective stood to be undermined and the

prophetic message silenced. This may offer the church peace and safety and a particular kind of freedom but at the price of being unfaithful to the God who is truly Lord of all life and history and who is a God of justice and righteousness. The writer of the Book of Revelation reflected the authentic prophetic perspective and called upon the church to share that perspective and hope.

It has already been pointed out that the expectations and demands that were held and made of Christians in the situation in terms of participation in the life of the society and especially the special decrees of the powers-that-be, were not only of religious significance but also of political significance. It meant, therefore, that when the writer in his prophetic capacity counselled non-conformity it had serious political implications. It was calling into question the accepted cultural and social order and certain significant political realities that were supposed to be affirmed and promoted. This would not be tolerated and was bound to result in action being taken against the Christians if they pursued the line of action along which they were encouraged. All of this would not, however, have taken the writer by surprise. He must well have



expected the resistance and was prepared for it and hoped that his readers would also be prepared, and so he instructed them to that end.

(e) POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Indeed, it must be said that the writer's prophetic perspective, stance and role in general have had very definite political implications. It is hardly an overstatement to say that based upon its prophetic orientation and commitment the Book of Revelation is the most self-consciously politically sensitive book in the New Testament. This is not because the writer wore the mantle of a politician as politicians are generally defined and understood in our time, or even would have been technically understood in his own day and age. It is more because of that seemingly unavoidable political element that belongs to the very nature and character of the prophetic role and challenges represented in the classical biblical prophetic tradition. In this sense the political realities and issues associated with or raised by the book are not to be seen as substituted for or additional to or existing alongside theological or spiritual factors and interests. They are inseparable. It is in being prophetic in the situation that the writer

was unavoidably political. Issues and realities had to be faced that were of deep political significance, though not from a theoretical or doctrinaire point of view. Events that took place in history were the concern of the lord of history, and were to be seen in the light of God's decisive and redemptive act in Christ within history, the inauguration of the new age and its promised fulfilment.

In a situation then where the question of who controlled the destiny of men and women and who ruled history ultimately was a critical issue, it was a matter of urgent concern for the prophet. The fact that claims were being made by the Emperor and on his behalf that would ascribe to him such ultimate control and rule and the further fact that structures were put in place, strategies were developed and a dominant culture existed to maintain and sustain such claims gave a distinct and immediate political dimension to the question. Injustice, oppression and idolatry became an integral part of the system especially in relation to those who raised questions about the legitimacy of the claims. The prophetic perspective and orientation of the book saw the whole situation as a critical challenge which had to be confronted and it was with clear knowledge of its



political implication that it was confronted. Was Christ truly sovereign lord and the one whose judgements were just and true? Was the divine purpose being worked out in history despite the pretensions of the Emperor and his allies? Must the Emperor and what he claimed and demanded and the supportive structures he developed to pursue his purpose remain unchallenged, be submitted to unconditionally, and be not exposed for what they really were? Must the rights of the oppressed be no matter of concern? The prophetic call and challenge meant that these things be addressed. In the end it was a matter of Christ or Caesar, and what would flow out of this in terms of commitment to righteousness, justice and freedom or commitment to injustice and oppression; willingness to suffer for righteousness sake or to become part of the oppressive system, through active support or conformity in self-interest. Religious and theological commitment involved inherent political decision and choice in the context of oppression and injustice that existed. Neutrality was an impossibility. Kerygmatic witness to the righteousness of God, a symbolic vision of hope and commitment to the paradigm of Jesus in direction, purpose and quality of life, summed up in maintaining the

testimony of Jesus committed them to a prophetic perspective that entailed serious political implications,<sup>19</sup><sup>10</sup>.

There is distinct emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God as the prophetic challenge and critique are made in response to the situation. Reference has already been made in the previous chapter to the role that worship played in underscoring the lordship and majesty of God and of Christ in whom God acted. The worthiness of God alone to be worshipped was stressed. His absolute sovereignty was declared. Indeed sovereignty was declared to belong to him and his Christ already and forever, <sup>11</sup><sup>15</sup>. The unequivocal announcement that, 'the Lord God Omnipotent reigns' is part of the triumphant shout in the wake of the fall of Babylon - <sup>19</sup><sup>6</sup>. God is God, not to be compared with Caesar, the structures of the World, the Empire or any idol of grandeur. God is High and lifted up, wholly Other, Sovereign Lord. This spirit runs through the Book and it is a note echoed in various ways and various forms, including certain of the imagery and symbolisms used, which probably were used mainly for impact in terms of portraying majesty and transcendence, <sup>1</sup><sup>4ff</sup>; <sup>4</sup><sup>1-6</sup>; <sup>15</sup><sup>3,4</sup>. By far the greatest number of times reference is



made to divine throne, the symbol of sovereignty and universal rule in any single book in The Bible is to be found in the Book of Revelation. God reigns supreme.

Emphasis on the sovereignty and transcendence of God has, however, not found favour with some persons and generally speaking the dangers highlighted in their criticism are real. Whether, however, they are present in the book to such an extent in the emphasis we noted that would make the criticisms entirely valid is something that must be looked at. It has been argued that appeal to the transcendence, "the Otherness" of God, has been used as the basis of arguments that counsel against and are critical of the involvement of the church in and with matters and issues of a political nature or deemed to be of such a nature. The values and goals of Christianity are different from those of secular society and history. God's people are concerned about spiritual and eternal values which cannot be accommodated or embodied in the political structures of contemporary society in its fallen and corrupt state. Emphasis on transcendence in this way, therefore, encourages an apolitical attitude on the part of Christians. Christians may very well be engaged in charitable deeds and organize welfare projects but action aimed at

changing fundamental structures or at the reordering of society or challenging the status quo on behalf of those who are oppressed by it are considered not to be within the ambit of Christian responsibility. Even people who are themselves victims of unjust and cruel situations and conditions in specific societies, influenced by this particular view of the transcendence of God are made passive and they accept their situation believing that their faith has no word of concern and criticism to address it. Their hopes are transferred to another realm of existence.

David Jenkins is critical of this view of transcendence and he comments that it results in traditional Christianity fading from a response to the living God to becoming:-

... A cultic practice privately maintained by initiates and little related to a gospel of salvation addressed to the whole world out of experience of a living God, both known to be the Lord and whose lordship is known to be expressed through the Lord Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

In this sense it has also become unwittingly, to say the least, an ally of oppression and injustice in the world

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<sup>53</sup>See his essay, "Doctrines Which Lead One to Politics" in Christian Faith and Political Hope - A Reply to E.R. Norman, Haddon Willmer (Ed.) Epworth, 1979, pp. 146ff.



in general and in specific societies in particular. It may be totally indifferent to the real pains and sufferings of people or it may engage in charitable deeds and welfare projects but with no thought of taking action in critique and protest against the ordering of society and the status quo. It allows for a compartmentalization of life that makes the Christian faith of no direct relevance to issues and realities of a socio-political nature that impinge directly upon the everyday life of men and women, groups, races, classes, nations and societies. It enables people, groups, races and classes to benefit from the socio-political ordering of affairs that cause great harm and hurt to others without any sense that their confessed commitment to Christian values and goals have any direct bearing on such a matter. These are often widespread realities especially in Third World Countries, where certain missionary teachers and teachings and evangelistic preaching and ventures tend to inculcate such a point of view.

Emphasis on transcendence and sovereignty has further been criticized by many who are directly engaged in active struggle for justice and liberation of the oppressed and who reflect upon the struggle in the light of the Scriptures. And even some who might not be caught

up in the struggle as such but are openly sympathetic and seek honestly to reflect on the issues as best they can from where they are, they too are critical of emphasis on transcendence and sovereignty consistent with certain theological streams of thought which would not hesitate to appeal to the Book of Revelation for support. Such an emphasis it is felt, reinforces undemocratic concepts and patterns of dominance and paternalism in the exercise of authority and the ordering of human affairs. These have often been actually the patterns used to oppress people, rob them of their rights and hold them in continued subjection. They have also been patterns, which being so much a part of the dominant culture have been internalized by the oppressed and which inevitably increase their sense of powerlessness and confirm their status of dependency. It is argued that the human impulse towards struggle and resistance and the quest for freedom from oppression and domination cannot but be undermined by emphasis on Divine Sovereignty which is considered to be faithfully patterned in human structures of authority claiming to deserve obedience and support. This may take place to such an extent that the oppressed and dominated themselves become willing partners to their own oppression and domination. Dorothee Solle, speaking



out of her own experience as a woman, an oppressed group, as she states, claimed that she quite naturally had problems with the idea of a mighty and supernatural Lord, who was also at times called Father. His titles such as "King" was an insult to her democratic feeling and the title "Lord" constituted an affront to her solidarity with the people who were always under some master. She claimed that it was quite some time before she was able to free herself from that God and found her way to a non-theistic theology that focussed on the suffering love of Christ. It is a matter where sovereignty and lordship as concepts ascribed to God have to be set aside for the more appropriate and relevant concept of the suffering love of Christ.<sup>54</sup>

Writing with specific reference to the Book of Revelation Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims that contrary to some others who find its theology of justice and judgement and its "advocacy stance" for the oppressed and powerless a problem, it is rather its envisioning of God and Christ in analogy to the oriental great king and the Roman Emperor that she finds a problem. She calls it

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<sup>54</sup>Dorothee Solle, Choosing Life, SCM Press, London, 1981 p. 95.

the "Theological Achilles' heel" of the book. God's glory and power are likened by the writer to Roman imperial power and splendor and Christ is portrayed as the divine warrior and "king of Kings". In doing this the writer of the book runs the risk of seeing divine power as "power over" similar to that portrayed by Roman domination. Fiorenza admits that the writer attempts to transform the images but she is uncertain whether he actually succeeds to satisfy many of the readers of the book.<sup>55</sup>

It cannot be denied that emphasis on the sovereignty and transcendence of God is very evident in the Book of Revelation. This has been noted more than once in our study. It must be observed here, however, that the emphasis is not the result of any abstract speculative theorising on the part of the writer. The emphasis emerges out of the struggle and engagement reflected on in the light of the Word of God. It emerges out of a situation in which idolatrous claims are being made by and on behalf of the Emperor and it was as fitting as it was necessary to counter and resist such

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<sup>55</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgement, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 9.



claims. In the purpose of the writer, emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God was to challenge and expose the pretentiousness of the worldly powers. It was to \*relativize all human ruling powers and put them in proper perspective: His circumstance and situation warranted this and he was responding courageously and appropriately. It is true that the concept of sovereignty and transcendence has been interpreted and understood in a manner that conveys not only ideas of remoteness and unrelatedness but also to reinforce certain patterns of dominance and paternalism. Yet it is also true that this has been done not necessarily because such understanding and interpretations have been truly supported by the biblical witness in general or that of the Book of Revelation in particular. It would seem rather that it has more to do with the fact that it has been co-opted and distorted by application to patterns of human rule and the exercise of human authority in the service of vested interests. Sharon Ringe has perceptively argued that this tends to take place where sovereignty finds hierarchical and not covenantal expression which is in tune with the Biblical tradition. She insists that when the sovereignty of God is referred to in the Biblical tradition, it is fundamentally in

terms of a relationship which God has graciously initiated and which he is open to renew by his grace in Christ. As a result, sovereignty is not expressed in the arbitrary rule of power and authority, but in a relationship of Gift and demand, privilege and responsibility.<sup>56</sup> David Jenkins expressing himself differently but basically articulating thoughts of a similar vein, writes of the Biblical tradition:

...What is distinctive of the whole tradition is the unambiguous but mysterious combination of the transcendent otherness of God ('God is known to be God' - and not a feature of the world, the universe or of human beings) and of God's self-chosen and self-willed freedom for concern with and involvement in 'down-to-earthness'. Traditionally and classically Christians have believed themselves authorized to claim, and obliged to claim, that God was free enough, mysterious enough and loving enough actually to have committed Himself to His own 'personal down-to-earthness' in and as Jesus of Nazareth who became Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Sharon Ringe, Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee - Images for Ethics and Christology, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 96

<sup>57</sup>See his Essay "Doctrines Which Drive One to Politics" Christian Faith & Political Hope - A Reply to E.R. Norman Haddon Willmer (Ed.) Epworth, 1978, pp. 141-142.



These comments about the Biblical tradition in general which are here considered to be insightful and accurate are comments that are basically borne out by the writer of the Book of Revelation in particular in his witness to the Sovereignty and transcendence of God. Quite apart from the positive practical purpose which the emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God was meant to serve in the struggle which the writer and his readers were engaged, and which makes it ironical that this emphasis would be used to support powers of the nature it was meant to expose and resist, there are certain balancing factors in the Book of Revelation that ought to prevent the kind of popular misunderstanding related to the emphasis. There are three such features that are worth mentioning.

Firstly, there is the factor of God's decisive act of redemption in history in Jesus. Remoteness and unrelatedness are not factors related to the emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God in the Book, in this regard. Indeed it is the redemptive activity of God in Jesus in history that is the key event by which all history is to be interpreted and understood - 5<sup>9,10</sup> cf 1<sup>5,6</sup>. God relates himself directly to the world and discloses himself in history decisively in a liberative

and redemptive manner in the Jesus-event. This certainly is not to be simply 'internalized' and understood as referring exclusively to the "individual soul" but that it also has very important socio-political implications, something John was keen to indicate by the very nature of the struggle he and his disciples were engaged in at the time. It meant the inauguration of the Kingdom of God which had both present and future implications in terms of the establishment of the righteousness, justice and peace of God and commitment of God's people to give witness to this. The emphasis on the transcendence of God must, therefore, be held together with the emphasis on God's activity in history in Jesus.

Secondly, there is the factor of the manner in which the writer has transformed images and symbols that he uses so as to hold together in creative and dynamic tension certain fundamental features in the outworking and fulfilment of the purpose of God. Reference has already been made to the fact that Fiorenza has noted this feature but thinks it is not adequate to prevent questions being raised in the minds of readers as to whether the transcendent sovereign God is not in the image of the Roman Emperor and all that this means for the exercise of power, authority and dominance. She



cited two examples of what she called 'nurturing' and 'compassionate images of God and Christ', 7<sup>16-17</sup>; 21<sup>3-4</sup>, which the writer employed but these did not suffice to act as correctives.<sup>58</sup> There seems, however, to be an overlooking of other notable instances of the transformation of images that are relevant for the discussion, for example 5<sup>1-10</sup>; 12<sup>1-11</sup>; 19<sup>11ff</sup><sup>59</sup>. In these instances the sovereignty and lordship are celebrated and affirmed as they are manifested in Divine Acts of Redemption, Victory and Judgement. Yet they are celebrated in such a way that the writer brings together in a remarkable manner, sovereignty and solidarity, power and powerlessness, exaltation and humiliation, victory and sacrifice, vindication and suffering. The emphasis on transcendence and sovereignty does not exclude the factors of suffering love, solidarity with the oppressed and powerless, and sacrifice. The exalted lord is presented as one who knew suffering and pain. He knew what it meant to be a victim of injustice. In the

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<sup>58</sup>See Page 77ff for previous reference to Fiorenza's comments.

<sup>59</sup>Reference to these and a discussion of them has already taken place in the previous chapter pp. 75ff.

redemptive purpose of the Sovereign God and in oneness with that purpose, He who was the Lion of Judah of the Root of David and who appeared at the Centre of the throne as a Lamb, who bore the marks of having been slain, 5<sup>5ff</sup>, accepted powerlessness in facing up to the powers of the world. In his exaltation he bore the tokens of his solidarity with the oppressed. It is difficult to see how, if properly understood and appreciated, the emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God in the Book of Revelation, should reinforce patterns of dominance and feelings of dependency. In fact it should stand as a challenge to such patterns and a source of encouragement and inspiration to those who resist them, in the way it has been set forth.

Thirdly, the eschatological perspective of the Book is another factor that should prevent the prophetic emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God being seen as legitimizing and reinforcing patterns of dominance in earthly rule. Indeed the perspective is of such a nature that the provisionality of all human rule is made obvious. The vision of the New City, coming out of Heaven and being established on earth is a direct calling into question of the tendency and attempt to



absolutize itself in perpetuity on the part of human power - and its supporting structures - 21<sup>1ff</sup>. Karl Barth sums it up in characteristic fashion when he writes:

...In this future city in which Christians have their citizenship here and now (without yet being able to inhabit it) we are concerned not with an ideal but with a real state - yes, with the real state; not with an imaginary one but with the only one that truly exists.<sup>60</sup>

This is certainly bad news for the earthly ruling powers that make exalted claims for themselves and seek the legitimizing support of religion as they seek to enforce their claims and entrench their dominance. It has already been said that the emphasis on the transcendence and sovereignty of God in the Book of Revelation had as one of its purposes to challenge the absolute claims of the imperial power and in a real sense to \*relativize its authority. When the emphasis is linked with the eschatological perspective, the purpose is strengthened and furthered because the provisional nature of humanly established orders, even the best conceived of them, is

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<sup>60</sup>Karl Barth, Church and State, SCM London 1939, p. 38.

set forth and is something to be reckoned with. Divine power, sovereignty and transcendence were conceived of in such a way that basically the demonic nature and illegitimate character of the power that claimed ultimacy for itself and sought to enforce its authority based on its perceived ultimacy was exposed and challenged.

The prophetic insight and consciousness that the Book of Revelation displays on a whole puts an emphasis on the activity of God in history, the central definitive act being the Redemptive event in Jesus, his death and exaltation. From the perspective of this event, it is expected that God's people ought to perceive and come to terms with their own history and experience. They ought to do so in the light of God's freedom, His purpose of righteousness and justice and His sovereign Lordship. The impact of this perception and the commitment it inspires inevitably result in conflict with features associated with the dominant culture - the arrogance of power, socio-economic oppression and idolatry. Affirmation of Divine Lordship and sovereignty meant pursuing faithfulness and ascribing honour and devotion to God that the Emperor and those who act on his behalf could only find threatening and unacceptable. The inevitable political implications are, therefore, always



present. There is no alternative but in remaining faithful and committed to righteousness, justice, freedom and peace, which means resistance, challenge and critique in relation to the demands that are made and the status quo maintained. The nature and character of God as manifested in his redemptive activity in Jesus and consistent with how he has always acted in the history and experience of his people, leave his people no alternative but to resist and challenge the pretentiousness of the powers of the world.

The political implications of the prophetic perspective do not mean that the people of God wish to become the new rulers, arrogating power unto themselves, administering the power structures, being convinced that they have special rights and expertise in the socio-political ordering of society. Certainly, as was noted at the beginning of the Chapter, the writer of the Book does not presume to have or offer any socio-political blue print for the ordering of society or for the creation of a rival political movement with all the customary political paraphernalia. It is an alternative perspective that is brought to bear on things as they are, the affairs of society and life as they are managed and ordered and as they impinge directly upon the lives

of men and women. It is a perspective shaped and dominated by a consciousness of and insight into the will and purpose of God as they are worked out in the ordering of human affairs. This ought to evoke a response of commitment and faithfulness to the righteousness, justice and peace of God that will refuse to be co-opted in the unrighteousness and injustice of the dominant culture and will witness in word and deed to what God truly requires to the extent of being prepared to suffer for righteousness sake. There is a hope and confidence based both on what God has already done, the new dimension of life and signs of the new order already introduced, and on its promised fulfilment in a new order of justice, peace and freedom, in the new city of God.

There is no inherent cynicism or pessimism encouraged towards power as such as it is exercised in the ordering of human society. There must, however, be vigilance and even a healthy suspicion, bearing in mind the predilection of power to corrupt and become oppressive and the willingness of persons, and structures including religious ones to collaborate and oblige. Where such corruption and oppression are at work the will and purpose of the God of justice and the God of the oppressed must be made known and adhered to by his



faithful people even in the face of persecution and death. The prophetic consciousness, perspective and commitment will not be intimidated but will give undaunted witness in engagement for righteousness, justice, peace and freedom.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The Book of Revelation is a Book of the Church and for the Church. In one sense to make reference to this ecclesial connection of the book is to make no special claim, for generally speaking, most, if not all, of the New testament books share such a distinction. Even those books that are addressed more specifically to individuals do presuppose a church connection and frame of reference, in one form or another. Yet in another sense, the reality of the church, the key role it has had to play in terms of the perspective and purpose of the book and the interest in its life and experience are factors that make the church a matter of special importance in the interpretation and understanding of the book.

The immediate matters of interest and emphasis as far as the church is concerned do not concern issues of individual and private ethics of the membership, the structure, constitution and order of ministry or specific articles of faith. Even where there is a list of vices



which the writer thinks will disqualify anyone who indulges them from sharing life in the New Jerusalem, the focus seems to be more on how such vices will affect the corporate life of the church, and the way it will be rendered unable to meet the religio-political challenges and issues it is called upon to face, 21<sup>8</sup> cf 22<sup>15</sup>. The writer is by no means insensitive to the importance of right beliefs but his sensitivity is not related simply to an interest in orthodoxy for orthodoxy sake, neither does he concentrate on explaining specific articles of faith or doctrine. His concern about right beliefs relates to how they bear directly upon the life of the church and upon the church's understanding of its response to the dominant culture which includes its relation to the religio-political establishment. He was very mindful of the religio-ideological captivity that could overtake the church and lead it to the kind of compromise that would undermine its faithfulness and leave the untenable, oppressive, unjust and idolatrous situation unchallenged - 2<sup>14-16</sup>, 20-23.

The writer's own commitment and role in relation to the church were enabling, and facilitating among other things. In reflecting upon the church's life and experience in the light of the vision of God's action in

history and promise for his people, he sought to enable the church to understand the situation in which it was called to work out its commitment in faithful witness; to come to grips with the challenges and realities that confronted it; to discover the direction and thrust of its pilgrimage and struggles and to bear the cost of suffering for righteousness sake with patience. The book was intended to be read aloud, to be heard and its teachings and insights obeyed and believed, 1<sup>3</sup>. All this presupposes a congregational setting and reinforces the idea that the life and experience of the church were central for the writer. It is no doubt significant that at the very outset the congregational experience of liberation is affirmed and celebrated by the Church. The first person plural figured very prominently in the opening doxology, which by any reckoning is one of the key passages in the book, 1<sup>5,6</sup>. The corporate or family nature of the relationship typical of the Church is also affirmed in the concept of brotherhood used of the writer in relation to his readers, 1<sup>9</sup>; 6<sup>11</sup>; 12<sup>10</sup>; 19<sup>10</sup> cf/I John 4<sup>20,21</sup>.

Further evidence that there is a deep sense of the church in the book is to be seen in two other things that stand out. These two have already been referred to in some detail in previous chapters but certain factors



stand to be repeated here in the interest of what is being set forth. Firstly, there is the obvious interest in worship. There are occasions or instances of worship that are scattered throughout the book and probably more so than any other book in the New Testament. Despite critical questions that are raised concerning the location, setting and nature of the worship, it is difficult to divorce the interest displayed in the acts and occasions of worship from the life and experience of the church. The significance and meaning of the worship were not primarily related to individual private devotion but they were related to the life of the whole church in the face of the claims that were being made upon it and the pretensions of the powers-that-be that were being paraded before it. Secondly, the church comes into sharp focus in that the book contains at its very beginning, immediately after its inaugural vision, seven messages addressed to seven congregations, 1<sup>19</sup> - 3. These seven congregations are considered to be actual historical congregations by most people. There are historical, geographical and sociological allusions in the messages that are of such a nature that strengthen the view that

the congregations were historical and not mere literary constructions.<sup>1</sup> It is also felt, and quite justifiably, that the messages were in addition meant for the church on a whole. The choice of seven congregations no doubt point in this direction, bearing in mind the symbolic significance of the number seven throughout the book. The number signifies completeness or wholeness.<sup>2</sup> There is also the refrain found at the end of each message which gives the impression that what is said to each congregation is meant for all - 2<sup>7,11,17,29</sup>; 3<sup>6,13,22</sup>. There is, therefore, a bringing together of both the individual congregations and the whole church which means that the church is addressed in its particularity in the

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<sup>1</sup>Sir William Ramsay, Letters to the Seven Churches, London, 1904. Ramsay established the local background and framework of the congregations through intensive investigation and research carried out in this area.

C.J. Hemer, A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, with special reference to their local background has both confirmed and upgraded Ramsay's findings.

<sup>2</sup>M.H. Cope, "Seven, Seventy, Seventy" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Ed. G.A. Buttrick, IV, New York and Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 295. K.H. Rengstor, Theologosches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament Ed. Gerhard Kittel R. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 35, 629. Both speak of seven bearing the significance of wholeness or completeness. Pope making the more general reference while Rengstorf is referring more specifically to the Book of Revelation.



form of individual congregations and its universality in the form of the total community encompassing all the congregations. The church then in its crucial two-fold dimension is reflected in this book, which is very significant. Parochialism is overcome without sacrificing particularity and universal significance is achieved without ignoring contextuality. Questions concerning the relationship of the messages to the rest of the book are raised. This is one of the things looked at already in a previous discussion, and will not be repeated here, but it is accepted that they form an integral part of the book and is in accord with the fact that the book was sent to the whole church, 22<sup>18</sup>.

The sense of the Church that pervades the book relates especially to the image of the church as the People of God.<sup>18</sup><sup>4</sup>; 21<sup>3</sup>. Again it must be pointed out that the writer of the book is not the only New Testament writer who has seen the church in terms of the People of God but it seems quite clear that he has employed a much wider range of features associated with this image than any other single writer. This no doubt is largely influenced by the particular experience of the church in its context and the way this experience was conceived to be analogous to that of Ancient Israel's, especially the

stage approaching and that embracing the formative and constitutive experiences and events of the life of the Ancient People. The Church is portrayed as the New Israel, the New Covenant Community. It is identified with the Twelve Tribes of Israel in the one hundred and forty-four thousand who are said to be sealed for protection in the wake of imminent judgement on the rebellious and disobedient - 7<sup>1ff</sup>; 14<sup>1-5</sup>. The admission must be made that this specific identification, though enjoying the support of many interpreters, has nevertheless been disputed by some. A well-known way of understanding the identity of the one hundred and forty-four thousand is to see them as representing Jewish Christians specifically, while the parallel vast throng that no one could number, represent Gentile Christians, 7<sup>9,10</sup>. One of the problems with this particular understanding is that the distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians was not one that had been a factor in the thinking of the writer and not one otherwise in evidence in the church's life as it was in the case of certain other New Testament writers and situations. In other places in the book where the Israel imagery is used or implied directly and clearly it refers to the whole church without any distinction made between Jewish and



Gentile christians. Therefore, despite the differences of opinion it seems that it is best to see both the one hundred and forty-four thousand made up of the twelve tribes and the large throng that could not be numbered as referring to one and the same entity, the Church. In this case then the church is definitely identified with the Twelve Tribes and so seen as the New Israel, the people of God.

In Chapter twelve, another passage that has occasioned much dispute, there seems to be a connection which envisages the church as the New Israel. There is here the only clear allusion to the story of the historical life of Jesus though it is given in a highly compressed form. The imagery has certain mythological features that bear resemblance to Graeco-Roman ones but it is far more influenced by Biblical imagery and it is the biblical imagery that the writer obviously wishes to make the point. The key factor here and the one that has occasioned most controversy, is the identity of the woman. Does she represent Israel, the historical covenant community or Israel as an ideal heavenly community? Does she represent Mary, the mother of Jesus? Or does she represent the Church? These are some of the possibilities pondered and put forth. While there will

always remain a measure of uncertainty in the matter, it does seem as if this is one of those places where there is an example of the fluidity of the imagery employed by the writer. Here it seems as if one biblical imagery merges into the other or is embodied in the other to allow the important link or the evidence of continuity that the writer wishes to maintain between the Old Israel and the New. Initially, the woman seems to be depicted as Israel the historical Covenant Community, (cf Is. 2-6<sup>17</sup>; 66<sup>7</sup>) and then there is movement towards or merging into an identification with the church, the New Israel, which became the focus of the dragon's threatening behaviour, 12<sup>17</sup>. Indeed J.P.M. Sweet sees a multiplicity of imagery in the passage. He thinks that the woman can also be seen as Mary and in doing so, he demonstrates the fluidity of the imagery, which enables the writer to express the continuity of the New Israel with the Old. He writes:-

She is Mary, but only in so far as Mary embodies faithful Israel, and mothers the Messiah and his community (John 19<sup>26f</sup>). She is the church but only in so far as the church is continuous<sup>3</sup> with God's people from the beginning...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>J.P.M. Sweet, Revelation, Westminster Commentaries, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 195.



In the message to the Church at Smyrna the writer makes a significant statement. He speaks of "those who claim to be Jews but are not; they are a group that belongs to Satan!", 2<sup>9</sup> (TEV) cf 3<sup>9</sup>. This group was charged with slandering the church community. The denial that they were Jews even though they claimed to be seems to be implying that it is not necessarily those who are racially, nationally and ancestrally so who are the real people of God, it was those who were committed to the worship of Christ, the Church that was there and then being persecuted. Stated in this way, it shares of the nature and understanding of comments made by the Apostle Paul when he reminded those to whom he wrote in the Epistle to the Romans, that the true Jew was he who was such inwardly, 2<sup>28</sup>, cf 4<sup>11,12</sup>; Gal. 6<sup>16</sup>. It is also reminiscent of comments attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, when in confrontation with members of the Jewish community, he referred to their schemes and plots against his life and reminded them that they were engaged in such activities not because they were true descendants of Abraham and Servants of God as they claimed to be, but they were of Satan and committed to carrying out his will, Jn. 8<sup>31-47</sup>. And even so, Eduard Schweizer, commenting on what the writer of the Apocalypse himself

said, pointed out that he seemed to have gone beyond anything that is to be found elsewhere in the New Testament. Schweizer writes:

...It is unique that not only the theological concept of Israel stressing God's choice, but even the national designation Jews is here denied to those who do not believe in Christ. That they are actually described as a synagogue of Satan shows the radical nature of these ideas.<sup>4</sup>

The point is being strongly made by implication by what the writer says that in a real sense the church has the legitimate claim to the designation of Jews. It is the New and True People of God.

#### A LIBERATED COMMUNITY

The Church's identity and self-understanding as the People of God, The New Israel, were associated especially with certain things that were of great importance for the

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<sup>4</sup>E. Schweizer, Church Order in the New Testament, S.C.M. 1961, p.132. Schweizer's point is appropriate, however, it is also important to bear in mind a point made by G.R.Beasley-Murray. He warns against that part of the statement by the writer which indicated that the people had become 'a synagogue of Satan', of it being generalized to the extent where it is believed that the whole Jewish People had become People of Satan. (See, the New Century Bible Commentary, Revelation, W. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Marshall, Morgan, Morgan and Scott, London, 1974, p. 82



Church as it responded to the challenges and issues in its context of oppression and injustice and as it sought to pursue a life of faithful witness to God in the situation. In focussing then, on the Church as the People of God, the New Israel, the writer quite definitely placed emphasis on the liberative-formative tradition in the history and life of the People of Israel, specifically, the Exodus-Covenant tradition and related it to the life and experience of the church in the situation and circumstances in which it found itself. This tradition had itself become pivotal in subsequent Old Testament witness, especially the witness of the prophets, for the understanding of the life, experience, responsibility and hope of the People. It also found use in the New Testament other than in the Apocalypse.<sup>5</sup> The writer of the Apocalypse, however, uses the Exodus-Covenant concept and imagery quite extensively and of course, he does so not without his own distinctive and characteristic insights informed by the particularities of the church's situation and also by his own vision of the cosmic significance of the outworking of God's purpose.

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<sup>5</sup>See for example, 1 Cor. 5<sup>7</sup>; 10<sup>2</sup>; Heb. 3<sup>3</sup>; cf. Luke 9<sup>31</sup>

The Church as the People of God, is a liberated community. It is God's liberated Community. This is something that the writer wanted to convey to the people and wanted them to hold in the forefront of their consciousness - as they faced up to the testing, threatening and painful realities of their religio-political, cultural and socio-economic situation. The Exodus-Covenant concept and Imagery was used to throw light on their experience in this regard. The Exodus represented a mighty and gracious act of the deliverance of people held in bondage in Egypt with seemingly no hope of breaking free and fulfilling the true possibilities of their humanity. The seemingly unconquerable power of Pharaoh was truly broken and overcome and they were set free for a new existence. The Covenant Event which has been juxtaposed with the Exodus event in our discussion cannot be divorced from it. It represented then a Divinely initiated act by which the people were called into a new relationship with God, thus becoming established as the People of God, a liberated People of Promise and Hope. It is the writer's conviction and he wants to convey it to the church that what had happened in the liberation of the people from bondage in Egypt under Pharaoh has now happened in a decisive and unique



manner in God's redemptive act in and through Christ. There has been a New Exodus and a New Covenant-Community, The People of God. This is exactly their experience as a Church and they must see themselves in such terms in the present circumstances and understand what is taking place in such a light. It is important that in their self-understanding as the People of God, they understand themselves as a liberated community in the light of the Exodus-Covenant experience of the People of Israel, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup> cf 19<sup>6</sup>

The manner in which the writer has made the point has led some to minimize his reference to and application of the events and experience of Israel to the life and experience of the church. Hanz Conzlemann has indicated that the writer has no retrospect on the past. He is charged with having no basic interest in Salvation History that goes back to the Events and Experience of the People of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Christopher Rowland has somewhat surprisingly echoed similar sentiments. He writes:

The whole future history in Revelation is an evolution which arises directly out of

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<sup>6</sup>Hanz Conzlemann, An Outline of New Testament Theology, SCM London.

past events, particularly the Crucifixion of Jesus and moves through the historical process to its conclusion. As John says little about history before the Cross, we are not in a position to know what his attitude to God's activity in history and had been in the period of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

The writer does not quote the Old Testament directly, neither does he overtly offer any detailed account of God's activity in the history of Israel in a way that there can be any confident pronouncement on his view of Salvation history on a whole. However, the Old testament allusions that are to be found throughout the book, and in this case especially those that are related to the Exodus-Covenant event and experience do allow for it to be concluded that he acknowledged and appreciated the pivotal significance of God's redemptive activity in the life of the People of Israel that the Exodus-Covenant experience and event represented. He acknowledged and appreciated it to the extent that he saw the history in which he and his readers were caught up as being in continuity with it and as having been made understandable in the light of it. Christ's redemptive act is the decisive and unique fulfilment of the Exodus event and the Church needed to grasp the meaning, significance and implications of being God's Liberated Community.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven, SPCK, 1969, p. 436.

<sup>8</sup>See discussion in previous chapter, pp. 17ff.



The oppressive power that the people were up against was in certain respects seen as Pharaonic in nature; the conditions and circumstances of oppression were reminiscent of the experience of the People in Egypt; The Act of Judgement that the oppressive and rebellious powers brought upon themselves were in some cases of the forms that were visited upon Pharaoh and his land; the celebration of victory associated with the Exodus was echoed in the Song of victory of the vindicated saints; the blessings and promise that the saints are given recall those associated with the Exodus-Covenant inheritance - 11<sup>8</sup>; 8<sup>6</sup> - 9<sup>15-16</sup>; 1<sup>5-6</sup>; 5<sup>9-10</sup>; 20<sup>6</sup>; 7<sup>1-4</sup>; 9<sup>4</sup>; 14<sup>1-5</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>; cf Ex. 7<sup>14</sup> - 10, 12; 19<sup>6</sup>. The writer handled this Exodus-Covenant imagery and tradition in his characteristic way. He does not draw attention to the fact that he was employing them and applying them creatively, freely and dynamically in relation to the present situation in which he and his readers were caught up, but he expected that it would be clear that the link with the past event and experience was being made and thus helping to make their current experience more understandable.

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The challenge of the People of God was for them to live out their faith as God's liberated community within a context of oppression and injustice. It meant living and working out their faith as a liberated people without political freedom or sovereignty, in the face of religio-political hostility and socio-economic disadvantage, wrestling and struggling with powers that are defeated but still seemed to possess awesome power and ability to assert themselves menacingly and threateningly to make life difficult by their claims and the sanctions with which they enforced their claim. Their liberation was to be in evidence in their faithfulness as a community to their Lord and in their willingness and readiness to refuse unconditional commitment to any human power and institution, however powerful they may appear and to what whatever extent they may go to impress with their power and authority and to enforce their claim. Their God is a God of Redemption and Justice and they are liberated to live in confidence in the redemption and Justice of their God by which they are assured of vindication and of judgement on those who deserve it. They are liberated for openness to and vision of the future based upon God's promise and symbolized by the city that will come out of heaven and be established on earth and which will be the



dwelling place of the Redeemed with their God. They were not, therefore, bound to the definition of life and the determination of the state of affairs as set forth, promoted and established by the creators and managers of the dominant culture. They stood in critical relationship to the dominant culture and were committed to bear witness to alternative possibilities based on their vision and knowledge of the purpose of God who is a God of Righteousness and justice, peace and freedom, a purpose that was being worked out in history and would be fulfilled by God's own doing in God's own time.

It is in this light that the People of God existing as God's liberated Community in an oppressive and unjust context were expected to understand the new dignity and honour bestowed upon them as "a kingdom and Priests", 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 20<sup>4-6</sup>; cf 3<sup>21</sup>. The exodus-Covenant association of the blessing is obvious. It recalls words that were spoken to those who were delivered from Egypt at Sinai, Ex. 19<sup>6</sup>. There are four explicit references to these words in the New Testament and three of them are found in the Book of Revelation, which in its own way says something also of the writer's own interest and

focus in terms of this blessing.<sup>9</sup> One of the things that the Exodus-Covenant association of the blessing does is to remind that it is a blessing that entails responsibility and obligation. The writer does not spell out the obligation immediately upon stating the blessing but the Old testament background coupled with his own perspective stated throughout the book would give insight into the obligation involved. They are a kingdom in the sense that they represented God's liberated people who live under God's Sovereign rule and authority, giving ultimate obedience and faithfulness to him. They are also envisaged as sharing in the eschatological rule of Christ in the fulfilled promise of the New Age which will be of God's own doing in God's own time, thus bringing their royal dignity to a climax, 1<sup>5,6,9</sup>; 2<sup>26</sup>; 3<sup>21</sup>; 5<sup>9,6</sup>; 20<sup>6</sup>; 22<sup>5</sup>. Such will be the complete vindication of the liberated community. At the moment, however, one of the ways in which they are called upon to work out their faithfulness and obedience under and within the sovereign rule of God is to be Priests, a royal community of Priests.

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<sup>9</sup>The other reference is in 1 Pet. 2<sup>5</sup>. It is probably sheer coincidence but noteworthy nonetheless that both books were written to churches in the same general area and both writers found the passage appropriate to apply to the Church. Please see page 13 above for more detailed discussion.



In terms of Old Testament associations, while bearing in mind that variations took place in the operations and function of the priest in later periods of the Old Testament following the exile, it can be said that the priestly function was largely Godward. It was related to worship and sacrifice. G.B. Caird has rightly observed, however, that such Old Testament understanding of the priestly function does not exhaust its meaning as it appears in the Book of Revelation. As far as the writer of the Book was concerned, the Church was also expected to be a community through which the redemptive power as well as the sovereign authority of God would be exercised, manifested and affirmed in witness.<sup>10</sup> Indeed it has been pointed out that a radical re-interpretation of the priestly function had taken place in early christianity in terms of the work of Christ. The effort of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is a powerful demonstration of this, but the writer of the Apocalypse is not far behind in his own distinctive way.<sup>11</sup> The paradigm of Jesus was an essential factor in the

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<sup>10</sup>G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black, London, 1965, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>See an important discussion of this in Hans-Reudi Weber, The Way of the Lamb, Christ in the Apocalypse, W.C.C. Publications, Geneva, 1988, pp. 40ff.

outworking of the church's faithfulness and obedience in witness. They were to hold or maintain 'the testimony of Jesus', which elsewhere has been seen to mean predominantly to be faithful to the example of Jesus' own ministry. Hans-Ruedi Weber writing on the priestly function of the People of God as set forth by the writer, says,

...The Priestly function assigned to the servants of God forbids them to abandon the world of nations in its course towards death and destruction. They must witness to the Lamb who by his sacrifice took away the sins of the world and their testimony concerns therefore, God's purpose of salvation for the whole creation. This testimony they can give only according to the pattern pioneered by Christ's priesthood, the priest becoming victim.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus the One who through his death and resurrection made their liberation a reality showed authority and sovereignty in sacrificial service, being faithful to death in pursuit and accomplishment of his redemptive purpose. His own supreme sacrifice crowned by his resurrection and exaltation is the unique source, basis and pattern of the life of the New People of God, the liberated community.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 40.



In their own corporate life the liberated community is expected to bear witness according to the paradigm that the sacrificial ministry of Jesus represented and constituted. This means that in maintaining the 'testimony of Jesus', enduring suffering, persecution and even martyrdom for righteousness sake in fulfilment of God's own redemptive purpose was to be the nature of their "lived witness". Their own freedom to serve God and give themselves faithfully and sacrificially in his service is in a real sense a continuation of the sacrificial ministry of Jesus. They embody in their corporate existence God's redemptive blessing and purpose. At the same time they became a challenge, a source of provocation and irritation to the authorities that saw themselves as the ultimate source of human salvation and warranting absolute devotion and loyalty. Hostility, tyranny and oppression are evoked from the authorities as a result, which make for a life of sacrifice on the part of the liberated community. This is to follow in the path of the ministry of the Lord.

The sacrificial existence that the liberated community is called to pursue in the face of hostility, persecution and oppression must not be divorced from the victory of which they have been assured and which

involves sharing in the rule of Christ in the kingdom. The vision of the multitude massed before the throne of God and in the presence of the lamb bearing and wearing tokens of their victory over the hostile persecuting powers and authorities with which they had to contend and shouting with acclamation and confidence -

... Salvation belongs to God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb (7<sup>10</sup> NIV).

witnesses to this. This vision opens a window on to the future blessings of the kingdom and at the same time speaks to the present experience of the faithful who are enduring persecution and oppression, at the hands of the authorities who display such arrogance of power and make such lofty claims so as to create confusion as to where ultimate victory lies and who decides the final outcome of the issues of the day. All those who pursue the life of faithfulness and self-sacrifice, the whole community of the faithful, some of whom are called upon even to die as they maintained their loyalty are assured that salvation, victory, belongs to their Lord. This is not an assurance given to martyrs alone, as some people have stated. The words that describe the multitude as those who have passed through great tribulation and who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of



the Lamb, 7<sup>14</sup>, do not specify martyrdom as such. And indeed if martyrs are implied, then the conclusion arrived at by Jose Comblin bears some consideration. He writes:

... According to the Book of Revelation, the martyrs represent the whole church. After all, the whole church, the totality of the people of God, finds itself in a state of persecution, and bears witness before the powers of the world. The church is a challenge to the world and its authorities. Thus it brings on itself all opposition to the truth, all the forces of death and life. Not all die literally, and not all suffer at the same hour. But because the whole church lives in an ongoing state of martyrdom, under sentence of death at the heart of the world, the martyrs are its most meaningful representatives.<sup>13</sup>

The victory and Salvation that are referred to in the acclamation have already been accomplished, through the supreme sacrifice of Christ crowned by his resurrection and exaltation. The ever present image of the lamb at the throne is a telling reminder of this, 7<sup>9,17</sup> cf 5<sup>6</sup>. What they have been promised has already

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<sup>13</sup>Jose Comblin, Cry of the Oppressed, Cry of Jesus - Meditations on Scripture and Contemporary Struggle, Trans. by R. Barr Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, p.48. Comblin probably bears witness to another side of the writers perspective that is often overlooked. The writer does give the impression that martyrs form a special category but on the other hand all Christians are seen as potential martyrs, at least, and in any case the ultimate blessings seem open to all Christians.

been accomplished and so their sacrifice anticipates the triumph they shall share in the New City. G.R. Beasley-Murray has observed that the cry of acclamation and confidence ascribing salvation and Victory to God, in 7<sup>10</sup>, is paralleled by shouts in 12<sup>10</sup> and 19<sup>1</sup> in which "salvation" is 'filled out' with such phrases as "the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ", (12<sup>10</sup>), and "glory and power", 19<sup>1</sup>. He then concluded:

...The salvation of God and the Lamb has been made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ, his exaltation to power and his coming again in victory of his kingdom, and therefore, it includes participation in the sovereignty which those events signify for Christ.<sup>14</sup>

In their suffering and struggle against the powers of oppression and injustice, the liberated community of God's People already share the pledge, the earnest, of the coming of the reign of God. This is how they need to understand the blessing of being 'a kingdom and priests' in terms of its present relevance and future significance.

The new dignity and honour granted to the New People of God, the liberated community, of being 'a kingdom and

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<sup>14</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible Commentary, Revelation, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1974, p. 146.



priests' through the redemption wrought by Jesus is, therefore, vital in the current struggle against unrighteousness, injustice and oppression. Clearly it means that they will not passively accept a dehumanized status imposed upon them or a life-diminishing and life-distorting definition of human existence put forward by the dominant powers in their own interest. It is a well-known phenomenon that in a situation of oppression and injustice such as that in which many who live in Third World countries and societies are acquainted with, people's humanity is undermined and their sense of human dignity and worth is reduced considerably, if at all they are left with any. Sometimes the whole development and arrangement of the order of affairs in the society are served by a religio-political and cultural ideological combination along with supportive structures and sanctions that ensure the diminution of human dignity and self-worth. Frequently in such situations those who are oppressed are forced to lead a peripheral existence and to become captives of a self-perception that makes them passively accept their oppressed and marginalized existence. This is so because they have come to accept their situation as in keeping with their defined status. Gregory Baum has pointed out that structures that exclude

such persons and make them feel inferior are internalized by them, so that they come to perceive of themselves as lacking in worth. The sense of self-worth that they possess is that which is derived from the definition and perception of the dominant culture.<sup>15</sup> The people of God, as God's liberated community in such a situation live with a different perception and vision of human dignity and possibilities. They participate in a new form of life, grounded in the blessings and promise of their redemption. They live with a heightened awareness of the oppressive forces and powers that are destructive of human dignity and stand in opposition to God's purpose for the true fulfilment of human life. This kind of situation is unacceptable as far as the liberated community is concerned and its own "lived witness" constitutes a challenge. It remains a sign and token of God's own liberating presence in the midst and in the face of strong and painful opposition by its own commitment to the God of its redemption, the God of righteousness and judgement.

Being a sign of liberation in terms of "lived witness" in the midst of oppression and in the face of

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<sup>15</sup>Gregory Baum, Theology and Society, Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, 1987, pp.273-274.



persecution and living in hope towards the future of total liberation in the promised fulness of God's kingdom, demand patience and faithful endurance on the part of the liberated community. This, as it has been already observed in a previous chapter, is a keynote concept of the Book of Revelation.<sup>19</sup>; 2<sup>10</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>  
<sup>16</sup> It is a patience not of passive resignation but of dynamic commitment and openness to the presence of God as living and active in their midst and working out his purpose in the historical situation despite the things that seem to hide God's face and deny his presence. As such, it is a patience that neither gives way to despair that sees no possibility of anything being done to challenge the powers or hope for a changed situation nor to over-confident Zealotism that conceives of the establishment of the kingdom of God as a purely human achievement. Both of these approaches are often features of the loss of patience which is invariably a threat and a source of temptation to the liberated community in a situation of oppression and injustice. There are in fact two cries or shouts in the Book of Revelation that are instructive in this regard, in that without addressing

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<sup>16</sup>See Chapter 2.

directly the matter of loss of patience, they nevertheless speak to it in a meaningful manner. Both cries do in fact need to be put alongside each other. The first cry is of the martyrs at the altar who ask of God how long before their cause be judged, and their suffering be vindicated. 6<sup>9-10</sup> It is the kind of cry that signals deep trial of patience and in some instances leads to despair. It is the kind of despair that at times ends up accepting the situation as inevitable, seeing no possibility of change and believing that they are fated to be sufferers of the kind as a matter of destiny. If even unwittingly, God is, therefore, seen as either impotent or on the side of the oppressor. It is a debilitating form of idolatry that results, for God is cast in the wrong image. It is significant that in the case of the Book of Revelation, the response to the cry is a counsel of patience, indicating that God's purpose was being worked out and more sacrifice on the part of the faithful would be required in the process. Loss of patience would be tragic. It would be a failure in faithfulness. God's response is one that is as challenging as it is reassuring.

The second cry comes in the following chapter in which the multitude is before the throne of God and in the presence of the Lamb, 7<sup>9-10</sup>. It is an affirmation of



profound significance, putting into proper perspective, the pretensions of the powers and forces of oppression, injustice and idolatry and at the same time sounding a note of eschatological reserve in relation to what can be accomplished by human action by the liberated community. Loss of patience over against this could lead one to try to do what only God can do; and so seek to pre-empt what he will do. This does not only end in frustration but it invariably leads to employment of the methods, approach and even the values of the powers of evil and oppression being challenged which is self-defeating to say the least. There is a patience that is required as the liberated community bears its witness to the accomplished work of Christ and the promised fulfilment of the establishment of the New City of God. This is a task in terms of the liberated community being a sign of the liberating presence and power of God in the midst and in the face of oppression, injustice and idolatry. Ernst Käsemann sums up the witness of the community in the following way -

...They fight, not to achieve power, but because they have to become like their Lord. Their wish is not to conquer the world, but to defend their Lord's claim to the earth, and they die in doing so. Their aim is not the overthrow of the

existing order but the testimony that he who makes all things new is on the way. They are nothing less than the Creator's deputies in a world given to apostasy, and so they have to deal with those who have set up their own name against their Lord, who do not regard power as a mandate, from the Creator, and who, therefore, misuse it. Thus far, Christians who accept the call to resistance are not simply witnesses to God's reign and tokens of the realization. They are at the same time representatives of a misused creation, the spokesman of all who are oppressed, the people of the desert who remind everyone that Egypt must be finally abandoned and that salvation is to be found only in the Exodus.<sup>17</sup>

There is another temptation that constitutes a threat to the People of God as God's liberated community. It is the temptation of lapsing into bondage while being under the illusion that it is exercising its freedom or enjoying freedom. This is so especially in relation to the way in which they stand to become entrapped in the dominant culture while thinking that they are exercising legitimate freedom in participating fully in its way of life. The writer of the Book of Revelation is particularly sensitive to this. He warned most strongly against it and was critical of it where it was in evidence. Attention has already been drawn to the warning and rebuke issued by the writer against groups

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<sup>17</sup>Ernst Käsemann, Jesus means Freedom, SCM 1969, p.140



and teachers who were obviously giving the impression to the church that they were free to participate in practices that had pagan associations and which at the same time, gave evidence of civic loyalty and social integration, without compromising their faith. They obviously claimed that they had the kind of insight into the divine nature and character and the nature of the world that allowed them to participate freely in the pagan practices and not endangering their own commitment. The letters to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira reflect the existence of such teachers in their midst, 2<sup>1-7</sup>, 12-17, 18-29. While the church at Ephesus rejected the teachers and their teachings quite vigorously which earned the commendation of the writer, the other two churches seemed to have been more lax in their attitude which in turn earned the warning and rebuke of the writer. The exercise of freedom to participate in the way the teachers seemed to have instructed was in the mind of the writer an illusory freedom. It simply meant actually forfeiting the authentic freedom to be faithful to their Lord which would be a sign of his liberating presence and power in the midst of an idolatrous setting. It meant losing their power of protest in the name of righteousness and

the distinctiveness of their calling and commitment to their God who is a God of righteousness and justice would have been undermined. It was essentially a compromise of the integrity of their faith which in effect meant a denial of the Lordship of Christ in the name of the exercise of a freedom.

There are further evidence and insight in the book which show the liberated community of God's people actually becoming entrapped or completely absorbed in the dominant culture while obviously believing it is enjoying freedom. The end result was total ineffectiveness in terms of the kind of witness that was called for in the situation. The churches at Sardis and Laodicea were severely criticized on this score, 3<sup>1-6</sup>, 14-20. These in fact are two churches that were without any redeeming or commendable features, though it is said that there were a few in the church at Sardis who maintained their faithfulness, 3<sup>4</sup>. These churches enjoyed prominence, power and prosperity. Significantly neither church seemed to have suffered any persecution or harassment, and it might well be that this was so because they had accommodated themselves so completely to their religious-political and social setting, they constituted no threat to the idolatrous and oppressive powers either because of



their indifference while they enjoyed the benefit of the way things were ordered or because of their open complicity with things as they were. In the process they were both self-deceived. It is said of the church at Sardis that it had obviously come to terms completely with its environment that although it retained the outward appearance of life, it was spiritually dead.<sup>18</sup> The church at Laodicea in its own self-perception saw itself as self-sufficient and comfortable, based on its prosperity and obvious acceptance within the community while being totally unmindful of its ineffectiveness and deficiencies as a community of God's People in its context. It is said that this church "is a prime example of harmful interaction between a church community and its environment."<sup>19</sup> These two churches betrayed and denied the cause and purpose for which they were called by their conformity and harmony with the order and ordering of things as they were. While believing that they were enjoying real freedom they allowed themselves to become entrapped in and by the status quo which stood contrary

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<sup>18</sup>R.H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation (New London Commentaries) Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1977, p.109.

<sup>19</sup>Donald Guthrie, The Relevance of John's Apocalypse, W.B. Eerdmans, 1987, p.85

to the claims and challenges of God in Christ. They actually gave up the costly freedom of being what they ought to be in the name of their lord for righteousness sake. They became party to the injustice and idolatry that were part of the dominant culture.

Those who have lived in Colonial and post-colonial societies of the Third World know from their history and legacies of that history the negative consequences that can come about when the church becomes captive and servant of the dominant culture. In some cases the relationship began from the very moment of colonization since missionaries accompanied the colonizers or appeared soon after their advent. There was invariably a convergence of religio-ideological orientation as far as the church and the governing authorities were concerned. They, therefore, shared a relationship of mutual support and collaboration. There was no serious challenge to the existing structures or way of life that operated to the distinct disadvantage of the majority of the people. Edwin Jones, writing against a Caribbean experience, makes the following comment:

...Under British Colonial tutelage in the West Indies there was generally a unity, a relationship of mutual assistance and co-operation between the established



church and the state. This relationship was symptomatic of their broadly similar ideological purpose. Both shared responsibility for many aspects of the definition and management of public policy; both had a similar conception of the sociology of development for the colonies so that virtually every cabal between church and state, the former would re-affirm that 'the aim of the church in the West Indies is to cooperate with the government' and help to maintain 'stability'.<sup>20</sup>

With variations here and there this seemed basically to have been the general pattern of the Colonial and post-colonial experience on a whole. Adrian Hastings, writing in terms of the African experience, makes the following comment:

... The pattern of Colonial Church-state relations varied considerably between British, French, Belgian and Portuguese possessions; and post-independence relations tend to be in part a continuation and in part a reversal of what went before. Certainly for the most part, there was some form of entente between colonial governments and mission churches; it was a link between white men, frequently of the same nationality...<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Edwin Jones, Coalition of the Oppressed, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies 1987, p. 83-84. The quote in what Jones had to say is attributed to the Bishop of the West Indies to Sir Henry Moore (Colonial Office documents, 318/434).

<sup>21</sup>Adrian Hastings, African Christianity, Seabury Press, New York, 1976, pp. 82-83

It is not that in some cases the church was entirely insensitive and indifferent to some of the needs of those who were victimized by unjust ordering of the society but it seemed either unaware of or unwilling to accept the fact that the actual ordering of society and its supportive structures were creating the needs. Welfare work was undertaken to make life more bearable within the existing situation and with the existing structures still operating with their designed bias against the victimized and disadvantaged.

The official policy of missionary groups or denominations other than the established churches was hardly different from that of the established church. Their missionaries were given instructions to avoid political involvement and concentrate primarily on evangelizing the natives. Challenge to the existing structures when it took place was for the most part, the activity of brave individuals who acted against the counsel and policy of the official body and who were invariably subjected to persecution at the hands of the governing authorities and to disciplinary measures on the part of the church authorities. The legacy and influence of the church-state co-operation have been longlasting in the given societies. There have also been new forms of



the co-operation where in some instances Governments have sought to court the favour of newer religious groups of a conservative fundamentalist nature, which are now enjoying popular acceptance in many Third World countries and which are often sponsored by overseas connections mainly in the United states of America. These groups are offered recognition and patronage once reserved for the mainly traditional denominations. They in turn see their recognition as support for the freedom of religion and defence of their christian cause. Interestingly, some well known repressive regimes have won support from some of these groups because they have granted such patronage and recognition and they are seen as bastions of christian freedom and defenders of the christian cause which include a strong stand against the threat of communism, real or apparent. This kind of mutual co-operation and religio-ideological convergence have often created an alliance of church and governing authorities against the disadvantaged and oppressed.

Conformity of the church to the dominant culture that leads to the loss of the distinctive challenge of church to the status quo means a betrayal of the church's calling to be God's liberated community, which involves being a sign of God's liberating presence and power in

the world. The challenge and the threat of the lived witness of the People of God, as God's liberated community, to pretentious human power and idolatrous and unjust dominant culture are compromised when under the illusion of enjoying freedom the church becomes captive of the dominant culture through conformity. The Book of Revelation is very critical of this and challenges the church to enduring faithfulness to its lord, to be willing to suffer for righteousness sake as God's liberated community in the face of oppression, injustice and idolatry.

#### A PROPHETIC COMMUNITY

Another way in which the church as the People of God appears in the Book is as a prophetic community. Prophecy and its implications as it is represented by the book itself which is actually designated as prophecy by the writer has already been looked at in a previous chapter. Yet, it is appropriate to note in this chapter that the writer saw the prophetic role as not confined to himself as an individual or to specifically defined groups in the church, but that there is a sense in which the whole church as the people of God also constituted a prophetic community. Christopher Rowland, commenting on



the instruction given to the writer to eat the scroll, 10<sup>8-11</sup>, an instruction reminiscent of that given to the prophet Ezekiel, Ezek. 3<sup>1ff</sup>, and the accompanying command that he should prophesy over many peoples and nations and tongues and kings, pointed out that this prophetic task given to the writer cannot be separated from the task of the church on the whole. He sees the writer as intending his readers with whom he shares solidarity in tribulation to share with him the prophetic task of witness before the world. This relationship is considered to be stated explicitly in 19<sup>10</sup>. Here the writer is identified with the fellow-members of the church who are said to hold the testimony of Jesus. And those who hold the testimony of Jesus are further said to have the spirit of prophecy. Clearly the prophet's own mandate to prophesy is not considered to be his alone, but was also that of the whole church. Rowland then makes a further link by seeing the "two witnesses in Chapter Eleven who are given the task to prophesy in a situation which from all appearance was dominated by the powers of the world and who succeeded for a while but were later killed and then were raised, as ideal witnesses symbolizing the church on a whole".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven SPCK, London 1982, pp.428-430.

It is worthwhile looking a little closer at the significance of the two witnesses, and the context in which they appear for indeed the challenge and assurance of the church's prophetic role seem to be in focus at this point, despite disagreements about the identity of the witnesses amongst interpreters and commentators. Attempts have been made to link the two witnesses to figures in the early Church such as Stephen and James or Peter and Paul. The two witnesses were martyred and these early church figures have reportedly suffered the same fate, Stephen's and James' martyrdom is reported in the Acts of the Apostles and that of Peter and Paul in early christian tradition. The two witnesses have also been considered to be referring to two eschatological prophetic figures who would appear near the end time and their experience of suffering and martyrdom would be part of the eschatological wars. These attempts at identifying the witness do not seem to fit in with the general characteristics of the writer's style and method that are represented in the passage.

) The writer's use of symbolic language and his resort to Old Testament imagery in the passage are in line with things that he has already said and hinted at and these point in a different direction from the



suggestions to which reference has been made. The two witnesses as they appear seem quite definitely to be reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, Ex. 7<sup>17</sup>; I Kings 17<sup>1</sup> cf 1 Kings 18<sup>36-38</sup>; 2 Kings 1<sup>10-11</sup>. They are two Old Testament witnesses and are often remembered in later thinking and traditions for their courage and faithfulness. At the same time the witnesses are associated with symbols which also bring to mind Zechariah 4<sup>11</sup>. In that passage, there is reference to two olive trees and a lampstand with its seven lights. The two olive trees are said to refer to Zerubbabel, the anointed King and Joshua the anointed Priest. These two, therefore, combined royalty and priesthood in the service of God. It is hard to resist the idea that the writer of the Book of Revelation was in his own characteristic manner, alluding to the church when he identified the witnesses with such imagery, for already he had spoken of the church in terms of a kingdom and priests and lampstands elsewhere, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 1<sup>12</sup>. The two prophetic figures are, therefore, representative of what the church should be in its faithfulness in carrying out its prophetic task. In truth then, the writer does see his prophetic role signified by his having received the

little scroll to eat and digest and the command to prophesy to the world as not his alone but one to be shared the whole church community.<sup>23</sup>

Eduard Schweizer has noted that basically the church on a whole as portrayed in the Book of Revelation seemed to have been without a hierarchy. All the members were included in the promised blessings of the kingdom and Priesthood, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>. They were all designated saints and servants, 5<sup>8</sup>; 7<sup>3</sup>. If there was any specialized ministry in the Church it seemed to have been that of prophecy. Schweizer, however, warns that no hasty judgement should be made even with this, but it should be investigated whether in fact the writer did not consider all the members of the church prophets. His own conclusion is that alongside the development of special groups of prophets, all the members were at least seen to

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<sup>23</sup>A. Satake states explicitly that the prophets are the only office bearers in the Church or churches pictured in the Book. - [Die Gemeindeordnung in der Johannes - apokalypse, Neukirchen 1966] see also G. Bornkamm who is of a similar opinion, TDNT VI p. 669. Both of these writers are cited by David Hill who does not disagree with their conclusions but is more guarded bearing in mind that the evidence does not allow for decisive and absolutely confident expression as for example Satake makes - in "Prophecy and Prophets in Revelation, New Testament Studies, 18, 1971-72 pp. 406ff.



be potentially prophets.<sup>24</sup> In the Book of Revelation, therefore, there were not only individual prophets and possibly groups of prophets, but the whole church community seemed to have been regarded as a prophetic community.

There is no illusion about the challenge, risk and danger that the prophetic task of the church is seen to entail. The more effective the task is in its pursuit it is the more it will eventually earn for itself persecution from the powers-that-be that maintain and benefit from the oppression and injustice of the context in which the prophetic task is actually carried out. This was the experience of the two witnesses, who formed the model of the prophetic task the church was expected to carry out, 11<sup>3ff</sup>. They succeeded for a while but were eventually cut down. Christopher Rowland notes:

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<sup>24</sup>E. Schweizer, Church Order in the New Testament, SCM 1961, p.134. In a footnote (491) Schweizer refers to two passages which he considers significant in the portrayal of the Church as prophetic. They are 16<sup>6</sup> and 18<sup>24</sup>. In these passages the words "the blood of the prophets and the saints" appear. He thinks that "prophets" and "saints" are synonymous and explanatory of each other and there is no doubt that "saints" refer to all the members of the church. He further compares the words with some other words found in 17<sup>6</sup>, "the blood of martyrs and saints" and think that they are of the same construction and no possible distinction can be made between saints and martyrs. This, therefore, reinforces the conviction that saints and prophets in the other passages are identical.

That prophetic witness took place in a setting opposed to God and ends in martyrdom and death...<sup>25</sup>

The vindication of the church that remains faithful in the pursuit of the prophetic task is assured. The two witnesses who were slain were vindicated after a period, 11<sup>11</sup>. Again it is a reminder that in the circumstances the victim is eventually the victor in reality. The puzzling vision of the measurement of the temple in the city seems to be underscoring just this fact - 11<sup>1ff</sup>. There are some who seek to interpret the Temple literally and the city as the City of Jerusalem. It does not seem, however, as if a literal interpretation is the most reasonable one. The other features in the passage are seen to be best interpreted symbolically, for example the two witnesses, and it would seem as if the Temple should also be interpreted along the same line. The Temple also might well have been destroyed at the time, bearing in mind that a Domitianic date has been accepted as still the most likely date for the writing of the book. What seems to be true is that the Temple was the source or inspiration of the imagery but not what was actually being portrayed there and then. The writer was asked to

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<sup>25</sup>Christopher Rowland, Radical Christianity, Polity Press, 1988, p.79.



measure a limited area which demarcated a region where there were evidence and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God and where by divine enabling the prophetic community was helped to maintain its testimony. This was in a situation where everywhere else seemed to have been under the control of the powers of evil that were opposed to the purpose of God and were asserting themselves threateningly and crudely, both in the religious and political spheres. The prophetic community by maintaining the testimony of Jesus remains as tangible evidence of an unconquered locus of divine activity in the world and servants of that activity that anticipate the total victory and vindication of the divine purpose that will be manifested in the New Age. The forces of evil for all their appearance of dominance have the prophetic community to contend with and were not able to dominate the prophetic community despite their show of force and power and the dominance they seem to display otherwise. The People of God as a prophetic community is seen by the writer as crucial to the divine purpose in terms of its witness and challenge of protest and resistance in the context of oppression, injustice and idolatry.

Interestingly, there have been differences of opinion in recent and current debate about the role of

the church as it relates to the prophetic task. This does not have to do with the traditional debate as to whether or not the church should have anything to do with the issues and realities of a socio-political nature within its context. The prophetic task is accepted and regarded as important but the key question is, how should the church relate to such a task or ministry? Should the church itself as a corporate body pursue the task or should individual members of the church, inspired and supported by the church be the ones to do so? Robin Gill, for example, has argued that whereas the church has a place for and quite definitely needs prophets within its membership, the church itself should not as a rule perform the prophetic role. Individual prophets with the support and encouragement of the church should carry out the task where it becomes needed and necessary. Gill sees the task of the church more in the light of a pastoral nature committed to reconciliation. This is over against the prophetic task which he sees must of necessity be partisan. It must take sides in its analyses and understanding of society and interpretation of the Word of God. This makes the prophetic role basically divisive. Gill does not rule out altogether the possibility or even necessity of the church engaging



in prophetic ministry but thinks that this should be only in the most extreme circumstances when the issue of oppression and injustice is undeniable and overwhelming. Of course Gill's attitude to and perspective on the role of the Church in this regard are particularly influenced by his own commitment to the traditional sociological categorisation of "Church" and "sect". For him church is restricted to the more inclusive religious group whose boundaries are more contiguous with that of the social community itself. As such then the Church is so bound up with the community and so influenced by the community as the community is itself also influenced by it that the confrontational and challenging nature of the prophetic role is considered inappropriate as a rule. Gill's technical use of the term "church" from the sociological perspective is not one that many would consider relevant in terms of the New testament perspective and it is one that is challenged by the very needs and issues that the Church is challenged to address in such communities that demand the prophetic ministry to be undertaken by the People of God.<sup>26</sup> A position that comes near to this but is at the same time different is that set forth by Peter Hinchcliff. He sees the church as engaging in prophetic

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<sup>26</sup>Robin Gill, Prophecy and Praxis, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 1981, p.42.

criticism but leaving individuals to become engaged in direct activity of the social transformation and reform frequently associated with prophetic ministry.<sup>27</sup> Here the church's prophetic role is limited but extended beyond where Gill sees it to be generally.

On the other hand there are those who see the church corporately in its own right embodying a prophetic ministry and carrying it out in all its dimensions. Manas Buthelezi, speaking of the Church as a "Prophetic Sign" says of it:

... As a steward and custodian of God's revealed truth, the church is a sign that guarantees that God will continue to speak to his people. It is a sign of assurance that someone will stand up and say "Thus says the Lord". The preaching of God's word is no longer dependent on an isolated charismatic seer or prophet since the whole community grounded in Christ is an authentic sign of abiding prophecy.<sup>28</sup>

In spelling out the prophetic ministry of the church in greater detail and more concretely, Buthelezi sees it in terms of a two-fold task. It consists of "liberating the truth" and "living for others".<sup>29</sup> This it would seem,

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<sup>27</sup>Peter Hinchcliff, Holiness and Politics, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1983, p.141.

<sup>28</sup>"The Church as a Prophetic Sign" in Church Kingdom World, Gennadios Limouris (Ed), WCC Publication, Geneva, p.140.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 139-144.



goes beyond the distinction made by Hinchcliff in incorporating both proclamation and participatory action in solidarity with the oppressed and needy. Rex Ambler is in no doubt about the church's prophetic role either. He writes:

... Christianity can and should be embodied in a prophetic community accepting its minority role but relating its specific religious practice to a wider secular practice for the transformation of society.<sup>30</sup>

In Third World liberation theologies the prophetic role of the church is for the most part accepted as critical for the ministry of the church. It is expected that this role should be assumed and pursued courageously and consistently. Where this role is not being performed by the church or not being performed as it is perceived that it should be, the church is sharply criticized for it. In this respect the "Kairos Document" is sharply critical of what it refers to as State Theology and Church Theology, in South Africa and its criticisms are of the kind that are echoed elsewhere in the Third World. State Theology is that which by selective use of the Scripture it seeks to bolster and legitimize the

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<sup>30</sup>Agenda for Prophets: Towards a Political Theological for Britain, Bowerdian Press, London, 1988, p. 115.

authority and actions of the state uncritically even in the face of the state acting against the interest of the people in being oppressive and unjust. The ideology of national interest and commitment to law and order become the theology of the state without corresponding commitment to genuine human rights and justice.<sup>31</sup> Church Theology does not stake a preferential option for the oppressed as it ought. It is committed to reconciliation as a first priority and not sufficiently mindful of the real demand for justice in situations of oppression. It operates on the basis that the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and the dependent, the oppressor and the oppressed can be reconciled without any

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<sup>31</sup>PCR Information, Reports and Background Papers, Challenge to the Church, A Theological comment on the political Crisis in South Africa, The Kairos Document and Commentaries, WCC Publications, 1985, Chapters 2 and 3.

The Kairos document has been followed up with another document drawn from a newer and more representative background of Third World experience entitled, The Road to Damascus. In this letter the challenge has been taken to those Churches that have been perceived as supporting oppressive political regimes and unjust socio-economic structural arrangement that impoverish the majority of the people. They have been charged with heresy and idolatry and challenged to see that such positions are utterly untenable. In this respect the prophetic challenge is more concentrated on the Church itself and the Church not now seeking to be neutral but which is considered confessedly on the wrong side.



fundamental change at the structural level and order of things in the society. The document declares that what is needed is a 'a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral and above all, prophetic'. The prophetic is what it is because it speaks to the particular circumstances of the crisis it faces and "does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand."<sup>32</sup> Leonardo Boff writing out of the Latin American experience, is also convinced of the importance of the church's prophetic role while he is critical of the absence of the role in the formal and official response of the church to and in the Latin American situation. he welcomes the new Base Ecclesial communities which he thinks are giving much welcomed attention to the prophetic role. He sees these communities as conscious of the fact that they cannot be concerned with their internal life alone, if misery and exploitation are more than a sociological fact. They are interpreted by him as social sin. He then concludes:

... Therefore, the community, in its reflection, cannot restrict itself to what is specifically Christian, that is, to the reflection of faith, charity, grace, sin, marriage, the sacraments or

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid, p. 23.

the mystery of Jesus Christ. These are unavoidable subjects but alone are not enough. Nor can it limit self to the examination of communitarian concerns such as self-help, health, participation in community efforts, liturgy and the like.

The group must arrive at the reflection upon social and structural problems that profoundly affect the community, such as justice, exploitation, poverty, marginalization, participation, freedom of speech, of action and of choice. This hits reality where it counts, where transformation can begin that improves not only community but also the surrounding world, preparing it for even grater transformation.<sup>33</sup>

The church's prophetic role is a necessity and that is not simply individual members of the church encouraged in the role by the church, but the church itself as a community becoming engaged in the role. The pastoral role of the church is at the same time not denied, but it is certainly not set over against the prophetic role nor emphasised at the expense of the prophetic.

It is in order to suggest that this is at last hinted at or anticipated in The Book of Revelation. It is a level of meaning it points to even if it is not spelt out fully in word or action in the actual situation of the writer and his readers. This is seen from the way

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<sup>33</sup>Leonardo Boff, Church, Charisma and Power, Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church, SCM London, 1985, p.135-136.



the writer perceives and portrays the Church as the People of God. We have seen that the writer sees the People of God as God's liberated community sharing the designation of 'a kingdom and Priests', 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 20<sup>6</sup>. The People of God are also seen to be a prophetic community, sharing the prophetic task of the writer and possibly of other individuals and groups within the church. There seems to be no tension perceived between the priestly and prophetic tasks. They are integrated in the commitment the church is expected to pursue in response to the situation in which it found itself. We have already noted that in his own understanding of the priestly role, the writer expected the church to be the community through which the redemptive power and presence of God would be manifested, by its lived witness. This witness was to be according to the paradigm that the sacrificial ministry of Jesus constituted. In maintaining the 'testimony of Jesus' one of the things that was expected of the Church was that it would endure suffering, persecution and even martyrdom for righteousness sake in fulfilment of God's redemptive purpose. This is of the nature of the sacrificial and priestly ministry of Jesus himself. This would be an expression of the single and undivided testimony and

commitment of the church which at the same time was expected to proclaim the righteousness and justice of God, protest and challenge injustice and oppression and resist and expose the pretensions and idolatry of the powers-that-be. It was influenced by a vision of God's purpose and will, a prophetic consciousness and sensitivity that put present realities into proper perspective and witness to alternative possibilities that bring such realities under critical judgement. It is also very important to note that despite the very dramatic and uncompromising manner in which the expression of God's wrath in judgement is portrayed and stated in the book, judgement and mercy are not antithetical. Judgement is severe but nonetheless meant to evoke repentance and the severity cannot be divorced from the hardening of the heart which the rebellious and unrepentant display, something which is actually lamented in the book, 9<sup>20,21</sup>; 16<sup>9-11</sup>. The church community itself is subject to very serious criticisms and faces the threat of judgement if it does not respond with repentance. The seven messages or letters to the seven churches demonstrate this very clearly and further confirm that judgement and mercy are not presented as antithetical along lines that are conceived and stated by



many who make a rigid distinction between a prophetic and priestly or pastoral ministry. The liberated community, sharing the blessing and designation of 'a kingdom and priests', is at one and the same time portrayed as and expected to be a prophetic community. And in the perception of the book the radical distinction that is sometimes made between the two forms of ministry, the Priestly or Pastoral and the Prophetic, is not in evidence. For example, this distinction appears in Gill's discussion and he expressly indicated his preference for the priestly model over the prophet as far as the Church is concerned. The writer in his own way presents them as two aspects of a single ministry and witness, each aspect actually needing the other and showing the importance of the other in the response of challenge, resistance and critique.

#### The Community of the Poor and Powerless

There is another aspect of the life, nature and character of the church as the People of God, represented in the Book that deserves some mention and attention. It is that the church is the Church of the Poor and Powerless. The evidence for this is direct, indirect and cumulative. It comes through as the circumstances and conditions to which the people were subjected are

addressed and responded to, that is as their own experience is reflected on in the light of the purpose of God. The circumstance and conditions were oppressive. They were experienced as such by those who were put at a disadvantage and marginalized by them. We have already seen that it was a situation in which there were the arrogance of power in full display and the imposition of grave economic pressures which resulted in a gap between the majority economically deprived and economically well-off whose lavish life-style is reflected in the list of things they traded in, with slaves coming at the bottom of the list. This showed how little value was put on human life of that class in relation to the luxury items of jewels and precious stones, 13<sup>1ff</sup>; 18<sup>1</sup><sub>1ff</sub>. Further economic sanctions were threatened and no doubt put in place against those who resisted the religio-political demands that would have resulted in serious compromise of the integrity of their Christian faith and commitment - 13<sup>6,7</sup>. And grave economic hardship especially for the poor is implied by both the third and fourth horses and their riders, of the seals.<sup>6</sup><sup>5-8</sup> The persons to whom the book was written were those who it seemed were left without rights and privileges upon which they could presume because of how things were ordered against them,



the total ethos - law, culture, social stratification, economic system. And at the same time they stood to be made scape goats for failures and problems in the system that worked so much to their disadvantage. This was how the people experienced and understood their existence whether there was formal and official persecution or not.

The injustice of what they were experiencing was a challenge which stirred a deep longing in them for change and for vindication of their cause. This comes out for example in the cry of the martyrs unto God, asking how long before justice be done and judgement be executed by the oppressors, 6<sup>9,10</sup>. The oppression and injustice that the people were experiencing were seen as a contradiction of the purpose of God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. He is a God of Redemption, justice and righteousness. He is Just and True, 15<sup>3ff</sup>; 16<sup>5-7</sup>; 19<sup>2</sup>. He is, therefore, a God who is known to vindicate the cause of those whose human dignity and whose hope were constantly undermined by the structures and systems of human institutions and power. In the light of this the people themselves were expected to place their trust and hope in God, to be faithful witnesses to his righteousness and justice which involved challenge and resistance to oppressive powers, willingness to suffer

for righteousness with an alternative vision of human possibilities under God shown forth in their lived witness and commitment to the kingdom of God inaugurated and to be fulfilled in the City of God, 1<sup>9</sup>; 2<sup>3,10</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>.

If the circumstances and experiences of the church point to the fact that the church was a church of the Poor and Powerless, it is also true that there are hints that this was how the church in its faithfulness was expected to be as far as the witness of the book is concerned. In an examination of the seven messages or letters that were sent to the seven churches, certain significant things emerge which seem to be more than coincidental and which would strengthen the conviction that the church was expected to be the Church of the Poor and Powerless in the situation. Attention has already been drawn to the fact that the two churches which seemed to have attracted to themselves the sternest strictures were Sardis and Laodicea, 3<sup>1-6,14-21</sup>. These two churches from all appearances seemed to have fitted in quite well with the status quo and benefitted very well from their complicity. In a real sense they became part of the structure of domination and supporters of the dominant culture. Sardis gained prominence and Laodicea was proud



of its prosperity. They both seemed to have suffered no persecution. They enjoyed security and protection, from the otherwise oppressive and unjust system. Clearly it means that they did not share solidarity with the oppressed and suffering ones. The rebuke and reprimand of these churches were without any accompanying word of commendation not as it was with the case of the other churches. They were simply typical of churches that had lost their sense of direction and purpose in their embrace of power and privilege in an unjust and oppressive situation and become ineffective in terms of articulate witness.

On the other hand, the church at Smyrna and the Church at Philadelphia are churches that receive the most favourable comments, 2<sup>8-10</sup> ; 3<sup>7-13</sup>. These churches are spoken of being poor and powerless. The Church at Smyrna is said to be known to be poor, that is in terms of the dominant culture and the way things were ordered. They were not only poor but oppressed. They suffered persecution. The only named martyr is associated with this Church, 2<sup>9,10,13</sup> The church at Philadelphia is described as powerless, of little strength, and subject to persecution, 3<sup>8ff</sup>. The local Jewish population in the case of both of the churches seemed to have been party to

the persecution. What is significant is that these two churches stand in direct contrast to the other two churches and they received approval over against the reprimand and rebuke of the other two. They seemed in their poverty and powerlessness, their faithfulness and commitment to have challenged and resisted the oppressive and unjust powers and systems ranged against them and demonstrated the willingness to suffer for righteousness sake.

There is at the same time no indication that the favourable judgement made of these two churches was at any time sacralizing poverty and the disadvantages that go with it for their own sake. It was not institutionalizing the marginalization caused by injustice, in the form of a church. The note of protest and critique that runs throughout the book in relation to the state of affairs that the people were up against is too strong for any conclusions of the kind to be arrived at. It is an acknowledgement that indeed the churches were made up of those who were victims of the unjust and oppressive state of affairs maintained in the interest of the imperial power and their local collaborators and that they had rejected any opportunity to become aligned with such oppressive forces at the expense of their commitment



to the God of righteousness and justice. They trusted God in Christ for their liberation and vindication, already accomplished and to be consummated in the Day of the fulfilment of the kingdom in the New City of the New Age, 11<sup>15</sup>; 12<sup>10-11</sup>; 15<sup>2</sup>; 17<sup>14</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>. They would, therefore, neither accept that they were fated as a class or group to be oppressed and marginalized in the manner that it was imposed upon them nor would they accept the definition of reality and possibilities of life that the managers of culture proffered and enforced as normative and absolute. They were committed to an alternative vision of the kingdom of God. Their very existence became a sign of God's liberating and redemptive action in the face of the powers of the world. This meant that their "lived witness" and commitment, however, humble and seemingly weak, pointed to the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God. The hope and vision of the kingdom they shared inspired and motivated them to take a stand against oppression, injustice and idolatry and share solidarity in the struggle against them. The prophetic nature of the Church in terms of its very being is demonstrated and reinforced by the Church being the Church of the poor. And in a very oppressive situation in face of overwhelming power to crush any opposition the

prophetic challenge of the Church as the Church of the poor is one that must be given the highest priority and one that defies the destructive and countervailing actions and strategies of the oppression. Indeed in many instances it is the only way the Church can be prophetic but it is by no means an ineffective way. The reaction of the powers in the Book of Revelation indicates this and so has the experience of the Church throughout history whenever it has been willing to become the Church of the Poor. This is something that the Church in current Third World situations of oppression and injustice are being called to note. Indeed the Church throughout the world is being challenged to recognise that the experience and oppression and injustice also has worldwide implications.

If the emphasis in the book in terms of the church's place in the society was that the church ought to have no pretensions to worldly power either in competition or alliance with the powers-that-be, it seems also that the understanding of the church in terms of its own internal structure was that it was seen to have no hierarchy or pattern of domination in the exercise of discipline and expression of worship and witness. Of course there is no certain knowledge as to what exactly



the internal constitution of the church was like. One of the main reasons for this is that it never became a matter of focal interest for the writer. It is in order, however, to speculate that there must have been some form of leadership structure in the church. The office and role of the prophet seemed to have been one that was recognized, as Eduard Schweizer has suggested.<sup>34</sup> The status of the writer himself is a matter of some speculation. He must have wielded some influence. At least he was a prophetic figure and so it might well have been that his influence was of a prophetic nature, whether he was an itinerant or more settled prophet. The identity of the angel of the church to whom the letters of the churches were addressed, is one that has occasioned much difference of opinion, 1<sup>20,21</sup>; 2<sup>1,8,12,18</sup>; 3<sup>1,7,14</sup>. The identity has been variously said to be that of the Bishop, Elder, Pastor or Guardian Angel of the church. Quite apart from the fact, however, that the matter remains unresolved, the fact is that in the end it was the whole church that was addressed by the letters and this is of importance in relation to what is here being considered. It seems that whatever leadership

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<sup>34</sup>Eduard Schweizer, Church Order in the new Testament, 3rd. Impression, 1979 SCM London

structure existed in the church then it never afforded or facilitated domination by any individual or group of individuals so that the pattern of solidarity in struggle and commitment and the participatory model of service were ever obscured or undermined. The authority of the offices of Prophet, Priests and a kingdom were to be exercised by all the members, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 11<sup>1ff</sup>; 19<sup>10</sup>.

Jon Sobrino writing of the church of the Poor from the perspective of the Theology of liberation has observed the following: -

... In the church of the Poor, the age old barriers between hierarchy and faithful, priest and workers, peasant and intellectual have been broken down... In this solidarity there is a sharing of the word... There is a yearning for the sharing of liberation and of the various struggles that lead to liberation.<sup>35</sup>

This picture of the Church of the Poor is reflected in the Base Ecclesial Communities that have sprung up in Latin and Central America and have also been gaining popularity beyond these areas. It must be granted that Sobrino and many others like him speak especially against a Roman Catholic background with that church's official

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<sup>35</sup>Jon Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, Orbis, Maryknoll New York 1984, p.103.



and formal structure and constitution being of a centralized and hierarchial nature. The Ecclesial Base Communities are seen in relation to this official and formal structure. Nevertheless, what is said also bears relevance to other church groups which in theory may express belief in a structure of a "people-participatory" nature and so without leadership structures and patterns of domination but in practice it is otherwise. Boff points to what he regards as inconsistency in the official church's policy. The church cries out against the violation of human rights in the civil order from time to time but there remains a gap between what the church says and what it does in the ordering of its own life. He cites instances where-by the concentration of power in the hands of chosen individuals and the exercise of authority through its hierarchy the church becomes guilty of the violation of human rights in relation to its own members. The church reflects in its own internal life the characteristics of the world's way of thinking and acting.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Leonardo Boff, Church, Charism and Power, Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church, SCM 1985, see especially his discussion in Chapters 4 and 5. Boff himself had personal experience of the Church's disciplinary approach to which he refers.

It is interesting to note that the church at Ephesus might very well have shown signs of inconsistency of the kind referred to in the above paragraph. Whereas it is praised for its faithfulness in defending the faith against false teachers who were operating within its membership, it was also rebuked for having lost its "first love", 2<sup>4</sup>. Opinions differ as to what losing its "first love" really means. There are those who believe it is referring to waning of enthusiasm that was very much in evidence at the beginning of their christian experience. G. Eldon Ladd says it was the weakening of the "the fervour of their first christian experience."<sup>37</sup> The fact is, however, that there is no indication of slackening of zeal and fervour which the church obviously showed in its continued fight against the false teachers. The real problem seems to be that the zeal and fervour were expressed in a manner against their opponents within the membership that was excessive and lacking in love. G.B. Caird has written:

They had set out to be defenders of the faith, arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage only to

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<sup>37</sup>G. Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1978, p. 39



discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality, without which all others are worthless...<sup>38</sup>

It seems reasonable to believe that in the process of exercising authority and discipline the Church on a whole behaved in a way that in principle smacked of the way the powers-that-be were acting in the exercise of their authority. The excessive display of authority and use of power within the membership against those who were being challenged were out of character with what was expected from the People of God. The threat was that if the Church had not repented, its lampstand would have been removed from its place, 2<sup>5</sup>. The abuse of power and authority careless of people's humanity was an ultimate denial of the true character of the church. It will be no more worthy to be regarded as the Church. The power of love in service and faith shared by the whole believing community primarily and fundamentally is more in keeping with the nature of the church that knows the redemptive power of 'the lion of Judah of the House of David' who appears at the centre of the throne as a lamb bearing marks of having been slain, 5<sup>5,6</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup>G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black, London 1966, p.31

Jurgen Moltmann writing generally of the Church has referred to what he suggestively and insightfully calls the Church of the Beatitudes. Of this Church he says:

In poverty with Jesus they are happy and in happiness with Jesus they become poor. In endurance with him they are comforted and in this comforting, they can go on enduring. In the gentleness of their self-offering they possess the earth and in this certainty they will prepare the way for a friendly world. In this spirit they will hunger and thirst after righteousness and, therefore, be persecuted. Amid their hunger and persecutions they will have their fill ...<sup>39</sup>

This perception of the Church as the Church of the Beatitudes comes near to the perception of the church as the Church of the Poor. There are even those who would believe that the terms could be used interchangeably or synonymously without any distortion of the fundamental concept in either case.<sup>40</sup> When the witness of the Book of Revelation is taken into consideration in its totality there seems to be much to suggest that the features of

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<sup>39</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, The Open Church, SCM London 1978, p.94

<sup>40</sup>It is of interest to note that in his magisterial commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Good News According to Matthew, trans. by David E. Green, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1975), Eduard Schweizer makes a direct connection 'between the Beatitudes and the Poor'. He heads up the section on the Beatitudes, "God's Partiality Toward the Poor", pp. 79-98.



the Beatitudes that represent a convergence of the picture of the Church of the Beatitudes with that of the Church of the poor are in evidence in the Book.<sup>41</sup> Attention has already been drawn to the special favour that the Churches that were poor and powerless found, 2<sup>8-11</sup>; 3<sup>7-13</sup>. Assurance is given to those who mourn that they shall be comforted. God shall wipe away their tears, 7<sup>17</sup>; 21<sup>4</sup>. A deep longing and hungering for the triumph of righteousness and the vindication of justice is echoed from time to time, exemplified in the cry of the saints at the Altar, 6<sup>9-10</sup> cf 21<sup>6</sup>. The willingness to be committed to faithful endurance of persecution and suffering in loyalty and obedience to God in the pursuit of his righteous will and purpose is encouraged throughout. Suffering for righteousness sake is a key requirement and expectation of the Christians and promise of sharing in the kingdom of God is also associated with this, 2<sup>10</sup>; 3<sup>12,21</sup>; 7<sup>9-17</sup>; cf. 13<sup>9,10</sup>; 14<sup>1-5</sup>. The Beatitudes breathe a strong sense of the presence of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom which stands in radical contrast with the kingdom of the world where joy is found

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<sup>41</sup>See G.B. Caird who admits to reflections of the Beatitudes, especially in 21<sup>1-6</sup>. (A Commentary on The Revelation of St. John the Divine, A & C Black Lond., 1966.

in the abuse of power and at the expense of the disadvantaged and oppressed. Injustice and the curtailment of human hope for the benefit of other interests and dominant groups are stark realities of the kingdom of the world. The experience of the blessings of the kingdom, joy, peace, freedom and righteousness are the promise of the Beatitudes to the powerless, oppressed, sorrowing, those who hunger after righteousness and those who suffer for righteousness sake, The vision, hope and promise of the kingdom are shared very deeply in the Book of Revelation. It is a source of encouragement to the harried, oppressed People of God who are reminded that the kingdom has already dawned by the redemptive work accomplished by God in Christ and will be fully consummated in the fulfilment of the New Age, 11<sup>15</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>. In the meantime they witness to the kingdom in word and deed and at the same time wait with patient endurance for its fulfilment. This church which is the community of the Poor and which is also a community of the Beatitudes does find a place of significance in the witness of the Book. And the Church as such remains a sign of God's liberating power and presence in the world.

The Church in Book of Revelation, seen from the perspective set forth, raises questions against the



charge sometimes made that the Book represents and encourages a retreat from the social-ethical dimension.<sup>42</sup> Surely, the theological perspective of the Book in general and its portrayal of the church in particular are not without very serious socio-political implications, as hopefully the discussion has indicated. The life and witness of the People of God were of a nature that reflected great concern for and commitment to righteousness and justice which exposed the injustice and corruption of the powers of the world that overreached themselves and the ruin they attract to themselves in terms of the judgement of God. The overarching view of the kingdom of God which is associated with the Book is one which sees the purpose of God's kingdom as being worked out in the present. It is a purpose to which the church must witness and show signs of in its own commitment to righteousness, justice, peace freedom under the Sovereignty of God. This commitment will inevitably bring it into conflict with the powers of the kingdom of the world but the Church must be prepared to suffer for

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<sup>42</sup>J.T. Sanders, Ethics in the New Testament, SCM London, 1975, pp. 112-115. Sanders has been very scathing in his criticism of the Book in this regard and even queries its place in the New Testament as a result. His view is both an exaggeration and misrepresentation to say the least.

righteousness sake which is part of the witness to God's liberating power and a participation in sacrifice of Christ which has already assured victory over the powers. And yet the church waits with patience and hope for the fulfilment of the kingdom, the city of God. This makes for a revolutionary presence of the Church which puts it on the side of the poor, powerless, oppressed, persecuted for righteousness sake and the dispossessed.



## CHAPTER 5

### HOPE - THE LIBERATIVE FACTOR

When everything is taken into consideration - the book in its context and the realities and issues that confronted and challenged its readers; the response and engagement it represents; the prophetic consciousness and imperative it displays and the self-understanding of the church as the People of God it portrays - hope is set forth in the book as the decisive liberative factor and force in and for the experience of the oppressed in their struggle. This is the significant message of the book and the important contribution it has to make to Christian understanding of engagement in struggle and solidarity against oppression and injustice. And by the very nature of the hope involved, the oppressors and their allies, if they are prepared to respond appropriately to the eschatological challenge and present possibilities it represents, it can be for them also a liberative factor. This too is an important aspect of the message of the book. Even when it seems to be at its

severest in outlining the judgement the rebellious powers and their followers bring upon themselves, it indicates that the judgement is to the end of evoking repentance and laments implicitly when the repentance is not forthcoming - 9<sup>20,21</sup>; 16<sup>9,11</sup>; cf 11<sup>13</sup>; 14<sup>7</sup>.

Before proceeding further, on the matter of the book's message of hope, there is the factor of the non-appearance of the word "hope" itself in the book that ought to be admitted and dealt with. There may well be those who are aware of this fact and wonder about the claim that hope is its central message. But does the absence of the word actually count against the message being central? It does not. The fact is that in the case of hope, it is not only in the Book of Revelation that the word is absent while the reality is present. According to Allan Barr, this is a phenomenon to be found elsewhere in the New Testament. Barr writes:

Hope is conspicuous in many parts of the New Testament where in fact the word does not appear.<sup>1</sup>

It is fair to say that any reasonable definition or description of hope from the Biblical perspective will inevitably find that its key elements are reflected in

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<sup>1</sup>Allan Barr, "Hope In The New Testament", Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 3, 1950.



the Book of Revelation. For example, Rudolf Bultmann points out that its chief elements are expectation, trust and patience and surely from our point of view these are most certainly outstanding features of the Book of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> It may be taken, therefore, that the absence of the word does not necessarily mean the absence of the message.

In putting forth the message of hope, the writer does not engage in what may be regarded as a phenomenological description of its virtues, neither does he analyse it critically or discuss it in an abstract manner. It is much more a situation in which, by what he had to say to the people in the situation of oppression and struggle that they found themselves, he sought, in a practical manner, to keep hope alive. This is with the obvious conviction that it is very necessary in such a situation not just for survival, but for ultimate victory. One of the ways in which this has shown itself in the book is by the emphasis the writer has placed on endurance, an essential constituent of hope, 2<sup>2,3,19</sup>; 3<sup>10</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 114<sup>12</sup>; cf 1<sup>9</sup>. D.R. Denton has emphasised the association of endurance or perseverance with hope,

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<sup>2</sup>R. Bultmann's article "Elpis" (hope) in TDNT. p. 531.

as Bultmann has done and to which reference has already been made. Denton has gone even further to say that if endurance is not synonymous with hope, they nevertheless each presupposes the other. They are associated in a mutually beneficial relationship. The stronger hope becomes, it is the more patient or enduring it becomes and on the other hand, the stronger endurance becomes it increases hope.<sup>3</sup> For the writer of the Book of Revelation, cowardice, a failure in endurance, heads the list of vices that will disqualify from entry into the New City, 21<sup>8</sup>. It is those who endure who are conquerors, a key characterization of the faithful, 2<sup>26</sup>, cf 2<sup>7,10,17</sup>; 3<sup>5,11</sup>.

The situation the book reflects and to which it was responding was one in which hope was seriously at risk. It has already been noted, that it was a situation of oppression with different features of it bringing considerable pressure not only upon the physical endurance of the faithful but also upon their faith and spiritual commitment.<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham describes the situation as follows:

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<sup>3</sup>D.R. Denton, "Hope and Perseverance", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 34, pp. 313-20.

<sup>4</sup>See Chapter 1.



In Revelation's exposure of the evils of Rome, the worship of the Emperor and the consequent persecution of the church are not an isolated observation, but follow from the fundamental nature of the Roman Empire, Rome's singleminded pursuit<sup>5</sup> of its own power and economic advantage.

In such a situation the hope of the fledgling Christian community was under constant pressure and attack. Well known hope-threatening features associated with such and similar situations must have been present and had to be reckoned with. It is not hard to imagine the seemingly invincible power of the whole state machinery and authority giving the distinct impression that no form of protest against its ways and actions had any chance of success. News of the tragic and bitter end of the Palestinian Revolt would have by this time filtered through to this province and reinforced such impressions and that the writer appreciated the awesome nature of the power that was ranged against them is reflected in his symbolic representation of it, 12<sup>3,4</sup>; 13<sup>1ff</sup>; 17<sup>7</sup>. The insatiable desire for power and glory displayed by the Emperor and encouraged by those in his service, including the imperial religious establishment, seemed to have had

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<sup>5</sup>Richard Bauckham, The Bible and Politics, SPCK, 1989, p. 101.

no limit and there would also be no limit to the steps that would be taken to have the desire met. This did not augur well for the future hope of the faithful. Such factors made for despair and the various ways in which it tends to manifest itself in such situations, for example, - surrender in compliance and conformity, fatalism, cynicism, self-pity, suicidal adventurism.

The crisis of hope is sharpened or intensified from the point of view that the faithful might well have been struck by what appeared to be a great discrepancy or contradiction in terms of their commitment and hope. It is the contradiction between their faith, its assurances and expectations, and their actual historical experience. The sense of security that their faith had promised stood to be seriously jolted in the face of the pagan power, seemingly willy-nilly being able to assert unstoppable power of a ruthless kind against them. And it was not now a case where a judgement - theory or explanation could be offered as in the case of the classical prophets of the Old Testament who could point out to the People of God that they were being threatened and harassed by their pagan neighbours as judgement for their disobedience and unfaithfulness, Is. 10<sup>5ff</sup>; Jer.1<sup>15</sup>, cf Am. 9<sup>4</sup>. The people in the Book of Revelation were suffering precisely



because of their faithfulness. for them it was persecution and martyrdom, 2<sup>13</sup>; 12<sup>11</sup>; 13<sup>7</sup>; 17<sup>6</sup>; 18<sup>24</sup>. This must have constituted a particularly challenging strain on their hope. And yet what is particularly striking is the impression given by the writer that it is exactly in such a situation that hope is particularly effective. And so he seeks to encourage hope by his emphasis on endurance. Hope is itself the answer to the threat and the seeming darkness and gloom. It is in such a situation of hope hoping against hope that its real power is proven. Jurgen Moltmann has made the point that it is in the face of contradiction and discrepancy of the nature being here considered that hope proves its power.<sup>6</sup>

With a combination of prophetic perspective and apocalyptic idiom, the writer of the book, offered an alternative vision of the world and history to his readers in the midst and face of the felt discrepancy and contradiction between their faith and their socio-historical experience. This vision is meant to inspire and sustain hope and it is also itself a vision of hope. And so with powerful symbols and sustained imagery drawn

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<sup>6</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope, SCM, Lond., 1967, p. 19.

from and influenced by the Old Testament for the most part, but not exclusively, the writer graphically and in some instances dramatically, depicted the power and the forces that were ranged against the people, outlined the means and manner by which such powers have been dealt with by God in Christ and will ultimately have their fate settled and set in perspective the eschatological future, its blessings and possibilities, 11<sup>7</sup>; 12<sup>17</sup> - 13; 17; 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9</sup>; 6; 8-9; 11<sup>16-19</sup>; 15-16; 21<sup>1</sup> - 22<sup>5</sup>. The eschatological future with its blessings and possibilities will be fulfilled by God Himself and is ultimately bound up with the Parousia. In the present moment it ought to be the substance and object of the people's hope. In this sense the book is charged with urgent and intense expectation, another of the essential constituents of hope itself. Well known Old Testament images such as the Exodus and its associated covenant blessings, the idea of a new order - a new heaven and a new Earth, the Holy City of God and other essential features of the eschatological hope, become part of the thought form of the writer as the Hope of the People who are the New Israel is set forth. - 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 7<sup>7-17</sup>; 14<sup>1-5</sup>; 15<sup>1-5</sup>; 21<sup>1</sup> - 22; cf Ex. 19<sup>16</sup>; Deut. 26<sup>8,9</sup>; Is. 2; 25<sup>6-8</sup>; 65<sup>17</sup>; Ezek. 40 - 48; Zech. 14. Of course, as it has already been said in our discussion,



the writer uses the Old Testament creatively, seeing and understanding it from the perspective of the particularities of his experience, so it is rather an interpretive use rather than simple quotation to reinforce points made or to illustrate truths.

In the presentation of hope there are two very closely related factors that are held together which provide the basis, direction, purpose and goal of the alternative vision, which is the actual vision of hope. They are the redemptive work of Christ and the Word of God's promise concerning the new order. The hope is grounded on and guaranteed by the work and it is focussed on the Word of Promise and the reality to which the promise points, including the ultimate utter banishment of the rebellious powers, 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 19<sup>11ff</sup>; 20<sup>1-7</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>; cf 1<sup>18</sup>; 12<sup>1-10</sup>. The hope for what is to come is intimately bound up with what has already been done and accomplished in history and which is open to be experienced by faith. This places the hope beyond the realm of mere wishful thinking. It also makes it different from mere optimism, a self-generated positive outlook on the future that steadfastly and stubbornly refuses to reckon with negative factors and possibilities of life and existence in history or refuses to take them seriously.

The death of Jesus on the cross is a direct encounter with the most powerful force and the ultimate expression of ambiguity and contradiction that hope would experience in its expectation of the fulfilment of purpose and achievement of authentic destiny. And the resurrection is the triumphant affirmation of life beyond its ultimate contradiction represented by the death of the cross. The One who is Lion of Judah of the Seed of David is seen as a Lamb bearing the marks of having been slain, standing at the centre of the throne in heaven, a living testimony of triumph over the final power of frustration and contradiction of hope, 5<sup>5ff</sup>. The resurrection and exaltation forming a single event represent the inauguration and sign of a new future, a future beyond all that seem capable of negating or denying it. It is God's future and the future with God in Christ that hope points to and which it sees remaining open even in the midst of what seems to contradict and undermine it. The resurrection sees hope come alive at the very point where it seemed to have been undermined or banished forever. Frances Young, writing more generally of hope in the New Testament and how it is related to the way of the cross, makes certain comments that are



particularly relevant to the way in which the Book of Revelation grounds hope on the sacrificial redemptive work of Jesus. She writes of the cross of Jesus:

...Well it was a clear sign that the judgement had begun; the tribulations and woes, the sufferings and pains, were initiated by his submission to death. It was the beginning of the dreadful but final conflict with the powers of evil. so the Christian believer was living in a kind of tension between the present evil age and the world to come.

The final judgement had begun; the kingdom was on the point of breaking in, and the resurrection of Christ was the first-fruits of the final resurrection. The suffering of Christ and the suffering that Christians were undergoing were the birth-pangs of a new age. Thus it was Christians could live in hope and bear the sufferings and persecution with confidence. In Christ God had begun to move with power. Christian faith was faith in one who had raised Christ from the dead, and they could persevere with hope and confidence.<sup>7</sup>

And J.P.M. Sweet, writing specifically in relation to the Book of Revelation, sums it up pointedly in this manner:

...The poles of the book are the death of the Lamb and the promise 'I am coming soon'.<sup>8</sup>

It is remarkable how in the reckoning of the writer of the Book the new order promised by God, guaranteed by

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<sup>7</sup>Frances Young, Can These Dry Bones Live? SCM Lond., 1982, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup>J.P.M. Sweet, Revelation, SCM Lond., 1979; p. 35

what has already been accomplished and which has been attested to in the experience of salvation, can be spoken of in a manner as if it has already taken place in its fullness while it is yet to be. He can declare triumphantly the fall of Babylon and call for related celebration, while it is still not an empirical fact, 14<sup>8</sup>; 18<sup>2,20</sup>; 19<sup>1ff</sup>. The acclamation of the sovereignty and authority of God and His Christ is expressed in a manner as if it is already an undeniably visible and fully established fact of history, 11<sup>15</sup>; 12<sup>10</sup>; cf 17<sup>14</sup>. The proleptic utterances and acknowledgement are the measure of the confidence of the hope that has been inspired by the work of Christ and in the promise grounded on it and which the writer is seeking to be kept alive by the people in the midst of their struggles. It may then be said that the hope is eschatologically focussed, christologically and soteriologically grounded and guaranteed and apocalyptically expressed from a prophetic perspective, illumined by the Spirit of God.

Therefore, in setting forth hope in the manner he has done in the particular context of oppression and struggle in which he and his readers found themselves, the writer shows it to be a dynamic liberative factor that ought to be recognized and appreciated for what it



is. Without it, victory will be given to the forces and powers of oppression and rebellion over and within the lives of the people themselves. But when seen, appreciated and embraced for what it is, there are five closely integrated aspects to hope as it is set forth. All of these have already found expressions in one form or another in what has been said in previous chapters but what is of significance here is the way in which they seem to form a definite cluster around the single cohesive factor of hope itself. In fact, without hope they are individually or collectively without real meaning or positive effect. What then are these factors? They are defiance, subversion, praxis - commitment, celebration and awareness of the cosmic dimension of the purpose and promise of God. These will now be looked at individually though it must be borne in mind that they belong together in practice as they are inspired together by the same hope.

- Defiance -

It can be said that to dare to hope in the manner conceived by the writer and set forth by him in the situation in which he and his readers found themselves, was definitely an exercise of defiance in freedom and

protest. It was at the same time an affirmation of their real humanity which was at stake once their hope was at risk. This defiance means a refusal to be restricted to or confined by the definition of life, its purpose and destiny or to settle with the horizons of possibilities established and determined by the dominant culture for human fulfilment.

Symbolic of the restrictive definition and determination of life, its meaning, horizons and possibilities is the mark the beast of the earth. It obviously concluded that it had the right and authority to place a stamp on the people giving them a specially established identity associated with its own authority and power. And without this even the most basic human rights are severely restricted, 13<sup>16</sup>. The exact practice that lies behind this act is uncertain. It could be drawing upon the practice of certain pagan cults in which tattooing was undertaken to mark ownership by the gods or of the branding of slaves with the same significance of marking ownership by the master whose seal they bear, or it could be the stamp of the imperial seal with which official documents were stamped indicating ultimate authorization. It could also have been related to the manner in which the Emperor's image stamped on coins



meant ultimate claim upon and ownership of the coin that bears his image. Whichever of the practices referred to might have been behind the practice or any other of a similar nature, there is an indication of the particular emphasis involved. It represents an absolute claim and determinative and controlling power and authority by which people's rights, self-understanding, purpose and human-fulfillment are established. Without the stamp of identity, basic rights are curtailed and in the notice given there is also hint of the social stratification that existed in the society, a stratification of class and status suggesting domination and dependence, superiority and inferiority, advantage and disadvantage,<sup>13</sup><sup>16</sup>.

The position then is that the powers-that-be supported by religio-ideological structures, claimed not only the unquestionable authority but also the supreme wisdom to set the boundaries and horizons of the people's hope that did not go beyond what the powers themselves thought were good for the people or what they thought they were in a position to grant or withhold as they wished. The hope of the alternative vision presented in and by the Book of Revelation enabled the people to look beyond the limiting and restricted horizons determined by

the powers in the dominant culture. This hope established links with possibilities that were other than those which were set forth as final by the powers. And so to maintain this hope was to live in defiance of the assumed power by the authorities to determine final destiny and human fulfilment.

In many Third World societies today, there are colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial structures and legacies of social ordering and culture that sustain and or reaffirm systems of privilege and disadvantage, perceptions of superiority and inferiority and domination and dependence which are given the appearance of belonging to the very nature of how things are and so cannot be otherwise. There is patronage or paternalistic gestures institutionalized, presumably signifying the way in which people are meant to be and how inevitably they are meant to find their rightful place in the given society. Hope is restricted to what is possible within the given framework marked by inherent rights for the privileged elite and disadvantages for the underprivileged majority, and the same structures prevail in terms of the countries in relation to their colonial, former colonial or neo-colonial patrons. Hope that will be considered reasonable in such a situation will be



expressed in wishes, desires, prayers for the specific framework to be made tolerable or bearable but not radically transformed. This is the highest hope the vast majority may have as far as present circumstances are concerned. Thoughts and hope of fundamental changes or the prospects of any genuine fulfilment of human possibilities here and now are not considered to be realistic.

Gustavo Gutierrez, writing of the theological task in the face of such situations as he knew them in Latin America, has this to say:

...Our task here is to find words with which to talk about God in the midst of starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply disappear or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of people who are struggling for their rights to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind and the corpse-filled graves of "Ayachucho". What we must deal with is not the past but unfortunately a cruel present, and a dark tunnel with apparently no end.<sup>9</sup>

This is exactly the kind of situation in which people seem to lead doomed lives. There is no scope for hope

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<sup>9</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent, Trans. by M.J. O'Connell, Orbis, New York, pp. 101-102.

for their present circumstances to change beyond what the dominant culture will allow in terms of its own defined, created and managed possibilities of life. And when peoples' hopes can be dominated and manipulated in such a manner they are made utterly dependent and totally controllable. Tyrants, ancient and modern, as well as the privileged and dominant classes know this and reinforce their own claims and advantages by exploiting it. Christian hope when rightly grasped, acts in direct defiance of this.

It means living with the knowledge of and entrusting all of life to the Word of God's promise by which He commits Himself to His People in particular and to humanity and His whole creation in general, 21<sup>1ff</sup>. It also means living grounded in what has already been accomplished by Christ and open to the blessings that have already been made available to be shared by faith. In both the promise and the finished work, God has shown Himself to be the God of Righteousness and faithfulness, 15<sup>3</sup>; 16<sup>5-7</sup>. This is the base from which the hope-threatening and limiting factors that are at work in the present situation are to be looked at and are to be seen as having a limit despite their appearance of permanence. And the possibility of a new order has not only been



guaranteed by the death and Resurrection of Jesus, but in the light of it, that is, His death and resurrection, He has the sole right and ability to give meaning to and disclose the purpose of God in history which includes the future and destiny of humanity and all creation, 5<sup>5ff</sup>.

Richard Bauckham hits a right note when he writes:

...The Risen Christ is our future. He beckons us forward to the goal of our creation and gives all Christian activity the character of hopeful movement into the future which God has promised.<sup>10</sup>

With this the total horizon of life is transformed. It is not now that which is set or defined by those who find their strength and confidence in their military might, their police efficiency and competence and their great wealth. It is not that which is created or promoted by the powerful propaganda-presentations or the carefully arranged cultural penetration by the dominant culture or powerful international patrons. It is that which is offered by the alternative vision of God's new order and the possibilities of life, present and future, that it offers and represents. The hope that is associated with this vision is inevitably in defiance of the imposed hope of the dominant culture.

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<sup>10</sup>Richard Bauckham, The Bible In Politics, S.P.C.K., Lond., 1989, p. 150.

In this defiance there is a liberated sense of being and action. There is a liberated sense of personhood, to think other than commanded, to see and understand other than being indoctrinated and manipulated to do. Charles Davis has written helpfully in relation to this when he states:

... In placing their ultimate hope in a transcendent new order, Christians are made radically free in relation to any and every establishment.<sup>11</sup>

This freedom to which Davis refers in general is the concrete practical experience of scores of the oppressed, dispossessed and disadvantaged peoples of the Third World and elsewhere where there is oppression. It is the very breath of their survival and strength. It is the basis of their continued sense of dignity in spite of the crushing pressures they must contend with. It is born of hope. John Sobrino writes:

...The crucified peoples have their hope. In Latin America they call it liberation...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Charles Davis, What is Living, And What Is Dead In Christianity Today? Breaking The Liberal - Conservative Deadlock, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1986, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup>John Sobrino, The Crucified Peoples, Catholic Institute of International Relations, London, 1989, p. 6.



Sobrino continues by noting among other things, that their hope is for the resurrection. And in their particular situation and experience, such a hope is one powerful act which includes both hope for the hereafter and hope for now. Then he asks an important question and answers it in a manner that is most relevant to what is here being discussed. This is how he expresses himself:

...Let us ask a final question. Are these people already living the resurrection? Of course, the new heaven and the new earth God wants for them are still a long way off. They have far more cross than resurrection in their lives. But they also have some resurrection - and we say this with all due respect and in fear and trembling. In the midst of slavery, there is already freedom, not a liberal freedom or freedom which claims to guarantee human rights. But there is freedom at a deeper level - there is freedom to decide, to commit oneself and to struggle for liberation.<sup>13</sup>

James Cone writing against the background of the experience of black people in the United States of America has something to say which bears out what Sobrino has said from a different context. He writes:

...The idea of heaven provides for black people to affirm their humanity when other persons were trying to define them

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 7

as non-persons. It enabled blacks to say yes to their right to be free by affirming God's promise to the oppressed of freedom.<sup>14</sup>

This is the kind of hope to which the Book of Revelation testifies and which is to be noted especially in its emphasis on endurance, 2<sup>13</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>1=2</sup>; cf 1<sup>9</sup>; 2<sup>2,3,10</sup>; 7<sup>14</sup>.

It is not surprising that the exercise of this hope prompts a hostile response from the powers-that-be and their agents. This we have seen to have been part of the experience of the people in the Book of Revelation and the constant threat under which they lived, 1<sup>9</sup>; 2<sup>10ff</sup>; 11<sup>7,8</sup>; 12<sup>17</sup>; 13<sup>10ff</sup>; 17<sup>14</sup>; 18<sup>24</sup>; 20<sup>4ff</sup>. This continues to be the experience of the oppressed down to the present day where there are those who are fascinated with their own self-perceived absolute power and glory. Where there is a great sense of pride in cultural, political and economic greatness and achievement and where there is abiding confidence in available resources, military and economic, to do whatever is wished or willed, there is often a combination of contempt, ridicule and suspicion of independent expression of hope. The seeming absurdity of entertaining hope separate and

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<sup>14</sup>James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, Seabury, New York, 1971, p. 97.



apart from or beyond what is defined as given, is one of the things that gives rise to the contempt and ridicule which are expected to be a source of great embarrassment for those who dare to exercise such a hope. Their hope seems to be so readily contradicted by the realities of their everyday experience that it must be foolish to keep exercising and expressing it. And yet one of the factors that puzzles those who seek to ridicule hope and dismiss it with contempt is that it does not vanish with shame and embarrassment but it continues and grows even stronger; and so they soon find themselves resorting to harsher measures of persecution to destroy it. whereas there is no explicit evidence that contempt or ridicule was used by the oppressive powers in the Book of Revelation, the level of cynicism displayed by the powers would indicate that it might well have been part of their oppressive ploy. But what is clear is that the hope was of such a nature that they did employ persecution because the people refused to be intimidated.

Suffering, was a fact of their experience and something to be expected. W.H.C. Frend comments:

...Witness involved defiance of the idolatrous powers (20<sup>4</sup>) after which would follow resurrection of those who had maintained their witness to the end, and their reign with Christ would last for a

thousand years. Then in familiar, yet ever terrible words, comes the vision of vengeance for which the martyrs cry out (6<sup>10</sup>) of the last judgement in which the martyrs would participate as judges and of the casting of the idolaters into the lake of brimstone which is the second death (20<sup>8</sup>). Thus suffering, witness, judgement, ultimate triumph are welded into the single theme of martyrdom. The unity of Christian martyrdom and apocalyptic is complete. The martyr-idea which profoundly influenced the first three centuries of Christian history was given its final meaning in the tense and exalted, apocalyptic of the Asian Church.<sup>15</sup>

With hope the people were expected to maintain the testimony of Jesus even unto death, 2<sup>10ff</sup>. And it is faithful endurance, a manifestation of hope, that will enable them to be conquerors and share the blessings of the eschatological promise, 2<sup>26-28</sup> cf 3<sup>5,12</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>; 21<sup>7</sup>. Enrique Dussel sums it up as follows:

...The author of the Book of Revelation has formulated an explicit political theology. Christians are murdered because they are witnesses (martyrs) of the 'heavenly Jerusalem', the 'new Jerusalem' - called new lest it be confused with the Old Jerusalem, the empirical one that killed Jesus and was destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>W.H.C. Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church, Blackwell, 1965, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup>Enrique Dussel, Ethics and Community - Liberation and Theology, No. 3, Burns and Oates, 1988, p. 51.



Jesus Himself was a true and faithful witness, 1<sup>5</sup>; 3<sup>14</sup>; 19<sup>11</sup>. Martin Rist is convinced that he is set forth by the writer as "the proto-martyr", 1<sup>5</sup>, and so set forth as the pattern for his followers.<sup>17</sup> This fits in with the challenge of the Christians to hold or maintain the witness of Jesus and doing so to the end in triumph of hope even in martyrdom.

Persecution and martyrdom as a risk of hope are not a remote experience of the distant past. It remains an enduring reality even within contexts where the Christian religion is deeply entrenched and the church has had a great and influential role to play. Such has been the experience in Latin America and in their own way Christians elsewhere such as in the Caribbean have had to face pressures of great threat and inconvenience. Disappearances, murders, torture, official denunciation have been some of the experiences in Latin and Central America, with the death of Archbishop Romero being an outstanding example of the price that Christians are called upon to pay, probably just as was Antipas' own at Smyrna, 2<sup>13</sup>. Lower level but highly inconvenient and frightening harassment, rumour-mongering secretly

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<sup>17</sup>Martin Rist, The Revelation of John, Interpreters Bible, vol. 12, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1952, p. 370.

inspired by prominent sources, victimization of and discrimination against churches, church groups and church leaders are known in the Caribbean and the story can be repeated elsewhere in the Third World.

There is, however, an ironic twist to the whole exercise of resort to hostility and persecution. It is a form of desperation which the exercise of Christian hope exposes in those who seek to destroy it. They become desperate, which is a form of contradiction of their hope in their effort to deny, undermine, and control the hope of the people which has proven defiant in its capacity to hope beyond the managed, carefully defined and controlled. Not only their lack of genuine hope is exposed but also the limitations of what they place their own hope in. This is what defiant Christian hope accomplishes even as it bears the pain of its own sacrifice. John Sobrino comments:

...There is the height of Christian freedom when - like Christ - these people do not have their lives taken from them but gives them freely and generously. They are passing from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Part of the tragedy of the contemporary experience is the way in which the church itself tends to become

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<sup>18</sup>Jon Sobrino, The Crucified Peoples, Catholic Institute of International Relations, London, 1989, p. 7.



divided and fractured in the midst of the persecution and the way the oppressive powers seek to exploit it. Often the church in general in its varied confessional forms is found on the side of the oppressive powers in the form of the establishment or status quo. Its formal posture, its comments and statements which echo calls for law and order, national unity, patriotism and sacrifice without analysis of causes of the pressure and disadvantage being borne by the people; its silence at critical moments or its ambiguous utterances seeking to manifest an impossible neutrality, often place it on the side of the powerful and the privileged and the dominant culture that is of their making. And so sensitive individuals, groups or specific congregations committed to righteousness and justice as an expression of their faith - commitment - could find that they are also opposed by the larger church. In the end Christians are on either side of the divide of oppressor and the oppressed, the powerful and the powerless, the persecutor and the persecuted. Hope itself comes under serious stress in such situations. The pressure within to conform and the seduction of special patronage are specific temptations when the vision of hope ceases to inform commitment meaningfully

and then the temptation towards complicity becomes a serious matter. In such a case the integrity of the faith becomes seriously threatened. The writer was sharply critical of any such possibilities, 2<sup>14-16,20-25</sup>.

There is not only the risk of the hostile response that hope evokes in its defiant expression, but there is also the risk of distortions by certain understanding and interpretation of it. The distortion that is especially well known is that which understands hope in terms of flight or escapism. The future becomes the focus of all interest, concern and commitment, that is the future of the new order conceived of entirely in transcendent and supernatural terms. John Macquarrie has summed it up in the following manner:

...It is safe to say that the expression 'Christian hope' is likely to conjure up in the minds of most people who hear it, pictures of heaven and a blissful life to come. In popular understanding of it, Christian hope has come to be visualised in other worldly terms. To the sceptic Christian hope looks like illusion. It is cynically described as a 'pie in the sky' and seen as a tranquilizer which diverts attention and energy from the problems of actual existence and so lessens the hope that problems may be overcome.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>John Macquarrie, Christian Hope, Mowbray's, London and Oxford 1978, p. 1.



Macquarrie further observes that the representation of Christian hope in such a manner may be a caricature but it has been made possible because Christians have been one-sided in their thinking.<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that a one-sided form of thinking on a wide scale has affected the understanding and interpretation of the Book of Revelation's presentation of the Christian hope. The writer's use of the apocalyptic idiom which he found very helpful in facilitating expression of the almost inexpressible, in enabling him to highlight distinctive features of the Christian life and hope that warrant concrete and dramatic representations and in making it possible to emphasize graphically radical contrasts gives it the potential to be treated literalistically and one-sidedly. One of the results of this one-sided interpretation and understanding of hope is for those aspects of it that set forth its transcendent nature to be emphasized in isolation from other aspects and thus there is a sheer other-worldly and supernaturalist impression portrayed of it. This is often done with the sincerest and best of intentions on the part of some

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, pp. 1-2.

while on the other hand it has been exploited by others with what seems to be the most dubious of intentions. However, both end up with a distorted configuration of Christian hope of an escapist nature. This escapist understanding has appeared to be so typical that someone like Albert Nolan, who in quite an important piece of work has unjustifiably dismissed the apocalyptic notion and thought form as unhelpful in terms of reflecting on contemporary issues and problems. He writes:

...What we have seen, though, is that the fundamental problem with apocalyptic is not its language and its highly symbolic imagery, but its supernaturalism which excludes the work of human hands and its closely-related tendency to universalize the day of salvation, thereby divorcing it from this time and this place. The highly symbolic imagery can be powerful and effective as in the New Testament Book of Revelation (Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1981, 116ff). But the supernaturalism is disastrous for any understanding of any concrete meaning of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

Nolan's judgment reflects a reaction of many who are committed to see transformation of the historical situation in the pursuit of their Christian commitment but who are aware of how diversionary the other-worldly-

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<sup>21</sup>Albert Nolan, God in South Africa, The Challenge of the Gospel, David Phillip, Cape Town and Johannesburg, W.B. Eerdmans Grand Rapids, Mich. Catholic Institute of International Relations, London, 1988, p. 132.



supernaturalist viewpoint can be; that which is often associated with the apocalyptic point of view in general. The mistake is for it to be thought that this is a necessary and inevitable understanding of it when it is not and even more so to fail to recognize the actual revolutionary potential of what they are so dismissive of. This is something that we shall look at later on in the discussion.

With the other-worldly supernaturalist interpretation and understanding of hope, a sharp distinction is made between the promised new order and the present historical order. The distinction is fundamental to the extent that the promised new order is considered an utter contradiction of the present historical order, a refuge from it and compensatory for all its inadequacies and shortcomings. The new order therefore, tends to become the total pre-occupation of Christian hope with the conviction that the present historical order is destined to pass away with its corrupt and incorrigible nature. A closely related development with this view-point is the reduction of the Christian hope to the matter of the survival of the human soul after death with entrance into the heavenly home with its blessings. This then makes the paramount

Christian commitment in the present historical order a two-fold one. It is spiritual nurture of one's individual soul and seeking to bring others to the point of commitment for the salvation of their soul. Hope is individualized and interiorized as it is escapist and totally other-worldly. The proponents of this point of view are, however, quite confident that they are right and that those who think otherwise, for example those who think they can transform the present historical order according to Christian values of righteousness and justice have misplaced priorities and are engaged in a largely impossible task. Such is the opinion expressed by Edward Norman, a very articulate and persuasive spokesman of the view-point.<sup>22</sup> He complains of what he regards as the politicization of Christianity that he had seen taking place. He sees political values being substituted for spiritual ones and social morality being substituted for the ethereal qualities of the Kingdom of God. He has no moral objections to individual Christians becoming engaged in the political process and seeking to make their contribution. Yet he is quite pessimistic

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<sup>22</sup>See especially his Reith Lectures of 1978. The Reith Lectures are an annual series of lectures sponsored by the British Broadcasting Corporation.



about any real possibility of the positive transformation of society occurring on the basis of Christian ethic and values. The fallen and corrupt nature of the world does not make it open and responsive to such spiritual values. In the circumstance, therefore, the church's task ought to be the presentation of the gospel of eternal life that individual human beings may respond and be prepared for the heavenly eternal kingdom of God. The proper focus then, is on the world beyond, a place of perfect peace and righteousness for the individual. Worship, personal devotion and piety seem far more representative of the core of the Christian faith than social morality or political action.

Whereas in some respects this attitude appears to be one of complete indifference and insensitivity to the difficulties and problems here and now, it is not necessarily so. It comes down to the fact that it is believed that not much can be done to the present situation, in terms of the possibility of very meaningful change. There is, therefore, an urgent longing for and expectation of the coming new age to bring an end to the present situation. In the meantime ameliorative charitable deeds are encouraged and undertaken. In all of this it is often taken for granted that the poor and

oppressed who are suffering most are naturally inclined to the general point of view of the other-worldly supernaturalist understanding of Christian hope. Sometimes the expression of their feelings and the utterances that embody their hope seem to suggest that they have no interest in or hope for change in their present situation and are only intensely longing for the reversal of their fate in the heavenly order. The coded nature of their language of suffering is mistaken to be purely other-worldly and supernaturalist. But if what they are saying is understood from the position of utter solidarity with them, it will be recognized that often in their expressions there are an outraged sense of justice and a deep longing for a change of their lot here and now.

What is true is that they are often fed the kind of religious teaching and understanding of hope that encourage them towards the other-worldly and supernaturalist attitude. This is what Jose Miguez Bonino refers to as "the ideological misuse of religion".<sup>23</sup> What such teachings do is to exploit the

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<sup>23</sup>Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Age, Fortress, 1975, p. xxvi. See also his "Popular Piety in Latin America". *Concilium* 96, 1974.



people's condition and wittingly or unwittingly give support to the status quo by leaving it unchallenged because of their hopelessness in relation to it or because of their own vested ideological interests. The powers-that-be are often quick to endorse such teachings as the authentic representation of the gospel and to give those who disseminate them priority and rights over against those who think there is need and a place for real change in the present historical situation.

How does this relate to the witness of hope in the Book of Revelation? Does it support the utterly other-worldly supernaturalist understanding of hope which renders it utterly pessimistic about and indifferent to the possibility of liberative change in the present historical conditions? From everything that has been said in the discussion up to this point, it is clear that such an outlook is considered by no means correct and as we proceed in the present discussion it is hoped this will be further sustained. It is sufficient to point out here that there is indeed a definite note of separation in the book but when seen in proper light it is not of the nature of the flight or escapism as stated. It is not based upon the assumption that the present order is inherently and unalterably corrupt. It is a separatism

of defiance and challenge. A critical distancing is encouraged in protest and in commitment to the Divine Lordship over against the rival claims being made by and on behalf of the Emperor in terms of the demands of the dominant culture.

There is a kind of separatism that stresses non-involvement in socio-political affairs and which strives for neutrality in such matters on the basis of commitment to a higher order which at the same time, is not averse to working with the powers-that-be and benefitting from an unjust status quo. And this is not simply by default. It involves not being averse to accepting favours from the powers and their associates. It involves seizing opportunities to have a place of prominence and privilege in the dominant culture. This is to be seen in contemporary church practice. Endorsement given or sought and received by church groups in terms of formal recognition and the granting of rights and privileges which they think will advance their own cause. In the Book of Revelation, however, separatism leads to tension between faith and culture because it is a defiant challenge to the arrogance of power and idolatry that characterized the dominant culture.



Of all the Books of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation should be seen as the one that is least likely to be reduced to individualistic categories such as suggested by the understanding of hope simply in terms of the survival of the individual soul and its future heavenly blessedness. We have already noted more than once that the focus of the book is not so much on private, individual concerns and even internal church organization and order. It is more on corporate concerns and the relation of the church to the state and faith to culture and on the hope of the people of God on a whole, indeed the hope of the whole creation. The book is not without its sensitivity to the individual but the sensitivity relates more directly to the individual within the community. The Christian life is not conceived of as a lonely pilgrimage of isolated individuals primarily concerned about their individual souls. It is rather seen as a new exodus of a new people on their way to a new city - 1<sup>5,6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>. The vision of hope cannot be reduced to individualistic categories without serious distortion taking place.

It is more on corporate concerns such as the relation of the church to the state, faith to culture and

on the hope of the people on the whole, indeed the hope of the whole creation.

It cannot be denied then that the transcendent element of the Christian hope is a reality witnessed to by the Book of Revelation, but not in a sense that it is totally other-worldly and supernatural and leads to escapism in relation to the present order and its challenges. A comment made by James Cone, not about the Book of Revelation, but one quite relevant to its viewpoint, does sum up the position well. He writes:

...The "otherness" of salvation, its transcendence beyond history, introduces a factor that makes a difference. The difference is not that we are taken out of history while living on earth - that would be an opiate. Rather it is a difference that plants our being firmly in history. The transcendence factor in salvation helps us to realize that our own fight for justice is God's fight too, and Jesus' resurrection already defines what the ultimate outcome will be. It was this knowledge that enabled black slaves to live in history but not to be defeated by the limitations of history.<sup>24</sup>

The second major aspect of hope's liberative significance witnessed to in the Book is its subversive impact.

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<sup>24</sup>Part of quote attributed to Cone, taken from G. Wainwright, Doxology, Epworth, London, 1980, p. 421.



Subversion

It is arguable that defiance as an expression of hope in the manner set forth in our discussion is itself a form of subversion. If this is so, it would mean that already the subversive note has been struck. This has got to be accepted but it does not necessarily mean that the factor of subversion has been entirely exhausted by such a presupposition. Subversion in this regard has more far-reaching implications, with certain specific emphases that warrant it being looked on, on its own.

The immediate point of interest and emphasis is that the new order which is the focus of the Christian hope in the book is of a transcendent nature but at the same time directly history-related, a factor noted in the discussion in the previous section. It is of a heavenly origin but will be an earthly reality - 21<sup>2</sup>. It is of such nature that while it is still a future promise it can nevertheless be spoken of in a manner as if it is a present reality, 11<sup>15</sup>; 12<sup>10-11</sup>. The writer definitely leads his readers to hold together both aspects with important implications for their whole outlook and sense of purpose. Christopher Rowland has drawn attention to a significant contrast between certain aspects of the vision at the beginning of the apocalyptic section

proper, 4<sup>1ff</sup>, and aspects of the final vision, 21<sup>1ff</sup>. In the first vision there is the heavenly realm in view. God is seen there enthroned, acknowledged and celebrated by the heavenly community. While that is taking place in the heavenly realm, earth seemed to be subjected to the rampage of the rebellious powers. In contrast, in the final vision of the new order, the distinction between heaven and earth has vanished. God is dwelling amongst his people in the new order. Rowland then comments:

...Here we have an example of theological immanentism which is predicted for the new age. It is only then that there will be the conditions for God and for humanity to dwell in harmony which was impossible while there was rejection of righteousness in human affairs. Heaven on earth is what the new age is all about. God is no longer transcendent but immediate - part and parcel of the world of perfection and evident in it.<sup>25</sup>

The immediate implication of this is that the new order, which is the focus of the Christian hope, is not so other-worldly and of such a supernatural nature that its values, norms and possibilities have no relevance for life in the present order. They are on the contrary, of direct relevance to it especially in relation to what is considered achievable in the present based on the vision

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<sup>25</sup>Christopher Rowland, Radical Christianity, Polity Press, 1988, pp. 80-81.



of possibilities in terms of human fulfilment associated with the new order. They are also relevant in terms of the claims made and pretensions affected by the ruling powers and those associated with their ordering of affairs. The distinct impression is given that there is already an inbreaking of the new order into the present historical order throwing light on it and enabling it to be seen in terms of its right and proper nature and character. It is judged in the light of what God wills for His people and creation and what He will bring about. The claims and pretensions of the present historical order with its arrogant rulers are therefore exposed and revealed to be really other than what they claim to be.

In this sense the vision of hope is subversive and it recognizes the points of possibilities for human fulfilment where they are denied and it is declared that there are no alternatives. Hope operates over against what the powers are plotting, how they wish things to be perceived and over against what the various legitimizing structure and institutions including religious ones affirm. The sharp, critical awareness of hope inspired by the alternative vision of God's promised new order even in the most unsophisticated and uneducated puts into proper perspective the proud achievements that are

paraded as the result of the greatness of the powers-that-be. It also puts into proper perspective established foundations upon which great superstructures of confidence are built and for which permanence is claimed. This is the subversive nature of hope.

In the Book of Revelation, deception is detected and exposed from the point of view of the alternative vision of its hope. It is ruthless in its unmasking of the reality of the actual situation. The parodying of the Godhead by the powers of evil is laid bare, 13; 17<sup>8</sup>. The propaganda in terms of miraculous deeds and the assumption of names that are seen to be blasphemous are made known - 13<sup>5-6,13-15</sup>. It is an ethos at once deceptive, seductive and corrupt, 17<sup>1-10</sup>, being laid bare. Wayne Meeks writes:

...The general strategy of the apocalypse is to oppose the ordinary view of reality as anyone might experience it in Smyrna or Laodicea, or quite different picture of the world as seen from the stand point of heaven.<sup>26</sup>

Meeks then goes on to say:

...If we were to describe John's prophecy in conventional literary terms, then we would say he has made his description of the heavenly reality a parody on the

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<sup>26</sup>Wayne Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians, SPCK, 1987, pp. 143-144.



power and ceremony of Rome. The effect on the reader, however, is just the contrary. Rome is presented as a parody of heaven. Its pomp a bold front concealing its predestined destruction.<sup>27</sup>

It is a harsh and unremitting exposure and critique. In a sense, it is the writer's own assessment of Pax Romana which is different from what many others thought and how many others saw it. In many ways Pax Romana had become a very impressive and powerful symbol of the greatness of the Empire, the tremendous achievement of its power and the wisdom of its rulers and convincing proof of the benefits to be derived from being part of the Empire and remaining loyal to it. C.K. Barrett has expressed the following opinion:

...There is no doubt that many in the ancient world looked upon the Empire as the means by which they were delivered from the forces of the underworld. and though historical scholarship can uncover a variety of human motive in Augustus and his successors, there is no need to quarrel with the popular view of them as Saviours - at least if this view is understood within the terms of reference to which it is originally applied.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid p. 145.

<sup>28</sup>C.K. Barrett, New Testament Essays, SPCK, London p. 13.

This of course is a different position being reported on with a measure of approval from that which is reflected in the Book of Revelation.

It may well be that we are here faced with a very good example of the difference made by the position from which such a judgment or assessment is made. The writer writes from the underside of Pax Romana. He wrote to his readers as one in solidarity with them in tribulation<sup>9</sup>. They are the subject of their own common story and so the perspective is different. They represented those at whose expense the greatness was achieved and maintained. such is often the case in patterns of relationship of domination and dependency known and experienced in colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial experiences. Seen from the position of the dominated, the situation is different from that seen from the position of the dominant. Richard Bauckham points out that many who were impressed with the situation as it existed then were really taken in by the propaganda of Rome, dazzled by the glory and seduced by the benefits that seemed to have been available and promised. Yet Pax Romana was in effect a system of economic exploitation imposed upon the



Empire. Reflecting on the portrayal of Rome as a prostitute in the Book of Revelation, 17<sup>1ff</sup>, Bauckham writes:

For the favours of Rome, the security and prosperity of the Pax Romana - her lovers pay a high price. Her subjects gave her far more than she gave them.<sup>29</sup>

Hope, seen from its true perspective, is not easily deceived and it shows up the deceptive factors for what they are. According to Jurgen Moltmann:

Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is but begin to suffer under it to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the good of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present. If we had before our eyes only what we see, then we would cheerfully or reluctantly reconcile ourselves with things as they happen to be. That we do not reconcile ourselves, that there is no harmony between us and reality, is due to our unquenchable hope.<sup>30</sup>

This hope then kept alive by the downtrodden and powerless does not only surprise and baffle the oppressors but intimidates and threatens them. Enrique

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<sup>29</sup>Richard Bauckham, The Bible in Politics, SPCK, Lond., 1989, pp. 89-90. See also Klaus Wengst, Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ, SCM Lond., 1987, p. 29, cf p. 20

<sup>30</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope, SCM Lond., 1967, pp. 21-22.

Dussel writes probingly about the discomfiture that hope in this subversive role causes the powers-that-be. He writes:

Why does the Empire, yesterday as today murder the heroes and martyrs: For the simple reason that in proclaiming the new order - a future system of justice and satisfaction for the starving poor - they destroy consent. They shatter hegemony. They undermine the foundation of the prevailing morality. They obliterate its justification.<sup>31</sup>

One of the things that the writer of the Book of Revelation was keen to warn against was that the church instead of being a bearer of this subversive hope, unmasking reality by its vision of the new order, could become victim of the deception of the pretentious state of affairs. The Church at Laodicea and Sardis seemed to have become victims of this, 3<sup>1-6,14-20</sup>, and there were false teachers reported to have been active in others, teachers whose teaching seemed to have aimed at encouraging or allowing for conformity to the deceptive state of affairs and which some of the people were prone to follow, 2<sup>14,15,20,21</sup>.

A church that rests its confidence and finds its full satisfaction in some kind of realized eschatology of

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<sup>31</sup>Enrique Dussel, Ethics and Community, Liberation and Theology, Vol. 3, Buris and Oates, 1988 pp. 51-52.



its own perfection or in its self-perception as self-sufficient based on its material acquisition and its share of the benefits of the dominant culture abandons its real hope. The Christian hope that it abandons becomes subversive of that which it assumes. This challenge is to be noted in the writers warning to the churches. Ernst Käsemann senses this and points out that the really disturbing message in relation to the church in the world is that it is often asleep in self-satisfaction. Having made its peace with the world, it no longer remembers that the reign of Jesus begins here and now with the freedom of those who reject the mark of the beast under the regime of Pax Romana and instead bear witness that the God of the New Order is on the move.<sup>32</sup> There can be nothing more tragic for the Christian faith and witness than a complacent and self-satisfied church in a situation that mocks, threatens and seeks to undermine the humanity of people by destroying their hope by oppression, injustice, violation of basic human rights, the denial of basic human necessities and the assumption of divine prerogatives. It is not unknown for

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<sup>32</sup>Ernst Käsemann, Jesus Means Freedom, SCM Lond., p. 130 ff. See also Wolfgang Schrage, Ethics of the New Testament, T & T Clark 1988, p. 340.

the church in Third World situations of oppression and grave injustice or in other situations where people or countries enjoy themselves from the benefits of the unjust ordering of human existence and life, to be content to celebrate its own privileges. The chief of such privileges is often its freedom to preach the gospel. The irony of this is striking for no doubt this would have been the first freedom threatened if it was being faithful to the vision of its true hope, which is an integral part of the gospel, with its subversive impact on such situations. This is a challenge that the message of hope of the Book of Revelation bears.

It is not a far step from looking at the subversive nature of the vision of hope that unmask the reality of the socio-historical and political situation to recognizing a further revolutionary potential that is part of its subversive nature. This further potential is based on the fact that the vision of the new order also reveals possibilities that can and ought to be fulfilled in the present order. It embraces an awareness of what can happen in terms of the transformation of life and structures in anticipation of God's New Order. J.B. Metz puts it this way:

The future which the church hopes for is not yet here but is emerging and arising



(Entstehend). Therefore, the hope the church sets in itself and in the world should be creative and militant. In other words, Christian hope should realize itself in a creative and militant eschatology.<sup>33</sup>

This affirms exactly what the other-worldly supernaturalist understanding of hope denies. And it contradicts the self-perception of dominant cultures in terms of their presumed ability to limit and define the horizons of human hope according to their own wisdom and power and beyond which they grant no further possibilities of human fulfilment.

The vision of the possibility of establishing in history that which anticipates God's promised new order has in time, inspired individuals and groups who have thought that they have been called and chosen by God to establish the kingdom itself. This has in some instances given rise to extremism, over-enthusiasm, over-optimism, fanaticism and bizarre forms of actions aimed at establishing the kingdom of God, as promised, on the part of some throughout the history of the church. The Book of Revelation though by no means the initial or only source of the vision and hope that have informed such

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<sup>33</sup>J.B. Metz "The Church and the World":, in The Word and History, The St. Xavier Symposium, F. Burke (Ed.) Collins, 1966, p. 82.

attempts, has been a chief source with its vision of the new heaven and new earth and the associated millennial kingdom to be established prior to the new order or as part of it. Indeed, it has actually supplied the name or title attached to movements of the nature to which reference is being made, "Millennialism", or "Millennial Utopianism". D. Aune, writing of "Millennialism", says it is:

...A term describing a complex form of collective behaviour widely used in cross-cultural studies of religious movements inspired by the vision of utopian society that owes its currency to the Apocalypse of John. Revelation 20<sup>4-6</sup> speaks of a Millennial Kingdom of Christ during the one thousand year interval between the second coming and the final judgement.<sup>34</sup>

Norman Cohn has outlined the emergence of millennial movements in the middle ages and gives opinion as to what he considers to be their lasting influence on Western

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<sup>34</sup>David Aune, The New Testament In Its Literary Environment, James Clark and Co., Cambridge, 1987, p. 228.



political thought and development. Reference is made to the influence of the Book of Revelation among others. <sup>35</sup>

In Cohn's estimation, however, those who were engaged in and inspired by such movements were for the most part, seriously misguided and by implication, quite dangerous. They engendered fanatical devotion, inspired unrealistic expectations, were given to self-righteousness and were not averse to cruelty to their

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<sup>35</sup>A notable example has been the work of the calabrian monk Joachim of Fiore who died in 1202. His considerable influence outlasted him reaching down to the Radical wing of Reformation for example in the work of Thomas Muenzer, who himself has stirred the interest of radical and revolutionary thinkers down to the present day. Joachim's thought and vision inspired by the Book of Revelation in particular, represented a resurgence of the millenarian outlook after it had suffered decline especially in the wake of Augustine's well known interpretation of the millenium as the current Church age and not as expected utopian historical reality. In Joachim's thinking Salvation History was envisaged along lines of a three-phase progression based on the Trinity with Father, Son and Spirit, each identified with one of the phases. The final and imminent phase was that of the spirit and it would be a period of perfect righteousness, freedom and love established within human history. This would be in contrast to the current period of corruption. Joachim had no plan of action for the establishment of this period but his insight became the inspiration of his followers and others to seek to work for the establishment of the new order which became a threat to the current socio-political and religious establishment. This gave weight to the ongoing suspicion that the millenarian view-point had a subversive potential with corresponding action to prevent it.



enemies. He also sees them as progenitors of totalitarianism of both the left and the right in Western Political development.<sup>36</sup> This is a considerably unflattering portrayal of the movements and it does represent something of a general estimation of them up till very recently when there is fresh appreciation of their importance despite certain unattractive associations in the case of some. What has become clear is that wholesale dismissal of such movements runs the

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<sup>36</sup>Norman Cohn, Pursuit of The Millenium, Secker and Warburg, Lond., 1957, pp. xiii, 4, 307. It is worth noting an interesting divergence of opinion concerning the influence of the millenarian movements on later political development in the West. Michael Walzer who has devoted much study to political revolution agrees with Cohn on the matter of the disagreeable features of the movements' character but disagrees concerning their supposed impact on later political development. In so far as religious and Biblical influence has played any significant part in this regard, this must rather be found in the "Politics of the Exodus", which displays features which stand in direct contrast to that of the millenarian movements (Exodus and Revolution, New York, 1985, p. 19).

On the other hand, Karl Mannheim who wrote his very influential "Ideology and Utopia" before both Cohn and Walzer, acknowledges the direct influence of the millenarian movements on later political development but certainly does not see it in the negative way it is seen by Cohn. He sees the movements themselves as inspiring the beginning of modern politics, that is politics understood in terms of people at every level of society sharing in the achievement of some purpose in ordinary everyday life (Ideology and Utopia), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1936, p. 190ff.)



risk of discarding "the baby with the bath water". In many respects this is exactly what happened and the whole millennial perspective was neglected or abandoned to those who were marginalized by the church or to semi-religious groups. The rediscovery of the effective meaning of the eschatological hope for the present that they represent is something that certainly is urgent and the signs that this is being recognized are welcome.

Opinions vary considerably about the meaning and significance of the period of the millenium as it appears in the Book of Revelation. It is one of the most debated features in some quarters while it is completely bypassed by others because it is nowhere else mentioned in the book and receives no other explicit reference in the New Testament on a whole. The debate will not be joined here but it is acknowledged that it does play an important role in the writer's efforts to set forth the vision of hope. In the viewpoint of this study, it represents the effort of the writer to state in as concretely and as graphically a manner, certain significant dialectical features that are of necessity associated with the promised new order and its relationship to the present order. And so the millennial period is juxtaposed with the vision of the new order. The transcendent yet

earthly nature, the eschatological yet historical character, the 'not yet' but 'already' significance, the openness to human involvement and yet unique divine establishment, the experience of suffering, even martyrdom, and yet sharing in the victory and royal authority of Christ the exalted by the faithful, its promise and realisation are all suggested by the millennial period juxtaposed with the vision of the new order. And it is as the dimensions of the dialectic are acknowledged in the expressions of Christian hope that it will make its desired impact.

It cannot very well be denied that there have been excesses and bizarre behaviour on the part of individuals, groups and movements that have been inspired by the millennial ideal. Yet as pointed out, it is unwise to dismiss them out of hand. The very emergence of such groups invariably at critical times when the disadvantaged state of people remain unattended by the responsible authorities and unchallenged by the church is something to be appreciated and reckoned with. If this is done then it is not only their error of ways will command attention but also the important but neglected truths and principles to which their existence, dreams and actions draw attention. Their emergence will be seen



in terms of the gap or vacuum which they seem to fill and which is caused, in a large measure, by the default of the church in its witness in the vital area of righteousness and justice. The revolutionary potential of hope is obviously too fundamental a factor in the experience and to the witness of the Christian faith to be neglected. And so as there have been other instances in the case of other fundamentals of the faith, for example, the witness of the spirit, there is the chance it will in due course, find expression not infrequently in exaggerated forms. The Book of Revelation itself with its vision of hope, has suffered exactly this fate, in one form or another.

The challenge that reminds us that as far as the Christian hope is concerned history is to be taken seriously and that it still remains the sphere of divine activity and in which possibilities are to be fulfilled in response to God's call and promise, is something to be acted upon. The reminder that there is a place in God's gracious purpose and providence for authority to be exercised in the ordering of human affairs according to the righteousness of God and not according to human will arrogating unto itself the power of almightiness and presuming to have the inherent right to act as it wills,

must be appreciated. The sense that it is part and parcel of the outworking of the Christian faith and discipleship to work for the transformation of unjust situations that put human beings at a gross disadvantage and undermine the possibility of the fulfilment of their humanity, is something to be affirmed.

At the same time the forms which certain of the movements inspired by the millennial ideal and by the revolutionary potential of hope take and the end to which many of them come, do teach and reinforce certain important truths that are themselves vital aspects of the message of the Book of Revelation, explicitly or implicitly. There is an eschatological reserve that must recognise certain limits to what may be considered achievable by human effort. There remains an emphasis on the fact that the establishment of the new order is the direct work of God Himself. When this is ignored to the extent that what is being sought in terms of the transformation of the historical situation in the name of righteousness and justice is identified directly and unreservedly with the kingdom of God itself, it shows how even the most sincere and even the most sacred of purposes and commitments are open to distortion and corruption in their own way. The strange twist is that



even in the fight against idolatry the action can approximate idolatrous proportions. The need for discernment is important, a factor which will receive attention in the next section. The call for patience or perseverance, such a prominent feature in the book, is quite relevant in this regard, 2<sup>10ff</sup>; 13<sup>10</sup>; 14<sup>12</sup>. The cry, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" and the reply that counselled patience are also significant here, quite apart from anything else, 6<sup>10-11</sup>.

There is also the danger of the lack of realism as far as the nature of the evil being contended with is concerned. The powers of evil have been successfully dealt with on the cross in that they stand as defeated foes restrained and restricted and doomed to ultimate banishment but there is still much to them that makes them formidable foes of great effectiveness in the pursuit of their own evil intention. They still have the capacity to distort, undermine and destroy, albeit without the effectiveness of finality but yet with devastating consequences. It is God's final overthrow of them that will settle the score forever in terms of their capacity to do more evil. G.B. Caird has some important

comments on this which are well worth contemplation. Referring to the resurgence of evil after the millennial period he writes:

...The myth of Gog enshrines a deep insight into the resilience of evil. The powers of evil have a defence in depth which enables them constantly to summon reinforcement from beyond the frontiers of man's knowledge and activity. However far human society progresses it can never, while this world lasts, reach the point where it is invulnerable to such attacks. Progress there must be, otherwise God is neither Lord of history or Lord of Creation. but even when progress issues in the millenium, men must remember that they still have no security except in God.<sup>37</sup>

There is a place for the ongoing probing of the revolutionary potential of the hope of the new order, ongoing inspiration by its ideals, ongoing search for ways and means in accordance with such ideals to fulfil the possibilities it reveals here and now but there is no place for believing that it is within human knowledge and capacity to build or establish the kingdom of God in all its fullness. Living in hope is living towards the fulfilment of the kingdom as promised by God as His own doing while anticipating its ideals and its promise here

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<sup>37</sup>G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, A & C Black, p. 257, 1966.



and now which is a way by which God allows for human involvement and participation in what still remains his own doing.

The third aspect of the liberative impact of hope is Praxis-commitment.

#### Praxis-Commitment

In view of what has been said already it is concluded that Christian hope puts those who are open to it and who have embraced its promise and challenge on the side of God's new order. And in doing so, it commits them to its ideals and values here and now in the present historical order. Escapism is denied and the over-zealousness of enthusiastic utopian millennialism are corrected. Praxis-commitment is called for and affirmed by the vision of the new order and yet this commitment is in the light of the kingdom yet to be fulfilled by God's own doing.

There is no doubt that the writer of the Book of Revelation emphasises the radical newness of the new order. His emphasis on its heavenly origin, the totality and universality that mark the new order and the exclusion of all impurity and corruption all point to the radical nature of the new order and the fact of its discontinuity with the old order, 21<sup>2</sup>; 21=5; 21<sup>8</sup>; 22<sup>14,15</sup>. And yet with all the emphasis on the newness of

the new order there are also indications of continuity between both orders. The name the new city bears is a name associated with the old order and one with on-going symbolic religious significance, 21<sup>2</sup> cf 22<sup>19</sup>, a significance which remained even when the city corrupted itself. The impression is given that it is the kingdom of the world that actually becomes the kingdom of God and His Christ, which hints at radical transformation rather than brand new creation, 11<sup>15</sup>. The same thing can be said about all things being made new, that it is radical transformation being hinted at rather than brand new creation, 21<sup>5</sup>, that meant an absolute discarding of the old order.

A most important indication of the continuity is the praxis-commitment which seems to be acknowledged, affirmed and accepted in the new order and which also is demanded by the new order. Life in the present historical order is life which is shaped for the new order itself. This then confirms that the vision of hope for the new order is intimately bound up with praxis-commitment within the present order, praxis-commitment marked and inspired by the ideals and values of the new



order and anticipatory of its fulfilment. There are three examples that are helpfully illustrative of this, even if they are not without their interpretive problems which preclude dogmatism.

Firstly, the names of the twelve Apostles are said to be etched into the foundations of the new city, 21<sup>14</sup>. Much is made of the significance of their representative status either in tandem with the twelve tribes whose names are written on the gates of the city or on their own, as the people of God embracing Israel and the church or the church as the New People of God in the new order. However, it does seem also that their foundational role in establishing and maintaining the testimony of Jesus and its witness to the kingdom or the new order must also be seen to be in consideration. That role is taken up in the fulfilment of God's purpose in the establishment of the new order and as such acknowledged and affirmed to have played its part in it. Christopher Rowland, commenting on the fact of the names of the Apostles written on the foundations of the city, says that reference to it indicates that individuals did have their part to play in the building of the city. He then added that such a claim did not mean denial of the Divine role, "but asserts that men and women, as they had during the

messianic age, could indeed act as the agents of God's eternal purpose".<sup>38</sup> There is something unique about the apostles role while it at the same time stands at a point to be followed upon in faithful pursuit of the Christian commitment.

Secondly, there is the much debated reference to the kings of the nations bringing their glory into the new city, 21<sup>24</sup>. The debate focuses generally on the identity of the kings of the nations, since for the most part, they are depicted as pagan rulers in alliance with the oppressive powers, 17<sup>1-2,12-14</sup>; 18<sup>9,10</sup>; cf 6<sup>15-16</sup>; 15<sup>3-4</sup>. There are those who have concluded that the kings who have taken their glory into the city could not be such kings and so there is inconsistency as far as the reference is concerned. At such a point only the faithful Christians ought to be in existence since the decisive events of judgement have already taken place, 19<sup>21</sup>; 20<sup>7-10,12-15</sup>. The inconsistency is put down to carelessness or lack of critical judgement on the part of

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<sup>38</sup>Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven, SPCK, London, 1982, p. 438. See also G.R. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible, Revelation, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1974, p. 321.

G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, A & C Black, 1966, p. 272.



the writer in the use of his source. This is the opinion of someone like S. Maclean Gilmour who thinks he uses his source without making the necessary adaptation. He accuses the writer of not being generally alert to inconsistencies on a whole.<sup>39</sup> There are those who think it presupposes the conversion of the Gentile nations, 14<sup>7</sup>; 15<sup>3-14</sup>.<sup>40</sup> Martin Kiddle simply thinks that the nations are believers of every tribe and the kings are martyrs who are given the privilege of sharing royal status, 20<sup>4</sup>, cf 5<sup>9</sup>.<sup>41</sup> These are but examples of the varied opinions that are expressed on the reference. In the end it seems that the position taken by Richard J. Mouw is a very helpful one and throws important light on the reference and is very relevant for the point being made in our discussion. Mouw writes:

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<sup>39</sup>S. Maclean Gilmour, "The Revelation to St. John" in The Interpreters One Volume Commentary on the Bible, Abingdon, Nashville, 1971, p. 967.

<sup>40</sup>R.H. Charles, International Critical Commentary Revelation, Vol. II T & T Clark, 1920, p. 172 ff. Charles adduces much evidence from the Old Testament and apocalypses for similar thought. He also presupposes major inconsistencies in the text of the whole section and undertakes extensive reconstruction to set the events in what he considers to be a more logical sequence.

<sup>41</sup>Martin Kiddle, The Revelation of St. John, Moffat New Testament Commentary, Hodder and Stoughton, 1940, pp. 438-439.

Rather, the importance of this reference seems to reside in the significant conceptual point it makes: namely, that the coming of the kingdom will require an official acknowledgement on the part of human institutional authority of the sovereign rule of God...

He goes on:

...It is important to note, however, that the conceptual requirement... has to do with more than mere political transaction. The kings of the earth are political representatives but they are more than that. When they bring 'the glory and the honour of the nations' into the new Jerusalem they are acting as representatives of the diverse cultures which developed in the course of history... the New Jerusalem absorbs the life and the authority of some major institutions - tribe, church, nation - which have developed in history.<sup>42</sup>

This in many ways falls in line with the view expressed by G.B. Caird when he writes in relation to the same reference:

Nothing from the old order which has value in the sight of God is debarred from entry into the new.<sup>43</sup>

From the perspective of the new order the present historical order bears possibilities of accomplishing the will of God and of ideals characteristic of the new order

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<sup>42</sup>Richard J. Mouw, Politics and The Biblical Drama, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp. 134-135-136.

<sup>43</sup>B.B. Caird, A Commentary On the Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black, 1966, p. 279.



being manifested in human lives and creations which will find their place in the framework of the future new order itself. In a real sense this affirms continuity between the present and future orders.

Thirdly, there is the list of vices that is recorded by the writer indicating that such vices disqualify from entry into the city, 21<sup>8</sup>, cf 22<sup>14,15</sup>. Again this is one of those points where it is thought that inconsistency is manifested for it should not be necessary for this warning to be issued at this point. This does not need to delay us, however, since the point being made is not affected substantially by whether the reference is rightly placed or not. The church is being warned as a clear reminder that they have been committed to a particular way of life by the promise and challenge, the gift and demand of the new order. It is not that the new order and its blessings are a reward to be worked for or to be merited as such. It is an offer, a gift, made available that inspires and commits those open to it to a way of life appropriate to its own nature and character.

The items in the list are probably representative and at the same time indicating the nature of the threat and challenge that confronted the people, not simply as individuals but as a community of believers. The

emphasis is not so much on personal private individual ethic. It is more on the response of the church to the issues, realities, threats, dangers and pressures of the dominant culture. It is significant that cowardice begins the list followed by faithlessness. All the others are somewhat predictable and expected consequences. Cowardice is nothing less than compromise and complicity with the demands of the powers and authorities for fear of suffering persecution and martyrdom which becomes obvious in faithlessness, a condition which is not just a lack of faith but of renunciation of the faith, giving precedence to the behest and intimidation of the pagan powers, 13<sup>4-8</sup>. The other things in the list represent the idolatrous indulgences and related patterns of conduct which are expected when there are compromise and renunciation of the faith of the nature to which reference has been made. Cowardice stands in contrast with the experience and effort of conquering which are considered of great importance in the book and which is in fact referred to in the previous verse along with the blessing attached to it, 21<sup>7</sup> cf 2<sup>7,11,17,26</sup>; 3<sup>5,12,21</sup>; 12<sup>11</sup>. It is a matter



of being faithful to the God of righteousness to the end by the praxis of righteousness. Martin Kiddle notes:

...The New Jerusalem is the embodiment of the holiness of life and its boundaries are built of righteousness.<sup>44</sup>

This holiness and righteousness of the new order warrant and inspire a praxis of righteousness in the present historical order which along with its creative and liberative consequences are taken up in the fulfilment of God's purpose in the establishment of the new order. The writer gives no detailed blueprint for political revolution or social transformation but there is no doubt that he was aware that commitment to the righteousness of God and the willingness to suffer for righteousness would have decisive socio-political implications as well as religious ones and these implications bore direct reference to the possibilities, promise and challenge associated with the new order. Writing with reference to the author of the Book, Christopher Rowland concludes:

...he remains in no doubt that already it is possible for those who believe in Jesus to act in the present roles of those who will play their part in the

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<sup>44</sup>Martin Kiddle, The Revelation of St. John, Moffat New Testament Commentary, Hodder and Stoughton, 1940, p. 428.

future order. To admit this is to accept the possibility that, amidst the imperfections of the present, much of worth can be achieved which will stand the test of entry into the new age (cf 1 Cor. 3<sup>13</sup>).<sup>45</sup>

One of the things that the praxis of righteousness presupposes is discernment. The writer attributes his own knowledge of the will and purpose of God that he shares with his readers to discernment by the spirit, 1<sup>10</sup>; 4<sup>2</sup>; 17<sup>3</sup>; 21<sup>10</sup>. And clearly as the church engaged in maintaining the testimony of Jesus, which cannot be separated from the praxis of righteousness as it pursues its prophetic role it is also dependent on discernment enabled and inspired by the spirit, 19<sup>10</sup>. Discernment is here understood in terms of heightened spiritual awareness and perceptiveness, sensitive and penetrative, enabling a keen understanding of the machinations of the powers of evil, the dangers and subtleties of the religio-political propaganda and ideological influence of the dominant culture and of the deceptive nature of the false teachings that arose in or infiltrated the church. The nature of the experience by which the discernment or insight of the spirit is communicated, whether ecstatic, visionary or rapture-like, is not a matter of primary

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<sup>45</sup>C. Rowland, The Open Heaven, SPCK, 1982, p. 438.



concern here. It is the fact that the spirit is an indispensable source of discernment or insight which is essential for understanding what is taking place in the present historical order and how it relates to the outworking of God's purpose and its promised fulfilment in the new order to be established by God at the Coming of Christ.

The place of discernment in the praxis of righteousness is important and it is a valuable contribution made by the book. The chances of the distortion of reality and of misunderstanding what is taking place in a situation of oppression and injustice are increased and remain a source of real challenge as far as God's people are concerned, when such situations of oppression and injustice are complex as they tend to be. The collaboration and interrelatedness of the various forces of politics, economics, religion and culture in the service of the oppressive powers and their beneficiaries are factors that demand proper understanding as the church in the praxis of righteousness seeks to respond to such situations. It is not only the sheer cold facts of statistics and other measurable and quantifiable data that are involved, but also perspective, motives, intention, purpose, meaning,

human dignity and potential and hope. Discernment is important in such situations and it means that not only the technical experts, intellectual leaders and influential makers of opinion but also the majority of the people who are themselves victims of the conditions, are able by discernment to understand in the light of God's purpose as they reflect upon their struggle and solidarity against oppression and injustice.

At the same time it is here recognized that other sources of insight and knowledge are valuable and desirable in the reflection on the struggle and the praxis of righteousness. Analytical tools of an appropriate nature have their place in aiding understanding, especially in terms of the complex nature generally of the oppressive situation to which reference has already been made. They are also important in guarding against simplistic conclusions being drawn based on superficial correspondence between the first century situation of the Book of Revelation and the modern situation. And it also helps, in turn, for proper grasping of points of structural correlation between the context of the book and contemporary oppressive contexts. But in all of this, it is important that the analytical tools are not elevated to a position that seems to render



spiritual discernment in its own right unnecessary, which is a danger to which some who have recognized the usefulness of such tools are prone to overlook. For analysis to replace discernment or to be seen as the only source of discernment is really to eliminate or ignore an indispensable source of understanding in the praxis of righteousness. It should be noted how much the writer stresses the need for the churches to hear what the spirit has to say to them, 2<sup>7,11,17,27</sup>; 3<sup>6,13,22</sup>.

It is also important that discernment be displayed by the church in relation to itself. Hearing what the spirit has to say certainly involves this. And this is discernment which ought to enable self-criticism towards renewal as part of the church's own liberating experience as it expresses itself in the praxis of righteousness. The strong call of the writer to the churches for repentance is a factor that is very significant in this regard, 2<sup>5,16,21-22</sup>; 3<sup>3,19</sup>. The vulnerability of the church to deception and entrapment within the dominant culture supported by and beneficial to the oppressive powers is something that the writer is keenly aware of, and without self-criticism the danger of the church becoming one of the legitimizing institutions and part of the whole sanctioning structure of the status quo and

also of deceiving itself about its own situation and condition is real, 2<sup>14,15,20,21</sup>; 3<sup>1-3,15-18</sup>. We have seen in our times and contexts that church fascinated with power and preoccupied with its own privileges is often not open to self-criticism. It resists it and seeks to marginalize those who draw its attention to the need for it or seek to act as catalysts for its undertaking it.

The praxis of righteousness will be costly. Triumphalism which is often a veiled form of self-assertiveness and self-projection do not go well with it. Yet victory is worthy of contemplation but always with the thought and knowledge that though it has already been accomplished by Jesus its ultimate consummation remains an eschatological reality. To this the people of God remain open as they pursue the praxis of righteousness enjoying such possibilities as are made available to faith in the present moment and towards the ultimate consummation itself.

This leads to the next aspect of hope's liberative impact. It is Celebration.

#### Celebration

Jon Sobrino writes very insightfully:

...One thing no one has yet been able to take away from the crucified people is their capacity to celebrate, to be happy



and to be joyful in the midst of suffering, because as they say, themselves, 'the opposite of happiness is sadness', as long as they are able to feel like this sadness has not overcome them.<sup>46</sup>

There is something about this statement that seems to reflect a mood to be discovered in the Book of Revelation. The point has repeatedly been made that the writer does not leave his readers in any doubt that suffering is involved in their pursuit of faithfulness to God in the situation that they found themselves. Suffering had both been experienced and remained a threat, 1<sup>9</sup>; 2<sup>13</sup>; 6<sup>9-10</sup>; 7<sup>14</sup>; 12<sup>12,17a</sup>; 13<sup>10-17</sup>; 17<sup>6</sup>; 18<sup>24</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. However, along with this grim and sombre note of suffering and martyrdom there is also an undeniable note of joy and celebration. No other book in the New Testament resonates with a greater echo of doxology, worship and acclamation than the Book of Revelation, 1<sup>5</sup>; 4<sup>8ff</sup>; 5<sup>7ff</sup>; 7<sup>10ff</sup>; 11<sup>15ff</sup>; 12<sup>10-12</sup>; 15<sup>3ff</sup>; 19<sup>1-2,5</sup>. Reference to and discussion of certain technical critical factors related to the hymns for example, have been made already.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Jon Sobrino, The Crucified Peoples, Catholic Institute of International Relations, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup>See Chapter, 2.

It is, however, in order to ask, what is it that accounts for the joy in the midst of suffering? Is it purely a literary creation or arrangement to provide an interlude of relief - dramatic relief, in a book that was intended to make a dramatic impact as it was publicly read, 1<sup>3</sup>? Is it simply a way of seeking to evoke admiration for the heroism of the sufferers by portraying them as gallant and joyful in the midst of suffering? Does it represent a way of depriving the oppressors of any sense of satisfaction that they are truly succeeding in hurting the saints or is there some psychological flaw evident where suffering is actually seen as enjoyable? These questions presuppose theories that may be used or have been used to account for joy and celebration in the midst of suffering. Yet from the point of view of the writer of the Book of Revelation the fundamental basis of the possibility of celebration in the midst of suffering is the hope of the People. It is the hope of the alternative vision of reality inspired by God's promised new order, 21-22. There are two factors that are immediately associated with the hope that makes it the basis of the celebration. They are memory and anticipation as on-going factors operating in the life of



the People in relation to the accomplished work of Christ and the promised new order of God, the one grounding and guaranteeing the other.

There is distinct indication that memory of the redemptive act of Christ kept alive was a source of joy and celebration. It is worth noting that three passages that make direct reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus and its redemptive significance, two more directly than the other, are associated with doxology, worship and acclamation, 1<sup>5b-6</sup>; 5<sup>9,10</sup>; 12<sup>10,11</sup>. In the first passage the reference is actually embodied in a doxology. In the second worship and rejoicing are occasioned by the fact that his sacrificial redemptive act has made Jesus worthy and able to disclose the meaning and purpose of the course of history and human destiny as God has willed and directed it. In the third passage which is a less direct but nonetheless fairly obvious reference to the whole life of Jesus in a most highly compressed form with strong mythological features, the emphasis is placed on the hostility displayed towards him by the powers of evil and his victory. This is accompanied by an acclamation of the victory that also anticipates his fully established reign as a present reality. Memory of the redemptive act of God in Christ,

a matter of more than recalling the historical fact but experienced as a living reality reinforced by the assurance that the love it manifests is a continuing one,<sup>48</sup> become and remain the basis of celebration in the midst of suffering.

The anticipatory basis of the celebration is demonstrated especially in the hymns. Wolfgang Schrage has drawn attention to the fact that the hymns that are to be found in Chapters Four to Seven celebrate the fulfilment of the eschatological purpose of God jubilantly as though it has already taken place though it is yet to be, since the final showdown with the primordial power of evil and his hosts in which both he and they will be finally banished has not yet taken place.<sup>49</sup> The Beatitudes that are found in the Book, 1<sup>3</sup>; 14<sup>13</sup>; 16<sup>15</sup>; 19<sup>9</sup>; 20<sup>6</sup>; 22<sup>7,14</sup>; may also be sounding a note of joy associated with the particular factor with which they are related and not just embodying a wisdom thought

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<sup>48</sup>It is worth noting that reference to the Act of Jesus loving us and liberating us by his sacrificial death, has "love" in the present tense which suggests it is an on-going factor, 1<sup>5-6</sup>.

<sup>49</sup>Wolfgang Schrage, The Ethics of the New Testament, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, p. 334. Schrage draws upon and is influenced by the work of Klaus-Peter Jorns (Das hymnische Evangelium St. NT5, Gutersloh: Mohn, 1971).



or underscoring an urgent appeal. It is a joy experienced in the face of unfavourable empirical reality and a joy that will obviously be consummated in the blessedness of the new order which is the goal of the people's hope. There is already an openness to the reality in hope; so that it does not remain a totally distant and absolutely unrealized reality but sensed as something that can yet be anticipated in the midst of the contradictions of persecution, oppression, martyrdom.

The writer also depicts life in the new order itself as one of great joy. All occasions and experience of sorrow will be banished, 2<sup>4</sup>; 7<sup>14</sup>. Life in the city will be one that will find its focus in God who will dwell in the midst of his people and which will be expressed in worship, another indication of celebration as marking the life in that order, 21<sup>5,22</sup>; 22<sup>3</sup>. This is further underscored by the imagery of the church as the Bride and Christ as the Bridegroom along with the implied imagery of the wedding feast. The Bride and Bridegroom will be in perfect union, with the boundaries of the church, being one and the same with that of the city. The impression then is of all the inhabitants engaged in joyful living of an undisturbed nature in fellowship with their God, 21<sup>2,9</sup>; cf 19<sup>8,9</sup>; Is. 61<sup>10</sup>.

All this joy which is characteristic of the future order is not restricted wholly and solely to it. There are indications that it too can be anticipated in the present order albeit not without interruption and in the midst of suffering. There is an interesting juxtaposition of two cries in the book, the cry which expresses anguish of spirit and which some think bears even a note of vengeance surely reflecting the pain and sorrow felt at the hands of the oppressive power and the cry of acclamation from the same quarters in relation to the same situation reflecting a sense of victory and knowledge of ultimate fulfilment of God's purpose, yet to be, 6<sup>9,10</sup>; 7<sup>9,10</sup>. José Comblin, writing in relation to these two cries, concludes:

...thus the martyrs, visibly suffering the worst humiliation and abandonment at the hand of their torturers, share beforehand by faith, the resurrection of the Cross. The resurrection will not come later as an act of justice, as God's response to the martyrs' calls. It is already present. Already at this very moment, the martyrs can raise their voices in tones of triumph because eternal life is theirs right now - in the very moment of their struggle with their murders.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>José Comblin, Cry of the Oppressed, Cry of Jesus, Meditations on Scripture and Contemporary Struggle, Orbis Books, 1988, pp. 46-47.



These cries are not without their echoes on earth in the experiences of the people of God. The joy of the marriage feast is also anticipated before it actually takes place. Indeed, the anticipation takes place in the context of the decisive battle between Christ and the beasts and her hosts in which the victory was Christ, 19<sup>8,9,11ff</sup>. This was a battle that took place before the establishment of the new order.

Though there is no clearly unambiguous indication or evidence of the practice of the Lord's Supper in the Book, there are hints that provide grounds for the impression that celebration of the Lord's Supper is reflected in it. For example, in the reference to the Lord knocking on the door and promising to feast with those who are open, welcoming and receptive, it is considered that there may be such a hint, 3<sup>20</sup>. G.B. Caird writes concerning Jesus' promise:

..The promise that he will come and have supper has a eucharistic flavour about it. This mention of a supper could hardly fail to conjure up the pictures of the Last Supper in the Upper Room and subsequent occasions when that meal has been re-enacted as the symbol of Christ's continuing presence. This reference to the Lord's Supper is of peculiar importance for an understanding of John's Theology, for the sacrament is clear indication that the early church believed in a coming Christ which was an

anticipation of the Parousia. Just as the Jews kept the Passover as a memorial of God's saving act at the Exodus as a foretaste of the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, so the church celebrated the Lord's supper to proclaim the Lord's death till he comes, 1 Cor. 11<sup>26</sup>. Week by week, past and future meet within the sacrament in which the crucified and regnant Lord made his presence known to his disciples in the breaking of bread.<sup>51</sup>

J.P.M. Sweet would endorse this and has gone even further in seeing much influence on the book by eucharistic practice, as suggested by Pierre Prigent. Referring to Prigent, Sweet writes:

...He has also argued persuasively that the literary structure of the Seven Letters is drawn from the 'formal scrutiny', or examination of the worshippers, which preceded the eucharist - a theme taken up in Ch. 22 - and that much of the symbolism of these chapters is drawn from that of baptism and Eucharist...

According to Prigent Revelation is evoking the message of Christian worship, i.e. that the final coming of Christ and the blessedness of the heavenly banquet are anticipated here and now in his eucharistic presence...<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John The Divine, A & C Black, 1966, p. 58.

<sup>52</sup>J.P.M. Sweet, Revelation, SCM London, 1979, p. 41ff. Prigent's work that is drawn upon is *Apocalypse et Liturgie*.



Even if there is not the widespread influence of eucharistic practice reflected in the work, as suggested by Prigent and approved by Sweet, but on a less elaborate level as reflected for example in the passage commented on by Caird, it would still be significant.<sup>53</sup> For the Eucharist provides a framework for celebration in the midst of life whatever the circumstances and it is a particularly significant moment of the coming together of memory and anticipation based on the work of Christ and Promise of God, and as an expression of joyful Christian hope, and affirmation of Christian freedom and corporate commitment here and now over against such things as would oppress the people and seek to limit the horizons of hope.

The capacity for Christian celebration has been accounted for by many as resulting from a false consciousness created by the ideological conditioning of

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<sup>53</sup>The prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" 22<sup>20</sup> cf 1 Cor. 16<sup>22</sup> is also considered to have eucharistic association in the book as it is known to have elsewhere - see G.B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John The Divine A & C Black 1966, p. 288; J.P.M. Sweet, Revelation, SCM London, 1979, p. 319. G.R. Beasley-Murray without making the eucharistic connections in the specific context notes the liturgical association of the words The New Century Bible Commentary, Revelation W.B. Eerdmans Grand Rapids, Michigan, Marshall, Michigan and Scott, London 1974 p. 348.

the faith itself. There is no purpose here to deny that such a false consciousness can emerge and has had its influence. However, it does not mean that Christian celebration in the midst of suffering must inevitably be a result of false consciousness and there are times when it is so characterized when it is not, but it is rather a particular expression of the liberative impact of Christian hope which is itself solidly grounded and guaranteed in history and human experience by God's Redemptive work in Christ. James Cone, writing of the celebration of black people within the context of their suffering in the United States of America, says of black music which is one of the forms in which their celebration is expressed;

...Black music is unity music. It unifies the joy and sorrow; the love and hate, the hope and despair and moves people towards total liberation.<sup>54</sup>

The oppressed have a disturbing way of mystifying the oppressors by singing and dancing their protest, challenge and defiance; a way of giving peculiar expression to a sense of freedom in the midst of oppression. They seem able to celebrate and mourn at one

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<sup>54</sup>James Cone, Spirituals and the Blues, Seabury, New York, 1972.



and the same time and so funerals become moments of hopeful triumph in the face of death caused by the tyranny of the unjust and oppressive. Funerals in South Africa for victims of the struggle there is a case in point. They are celebrations of the resurrection through the Cross.

Clodovis Boff speaks movingly of what he calls a "culture of freedom" shared and known by the poor and oppressed in Latin America. He points out that it would be a mistake to think that the poor and oppressed live so completely overwhelmed by their oppressors and oppression so as to be totally alienated and estranged from freedom. Their entire life is indeed characterized by the struggle for survival. Their experience of degradation in every area of life is real and yet in many of them can be found an impressive feeling of dignity and vigorous expression of 'positive joyful taste for life'. It is really something of a culture of freedom known to them within the particularity of their experience. Boff sums it up in the following manner:

... This 'culture of freedom' forms something like an atmosphere in which the struggles of the poor for their liberation are carried on and which gives struggle a quite special touch. This atmosphere is made up of life-affirmation, of the will to move forward,

of hope ('Tomorrow, God willing, it will be better') of a sort of existential vibrancy... typifies the poor in their humanity. It expresses the 'transcendence of the oppressed'. It shows that the life of the people cannot be reduced to work (on the economic level) but also includes dance, that is not just a struggle (on the political level) but who plays; that is not just a theory (on the cultural level) but also poetry and creativity. Therefore, the poor combine the sphere of need with the sphere of freedom.<sup>55</sup>

When the poor and oppressed can celebrate like this, then the oppressors tend to feel threatened. By their surmise, freedom and joy of the nature they sense being displayed ought not to be, based upon how they have sought to manage the lives of the oppressed and poor. There is in the freedom and joy expressed by the poor and oppressed a critique of the freedom and joy that the oppressors themselves seek after and claim to have.

It is no wonder that attempts are often made by the powers-that-be through their edicts, propaganda and offerings of their own to restrict, modify, frustrate, replace or prevent altogether the authentic celebration of the poor and oppressed. But then, the more this is done, it is the more the capacity to celebrate in the midst of suffering seems more evident and more

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<sup>55</sup>Clodovis Boff, "The Poor In Latin America and their New Way of Liberation", in Concilium, June 1987.



challenging. The people seem in their daily life to bear the cross in their struggle, sacrifice and humiliation but also the power of the resurrection is manifested in their hope which inspires their freedom and joy. Frances Young has expressed appropriate words in this regard:

... But the joy over-rides everything. For to put it in the eschatological terms of the New testament, the death of Christ has finally dealt with all the problems of the Old Order, broken down all the barriers to proper realization of the covenant relationship, and made it possible to join at least in the anticipation, in the feast of the kingdom. Have you noticed how often in the Gospels the kingdom is likened to a wedding feast? Now to feast in the kingdom is to feast in God's presence, to rejoice in seeking him face to face; to feast in the kingdom is to worship him properly, to play one's part in the great congregation praising the God of our salvation, the multitude of every nation in one loud voice...

Salvation belongs to God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, Rev. 7<sup>10</sup> ...

Of course the final consummation has not been reached, yet the Christians of the New Testament experienced it in anticipation, so might we. The old order is obsolescent fading away; it still dogs our footsteps, but it cannot harm us. The pictures of the kingdom in the Bible are pictures of joy arising from the midst of affliction, joy among free people who had glimpsed a God who so loves that he shares in the darkness and pain, comes to his people like a father

and a shepherd, meets them, in the way and lifts their burden, they hope in God because God is the one who saves. They love and serve God in the midst of the pain and evil of the world. Even in the visions of the perfect future, the Lamb slain and the blood of martyrs are at the centre of the praising congregation.<sup>56</sup>

Hope leads the way to celebration in the midst of suffering. And it gives the taste of liberation now and the vision of possibilities that the attempted limitation of horizons by the forces of oppression cannot obliterate.

The final aspect of the liberative impact of hope is Awareness of the Cosmic Dimension.

#### Awareness of the Cosmic Dimension

Whereas it has been emphasized and maintained that the Book of Revelation is self-consciously contextual, this does not exhaust its vision or explain its frame of reference totally. The writer quite significantly operated at the same time with a cosmic vision which is one of the very important and distinctive features of the book and makes it relevant to more than the immediately contextual. The contextual and the cosmic are held together and a perspective is gained on how God

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<sup>56</sup>Frances Young, Can These Dry Bones Live? SCM 1981, pp. 81-82.



identifies Himself with the life, experience and needs of a people in the particularity of their experience and yet remains at the same time the God of the whole cosmos and whose interest is the liberation and redemption of the whole cosmos. This does not emerge in the writing as a carefully thought out theory or a fully developed dogmatic presentation. It rather emerges as the writer seeks to make sense of the experience of struggle and tribulation in which he and his readers shared solidarity. This he sought to do in the light of the purpose God disclosed in his word and by the inspiration and enlightenment of the spirit.

The signs and indications of the cosmic dimension are scattered throughout the book, sometimes by straightforward references and at the other time by implication. God and His Christ are at times spoken of in terms that convey the sense of their cosmic significance and the cosmic significance of what they do. They are the 'Alpha and Omega', embracing and transcending all dimensions of time while indwelling it, the source and ground of all creation and are unmatched and unmatchable in sovereignty and authority, 1<sup>8,17</sup>; 2<sup>8</sup>; 4<sup>11</sup>; 17<sup>14</sup>; 19<sup>6</sup>; 21<sup>6</sup>; 22<sup>13</sup>. God conceived of in this light cannot simply be restricted, domesticated,

tribalized or nationalized. One of the titles used of Christ is the "Word", 19<sup>13</sup>. This title is used elsewhere with cosmic significance, John 1<sup>1ff</sup>; Heb. 1<sup>1ff</sup>; cf Col. 1<sup>5ff</sup>; Prov. 8<sup>22</sup>. It is not clear by any means that the same cosmic significance is being assigned to the use of the title in the book. There are indications elsewhere in it that the word is noted for its dynamic and critical impact, 1<sup>16</sup>; 2<sup>16</sup>; cf Heb. 4<sup>12</sup>; Is. 11<sup>4</sup>; 49<sup>2</sup>; Ps. of Sol. 17<sup>27</sup>; Wisdom 18<sup>15</sup>. There is also evidence that the Word of God is used in reference to the gospel, 1<sup>2,9</sup>; 6<sup>9</sup>; 12<sup>11</sup>; 20<sup>4</sup>. And yet the absence of a direct and explicit cosmic reference as far as the title "Word of God" is concerned should not be hastily regarded as a lack of any such connotation of the particular usage. Martin Kiddle, for example, thinks that there might well be such a connotation, especially if the book has links with the circle from which the Johannine writings emerged and also based on hints contained in the Book itself such as the exalted Christ being referred to as the beginning of creation, 3<sup>14</sup>.<sup>57</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, thinks in a similar vein when he writes:

...It would seem likely that some notion of the role of Cosmic mediator will have been present to John's mind in using the

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<sup>57</sup>Martin Kiddle, The Revelation, Hodder and Stoughton, 1940, p. 386.



term. Since the Purousia initiates the eschatological process completed in the new world, it may be held that the title Word of God is fitting for him who both initiates creation and fulfils its purpose in the new creation.<sup>58</sup>

Such other features as the frequent references to heaven and earth, thrones and the sea underscore the cosmic sweep of the vision and purpose that the writer is dealing with, 4<sup>1ff</sup>; 5<sup>1ff</sup>; 7<sup>1ff</sup>; 19<sup>1ff</sup>; 21<sup>1ff</sup>. And even those symbols which seem to have direct contextual referents such as the dragon, the beasts or Babylon, both their background associations and the scale of influence they represent indicate that their significance is not exhausted by their contextual referents.

The matter of direct interest, however, from the point of view of this study is the range and nature of

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<sup>58</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, The New Century Bible Revelation, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Lond., 1974, p. 280. E. Schüssler Fiorenza disagrees that there is such a cosmic connotation arguing that the title in Revelation has a clearly different theological and traditional context from that of the fourth Gospel. she is convinced that the writer was a member, possibly head of a Christian prophetic-apocalyptic school of its own rather than being a member of a Johannine school; so that no direct literary inter-relationship between the two need to be assumed. Rather, if anything, a dialectical exchange of theological thought could be considered...

("The Quest for The Johannine school; The Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel" in *The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgement*, Fortress Philadelphia, 1985, esp. pp. 97-99. 106-108).

the promised new order, which is, the focus and goal of the hope represented in the book. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>1</sup> All things will be made new, 21<sup>5</sup>. It is a new creation which represents an inclusiveness and comprehensiveness that are reflected in the removal of barriers, frontiers, divisions, mutual threat and challenge and competing and antithetical forms of existence. It is the fulfilment of what God had originally intended in his creative purpose, now taking place in the radical transformation of the historical process on a cosmic scale and at the instance of God's own creative and redemptive initiative. Thus a central mark of the new creation is the feature of "Integration", the chief integrative factor being the transformative action of God and his indwelling presence, 21<sup>1-8</sup>. It is the fate of the whole earth and cosmos, history and nature, time and space, humanity and all created life that is involved. It is a single and undivided order marked by wholeness and wholesomeness. The division and distinction between heaven and earth are no more. There is no hint, if ever there was, of distinction between the secular and sacred and the communitarian view of human life is emphasised over against any thought of individualistic preoccupation and commitment. This new



heaven and new earth merge into the communitarian concept of a city, 21<sup>2,9ff</sup>; cf Gal. 4<sup>24-31</sup>; Phil. 3<sup>20</sup>; Heb. 11<sup>10</sup>; 12<sup>22</sup>; 13<sup>14</sup>; Ps. 46; 48; Is. 2<sup>1-4</sup>; 65<sup>17</sup>; Sib oracle, 5<sup>420-25</sup>; 1 Enoch 90<sup>29</sup>. The city does not only offer the vision of a common area of habitation but more so a vision of a totally integrated way of life - a community of shared existence and experience. It is the ultimate in ordered human life, the finest expression of human community summed up in the high value placed on citizenship, a symbol of belonging and commitment to the common good. It incorporates all that is best in terms of culture and expression of the human spirit. Haddon Willmer, writing of the City as an ancient concept, has this to say:

...The city has been a focus of civilization since the fourth millennium B.C. In the city, man's aesthetic and economic endeavours mesh...closely in corporal forms. The city has developed the sense of order out of which civilization grew and on which it depends.<sup>59</sup>

If the vision of the new order as an integrated whole is to challenge and shape perspective and commitment in the present order as an integral part of

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<sup>59</sup>Haddon Willmer, "Images of the City and the Shaping of Humanity" in Theology in the City, Edited by Anthony Harvey, SPCK, 1989, pp. 32-33.

the future hope represented in the book, what are some of the ways in which this will be manifested? Certainly it has implications in relation to the reality of oppression and injustice, the struggle for liberation, the perception of God as God of the oppressed and the call for preferential option for the poor. The characterization of God as God of the oppressed has been challenged along with the concept of preferential option for the poor. It is felt that it violates the fundamental principle of all humanity being equal before God and all being loved by him equally. Yet a proper understanding of the principle of integration as suggested by the vision of the new order indicates that such a violation is not a necessary outcome of the concepts. The overall and all-embracing purpose of God is the inter-relatedness of humanity. Oppression and injustice are a direct threat to this inter-relatedness since they marginalize and victimize one section of humanity. In the interest of the integrated purpose of God which includes the inter-relatedness of humanity in terms of equal dignity and possibility of fulfilling their humanity, the marginalized and victimized become the special object of divine concern, justice and righteousness. Marginalization and victimization are a



distortion of the Divine intention and purpose which ought to receive corrective attention. This is impossible without special attention being paid to those who are suffering. Phillip Wogaman, writing of the concept of preferential option for the poor, says:

...The implicit claim is that people are fundamentally equal in value, that they are created for mutuality in relationship, and mutuality is not possible so long as people are in a position to dominate others.<sup>60</sup>

The idea and principle of integration in terms of the human community are, therefore, served positively by the concept of God as God of the oppressed witnessed to in the Book of Revelation along with the implied commitment of preferential option for the poor and oppressed rather than undermined by them.

The concept of liberation is also served in a positive manner by the principle of integration inspired by the vision of the new order. Liberation may be understood in a rather narrow sense as it relates to the experience of the oppressed and their struggles. The

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<sup>60</sup>J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Perspectives on Politics, SCM, 1980, p. 70. A very sensitive and instructive treatment of "Preferential Option for the poor", may be found in a brief article by Gustavo Gutierrez, entitled, "The Church and the Poor", in The Month, July 1989.

impression is given in some instances that liberation is understood largely in an economic and political sense. This is reductionist, to say the least and does not reflect 'the integral nature of the redemptive character of God's work and purpose summed up in the picture of the new heaven and new earth'. The oppression to which people are exposed include such things as race, sex, class, culture, values, despair, self-understanding, alienation and marginalization at various levels in life. The fullness of life, openness to and participation in community, receiving from and contributing to the wholeness of life and the sense of fulfilment of humanity are all part of the experience of being liberated. Engagement aimed at enabling and expressing such an experience will be acknowledged and affirmed in the new order<sup>21</sup><sup>24</sup>. Hope of this often sustains the poor and oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Clodovis Boff writes of this hope of the poor and oppressed in Latin America in the following manner:

... This is expressed on various levels, from general desires, 'Oh, if only everyone could eat as God wishes...' through historical hope; 'Once the people have power in their own hands...' to eschatological hope, but it will only happen in heaven...<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Clodovis Boff, "The Poor In Latin America and Their New Way of Liberation", Concilium, June 1987.



Boff then comments;

...The one thing that is clear is that full liberation will come about 'in heaven' beyond history. This is absolute utopia. Such is the conviction of our people. Only secularized intellectuals can put forward and cultivate the idea of a 'paradise on earth' as the sum total of human hope.

And yet this ultimate eschatological hope still ferments in the hearts and between the hands of the people. It is in the name of the ultimate utopia that the foundations of an absolute future can be laid in this world, in the shape of an egalitarian society.<sup>62</sup>

Boff's description and comment are apt. It fits the experience of the oppressed in many Third World countries. Human existence kept on the periphery of its own genuine potential and possibilities, including the possibilities of fulfilling life in community, by alienating and dominating structures of control and patterns of relationship means a violation of the desirable and divinely purposed integrated character and wholeness of life. This cannot be compensated for by the 'surplus life' that flows from those who benefit from the workings of the oppressive, alienating and disintegrative forces that make victims of others.

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<sup>62</sup>Clodovis Boff, "The Poor in Latin America and Their New way of Liberation", Concilium, 1987.

The principle of integration draws attention to the fact that the prospect for human life and welfare cannot be divorced from what happens in the total environment. In the Book of Revelation there is a hint of this quite apart from its emergence as a direct implication of the promise and vision of the new order. This is seen in the writer's view of judgement that the oppressors bring upon themselves and the sufferings they also cause the poor and oppressed as portrayed for example, by symbol of the horsemen and the natural disasters, scarcity and famine, associated with them, 6<sup>1ff</sup>. The evidence of Roman wealth and life-style gives indication of the exploitations of the natural and non-renewable resources of the provinces and other territories much to the overall disadvantage of the majority of the people in such provinces and territories, 18<sup>9ff</sup>. The link between what happens or what is done to the environment and the welfare and well-being of people is something that is receiving increasing and in some instances, urgent attention. Greed and poverty are two factors that are identified as being at work causing and aggravating the abuse of the environment with its adverse effect on the quality of life of the poor and oppressed. Enrique Dussel, writing of this



problem and especially as it touches the attitude of the rich countries and their relation to poor Third World countries, says:

...They regard the earth as sheer material, as purely exploitable, unlimitedly destructible, and a source of income, as a cause of growth in the profit rate, or even in the rate of mere production is another aspect of the human dominative act... The hot bed of this entire phenomenon is an aggressive society that destroys natural ecology, a society for which the corruption of nature is an intrinsic aspect of the process of its domination of human beings, the poor, the subjected classes, the peripheral countries.

The transnational corporations locate their most contaminating industries, and exercise the least safety precautions, precisely in the under-developed countries. Factory waste kills the fauna and flora of the oceans, pollutes the atmosphere with asphyxiating gasses and wipes out the natural producers of oxygen (such as our forests and or ocean algae). The developed countries rob the periphery even of its oxygen. After all they consume more than they produce.<sup>63</sup>

Dussel has expressed himself vigorously but not unfairly. Exploitation and pollution of the natural environment

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<sup>63</sup>Enrique Dussel, Ethics and Community, Burns and Oates, 1988, pp. 197-198. This is a welcome new and developing interest from the theology of liberation perspective, which has been criticized in the past for not showing enough interest in this area among others in its justifiable concern against exploitation and oppression.

have been part and parcel of the oppression suffered by poor countries in relation to rich countries in their long-standing colonial relationships and in subsequent dependence upon such countries for economic survival. The poor countries themselves are also forced to take ecological risks because of their own poverty, which is not simply self-caused as some would suggest, but due also in many respects to the existing unjust ordering of economic and political relationships. Jane Blewett remarks:

... It is all of a piece, justice for the poor people means justice for the earth. If one divorce the people from the earth and pretend we are working for poor while ignoring what is happening to their support systems, i.e. to their ocean, air and animal species, we are duping ourselves and them.<sup>64</sup>

The truth is that even though the situation is more immediate and urgent for the already oppressed and exploited poorer countries, it is not confined exclusively to them and even the developed countries are faced with adverse consequences of ecological and environmental delinquency in their own territories.

The principle of integration is not simply for the benefit of human beings as if this natural environment

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<sup>64</sup>Jane Blewett, "Social Justice and Creation Spirituality" in *The Way*, January 1989.



has no right of its own and no integrity of its own to be protected. It is interesting to note that in the important vision that opens the apocalyptic section, the heavenly community is seen to include significant representative categories of the animal world of God's created order - wild and domestic animals and human beings.<sup>4<sup>6-7</sup></sup> This is an integrated community in which all around the throne of God participated in shared heavenly worship,<sup>4<sup>6b-11</sup></sup>. The reality of the integrated order seen in the heavenly vision ought also to be reflected on earth as the worship itself. It is, however, as much threatened as the worship itself. Nevertheless, the vision of the new order in which heaven and earth will no longer be separate realms but a single historical order when all things will be made new,<sup>21<sup>14</sup></sup>, becomes an inspiration that prompts its anticipation in Christian praxis in the present order. Jürgen Moltmann has argued that human beings will stand in exploitative domination in relation to creation until it acknowledged that every part of the created order must be seen in the totality of their relationships. Human beings are participants in such a network of relationships and as participants they

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must recognize the community they share with nature rather than a position of domination and exploitation of it.<sup>65</sup> Other aspects of the created order have their own place in the revelatory and redemptive purpose of God and abuse or misuse of them undermines this considerably. What is here implied in the cosmic sweep of the Book of Revelation in its vision of all things being made new is made more explicit by Paul, in discussing the hope of creation, Rom. 8<sup>19-21</sup>. C.E.B. Cranfield, commenting on Paul, writes:

... If it is indeed God's creation, if he is faithful to it too as well as to mankind and if he is going to bring it also (as well as the believing me) to a goal worthy of himself, then it has a dignity of its own and an inalienable, since divinely appointed - right to be treated by us with reverence and sensitiveness<sup>66</sup>

The entire order of creation is central to God's purpose. It is the object of his liberative and redemptive will. This is indeed part and parcel of the vision of the Christian hope and something which ought to be affirmed and anticipated in openness to hope in the present.

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<sup>65</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, God is Creation, SCM, London, esp. Chapters 1 & 2, 1985,

<sup>66</sup>C.E.B. Cranfield, Romans, A Shorter Commentary, Eerdmans, 1985, p. 198.



The concept of solidarity in terms of human experience and relationship is closely related to that integration inspired by awareness of the cosmic dimension of the faith. This has been shown. The vision of the new order as a city with the Temple and the Church merging into that of the city itself, and with God dwelling in its midst, is very powerful in terms of its portrayal of the new order as a community, 21-22<sup>5</sup>. It is a community of "Solidarity in Perfection", perfect joy, peace, freedom, righteousness, fellowship, worship - life. This solidarity is anticipated by and is the fulfilment of a solidarity met at the very beginning of the book, a solidarity in tribulation and kingdom and patient endurance, 1<sup>9</sup>. Hope of the new order ties people here and now into this solidarity. It contradicts the tendency and temptations for the experience of suffering and oppression to result in a sense of isolation, apathy and self-preoccupation. And yet this solidarity does not necessarily mean that the particularity of each experience of suffering under oppression is being dissolved. But what it means is that there is a family likeness in much of the suffering endured in oppression and that there is fundamentally a common enemy behind the

form of oppression and injustice bent on undermining God's overall purpose in His creation. The dragon, the ultimate symbol of the lust for power, the capacity for deception and chaos, creating a culture of the denial of human fulfilment, is portrayed as such a power, 12, cf 13, 17. Marc Ellis is of the opinion that solidarity in suffering of the nature that it is said the wider vision of hope inspires, has its own role to play in the liberative process. He writes helpfully:

... We see that our particularity when shared with the larger world is a gift that portends transformation in a world in need of transformation.<sup>67</sup>

And there is another side to the question of solidarity when the wider vision inspired by hope is taken into consideration. It means taking account of exploitation and oppression, the distortions of God's creative purpose and order, even when they are not being directly endured. It should not be seen as being unrelated to or independent of the presumably free and comfortable experience and existence. There is an interrelatedness that cannot be overlooked and which should prompt a sense of responsibility towards and for the areas of injustice

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<sup>67</sup>Marc Ellis, "As It Was The Beginning: Jews and Christians in the Struggle for Liberation", The Way, Supplement 63, Autumn, 1988, p. 79



and oppression - a sense of responsibility which includes a sense of penitence and accountability since the experienced advantage is not infrequently at the price of the disadvantage, suffering and oppression shared by others. Unfair trade practices, special political and economic alliances, colonial legacies and continued neo-colonial patterns of relationship that sustain a domination-dependence state of affairs, and operate in favour of the developed and prosperous. And even where the direct link between development and underdevelopment is not visible or cannot be readily accounted for, suffering in any part of the human community ought to become the concern of others who share the vision of Christian hope with its cosmic sweep.

The vision of hope in the end opens up a vista of freedom as a broader, deeper, richer possibility of human fulfilment than the oppressors conceive of and sometimes than the oppressed themselves are willing to concede. The oppressor because of the hardness of heart which results from recurring rejection of divine action aimed at evoking repentance, fail to grasp it,<sup>9</sup><sup>20,22</sup>; <sup>16</sup><sup>9,11</sup>. On the other hand the oppressed, because of their own painful experience of being unjustly treated, are tempted to close the door to the possibility of such fulfilment

being experienced by the oppressor. The cry for vindication may well give hint of this, 6<sup>9-11</sup>. And yet the broad sweep and inclusiveness of the vision of hope seem to offer a more open possibility than this.

In fact, the issue is sometimes seen by some in terms of the perennial debate as to whether salvation is ultimately of a universalist or a particularistic nature. This is certainly not a preoccupation of the Book, as it is not of the New Testament in general. In a previous discussion in Chapter Three the ambiguity of the evidence was noted. There is an openness that this ambiguity suggests there should be taken very seriously. ( ?

It has already been pointed out that the matter is not a subject of debate in the book itself. There is an openness that the ambiguity of evidence suggests that should be taken very seriously and which would suggest suspension of final judgement one way or another, without by any means, undermining the serious moral thrust of the book with its urgent moral and spiritual claims or neglecting its vision of God's forgiving purpose even in judgement. This is why hope as the dominant feature is so significant and its liberative impact is borne out. This hope calls and challenges humanity to share in the possibilities that God in and through Christ has made



open for fulfilment, beginning in the present with faithful participation in commitment to His righteousness and achieving fullness in the glory of the new order. Whether this hope in the various ways in which its liberative impact is experienced and demonstrated, as discussed and considered in the present discussion, will be embraced by all and its promise experienced by all or it will be rejected ultimately by some and what the consequences will remain an open matter. Yet it is clear enough that to reject the Christian hope with its promise and challenge, gift and demand, is to incur judgement upon ourselves for we were made for this hope. But even this judgement at its deepest bears an evangelical motivation, seeking to evoke repentance. It, however, does not force it against the will. Hope kept alive is the spirit of freedom. This is the message of the Book.

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