

## CONCEPTIONS OF THE SACRED. REFLECTIONS ON TRANSCENDENCE IN CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE

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**ABSTRACT.** In this reflection paper, the author considers the language and content relating to the sacred and the transcendent and the expectations arising from such language. Contending that its secular usage is sufficiently unreferenced the author asks whether such language can still be used in Christian discourse which by nature is particular. The author concludes that human discourse on transcendence is common to all people in various ways sometimes mutually inclusive yet often exclusive. Christian discourse is able to use the terms available to depict the essence of human desire but historically has defended the particularity of biblical language as necessary to preserve its Christological imperative which is its distinctive departure from secular appropriation of mystery.

**KEY WORDS:** Sacred, Transcendence, Richard Hooker, John Calvin, Theosis, Participation, Mystery

In popular usage the term “sacred” is often contrasted with “secular”. The more exact use of language when considering these matters is important given their variable and elusive character. The terms themselves are derivative of a larger landscape of ideas and desires, many biblical and many not. These are distilled and popularised in many ways. The terms can mean anything a person thinks is deeply moving, not susceptible to rational inquiry, mysterious, dark, impenetrable, beautiful, and so on but with their usual meanings escalated to supra-mundane levels.

The situation is perhaps analogous to the contemporary use of the word “spirituality”. It appears to reference a person’s appreciation for the transcendent “other”, perhaps Rudolph Otto’s “numinous”, a nameless but felt perception that a realm of reality more ultimate than the cyclical physicality of present life does, in fact, exist but which the language and experience of ordinary life fails to capture. It is perhaps worth saying that to approach a working understanding of our

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terms, the idea of transcendence is not necessarily confined to what a person may sense or experience rationally but may exist in terms of desire and the transformation of desire into more concrete existential moves. This points to the need for an interpretive dialectic between the material truth of intuition and the necessary linguistic framework to describe it. To complicate the matter, expressions of transcendence are inherently difficult to articulate because the initiating experience may be without precedent, unsought, deeply surprising, and terrifying (so Otto) especially if we are uncertain as to the meaning or source of such an experience, beyond the “fact” that “it” happened. In the absence of external reference points the language we will use is whatever we have. Despite reluctance to assign religious language to such experience and in light of widespread uneasiness and suspicion of master-narratives, its use is inevitable in the absence of linguistic alternatives.

However, the word “sacred” (Latin: *sacrum*) does exist in our vocabulary and connects ideas of divinity, divine influence, completeness and difference. That which is sacred is “other”, unique, set apart, and cannot be used as we would similar profane objects or persons. The identification of that which is sacred can be almost anything: land, artefacts, people, organisations, groups, books (the Bible, The Quran), ideas themselves and so on. In secular society, sacredness is not immediately associated with divinity except by extension. Transcendence is more likely to be co-opted by our culture because its boundaries are so broad and can constitute anything a person wants. Thus, I would argue that spirituality is a correlate term for those wishing to maintain a formal linkage with a religious and linguistic heritage but as long as it is unreferenced a person can never be certain what is intended.

Allowing that our terms “sacred” and “transcendent” are elusive perhaps we can use the biblical language of the Old Testament regarding sacredness and its attendant linkages to holiness, secrecy and mystery as a place to start. This can be more fruitful because I think the Scriptures assert the sort of question we may be reaching for but to a much greater and challenging extent.

Religious mysticism is derived from human claims upon the divine and the search for coherence. For example, Evelyn Underhill thinks of the mystic as one who has “an overwhelming consciousness of God and of his own soul: a consciousness which absorbs or eclipses all other centres of interest”<sup>1</sup> built upon the conviction of “a personal self capable of communion with God”.<sup>2</sup> The essential feature of such mystical conviction is that it is experienced and rooted in:

... the way the mystic feels about his Deity, and about his own relation with it; for this adoring and all-possessing consciousness of the rich and complete divine life over

1 Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism* (New York: AMS Press, 1920), 2.

2 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 3.

against the self's life, and of the possible achievement of a level of being, a sublimation of the self, wherein we are perfectly united with it... This is the common factor which unites those apparently incompatible views of the Universe... [the mystic's] intuition of the divine is so lofty that it cannot be expressed by means of any intellectual concept".<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, if this points to transcendence it will be no surprise that if our gods do not look like us, they will certainly think a lot like us as we project our own sympathies and anxieties upon them. Yet it has to be conceded that the term "Deity" itself might be too particular for those interested claiming experience rather than interpreting it. While the aim of the mystic is "the establishment of special relations with the spiritual order"<sup>4</sup> it is to be noted that such a relationship is often established by the intensity of the mystic's desire and openness to the domain of the Spirit. The transcendental aspects of this relationship are attained by "immediate knowledge far more than by belief"<sup>5</sup> and which results in "unmediated intercourse with the Transcendent".<sup>6</sup> The Transcendent need neither be personal and therefore nor relational—merely "other" but initiated by the observer or seeker. This is the ancient problem and has the capacity to take us in many directions suitable to our desires. While Underhill does not make a case for the abandonment of the intellect, she is clear that the assurances of relational union with the Godhead cannot be imparted merely by membership in a group and that mystical experience in turn must be personally encountered. Such assurances are therefore secret and highly personal. The hiddenness, or secrecy, of divine knowledge is well-known in Christian and Jewish literature and believers of many traditions assume a posture of personal and corporate piety which offers maximum openness to the life of heaven draws upon such history of experience. See, for example, Julian of Norwich. However, in the Christian mystical tradition, the idea of mystery points to that of an open secret in which revelatory knowledge, disclosed by the Holy Spirit to those having faith, is actually the repair of knowledge lost in the Fall and now restored by divine grace, apart from the self-authenticating merits of the mystic. Thus, while Underhill's conception of "mystical" is primarily directed from below, inasmuch as mystical qualities reside "wholly in the temper of the self who adopts them,"<sup>7</sup> it is the *object* of such contemplation that directs the church in its thinking and theology including Aquinas, Bonaventure, Richard Hooker, John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and countless others

The language of the sacred from a biblical perspective resides not in the identity of the person but in the identity of God and insofar as the created order supplies intimations of sacredness and wonder it might be thought to drive observers

3 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 4f.

4 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 27.

5 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 25.

6 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 25.

7 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 5.

to openness towards divine implications. The pursuit of a language of wonder seems innate regardless of one's religious convictions.

The Old Testament texts concretely connect the idea of the sacred with the identity of God. One might say that this is intended so we may draw conclusions that are verifiable and repeatable because they are theologically linked to a tradition and manifested in terms of concrete permanence—that is codified into the behaviours of an entire community but derives from a model of reality. Thus, in relation to Leviticus, one may contract uncleanness but not purity. Thus uncleanness can be remedied but purity at the human level can only be received not achieved. The avoidance of uncleanness is in itself impossible and recognisable only through knowledge of the sacred and the required responses in accordance with its sacral boundaries. From a biblical perspective the sacred can only be truthfully understood in relation to God as the One who discloses the mysteries of reality, that is, its true and secret identity and purpose. The theophanies given to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets speak to the descent of God among us and the need for a mediator. While an intuitive attraction towards the sacred is to be expected in all ages this does not automatically translate into moral or ethical persuasion. Nevertheless, the Pentateuch positively demands it.

Exodus and Leviticus express the separates and difference of God, Num 23:19; Exodus 3:13ff, Psalms 8 and 144:3; the revelation of otherwise impenetrable knowledge such as dreams or riddles, reflective or speculative wisdom as to creation and the mystery of existence and related cosmological questions. The hint in Genesis 4:26 that at some point in the human journey, people (although LXX and MT read singular) “began to call on the name of the Lord”. Yet heaven remained silent. Robert Kuhn surveys the cosmological vastness and returns with a strange confidence in our capacity to produce more and more options as to why there is something rather than nothing resulting in the bleak coldness of “Why Not Nothing”. Perhaps the trite response is that he's asking the question which presupposes at least Kuhn himself unless he is a figment of his own imagination but then again, one needs a self-aware imagination in order to conceive a possible figment. His suggestion is that we “loosen our mental moorings from the one or two cultural conditioned explanations that are generally and uncritically accepted”.<sup>8</sup> And again, “How is it that we humans have such farsighted understanding after only a few thousand years of historical consciousness, only a few hundred years of effective science, and only a few decades of cosmological observations?”<sup>9</sup> As regards “cosmological observations” Kuhn confuses science with theology and is quite off the mark as regards the observational skills of the ancients. But he is confident that the bleakness of “Nothing” can be ultimately overcome because we're all a

8 Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Why This Universe? Towards a Taxonomy of Possible Explanations”, *Skeptic* 13.2 (2007): 35.

9 Kuhn, “Why This Universe?”, 35.

work in progress and “diverse contributions are needed”. The Bible cannot seem to comprehend this apparent rejection of “Something”—“the fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). After all, to argue for “Nothing” is in effect to remove ourselves from the origins of not merely rational comprehension but also the joy of it. Aside from the ghastly vision of “Nothing” what perverse pleasure could be derived in the discovery of “Nothing” for surely in that instant of time, assuming the discovery to be true, we would cease “to be” and know neither the pain nor pleasure of what we had discovered? As far as Christian discourse is concerned we can legitimately invite the inquiry regarding what is it that accounts for such asking in the first place. Why such a sense of self-reflection and wonder that all people can name in some way or other?

But we are a long way from limiting our conversation to considerations of what constitutes the sacred. One is apt to think mainly of sacred space, books, occasions, knowledge, persons, and so on, often in connection with anthropological studies for example, Mary Douglas<sup>10</sup> *et al* on taboos, death, ritual, shamanism, dream interpretation, Jungian analysis, Freud... but the Bible offers some very unusual and intriguing hints that suggest an escalation of the sense of the holy towards a coherence that is either hopefully or unnervingly personal. The theophanies of the Pentateuch are startlingly direct and even matter-of-fact.<sup>11</sup> We might term these transcendental encounters “boundary events”. Sacred in that they are different and other but impossible to investigate unless by the very integrity of those who experience them and were prepared to stake their lives upon their truth.

In the New Testament what of the resurrection of Jesus and the post-resurrection accounts? Are these accounts not embarrassingly candid while Jesus reminds the disciples that ghosts do not eat? Or St. Paul’s conversion while preparing to persecute the saints in Damascus. Or Stephen’s vision at his martyrdom. St. Paul again recounts, in 2 Corinthians 12:2, without much analysis, the experience of a man caught up into the third heaven. All these offer a key distinction as to biblical transcendence in that they derive from divine prevenience. If, as Underhill suggests, transcendence is a human perspective derived “from below” then its objective is to control and authenticate our version of reality and the satisfaction of need. The biblical accounts consistently reject this aspect of the human search and replace it with the offerings of heaven itself. Consequently, it is useful to consider how the Bible has constrained Christian discourse on this topic in the past. We turn to briefly consider developments in biblical apocalyptic.

10 Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

11 For example, the divine encounters with Abraham (Genesis 15:12-16), Jacob (Genesis 32:24-30), Moses (Exodus 3:2-6; 24:9-11; 33:17-23; 40:38).

### **Transcendence, the Sacred and Biblical Apocalyptic**

The language of biblical apocalyptic has the potential to restore and reconstruct an alternative imaginative framework which if understood with its power and limitations might present a counterpoint to transcendence created by human speculation. A number of barriers exist to our appreciation of the positive value of apocalyptic. The most obvious lies in the apparent obscurity of its symbolism and the difficulty of situating its genre within the larger biblical corpus—this involves the development of a hermeneutic which is both sufficiently focussed and generous enough to perceive the mind of apocalyptic thought as it might exist beyond the usual textual boundaries of, for example, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation. In other words, apocalyptic embodies a way of understanding the purposes and actions of God in the world in relation to the prophetic depiction of the Kingdom of God. Such actions must then be viewed as ultimate and hence transcendent by definition. Further, an assessment of apocalyptic needs a canonical perspective since it arises from the self-awareness of Scripture.

A further obstacle to a positive appropriation of apocalyptic is the popular attraction towards the sensational. Behind this lies a hermeneutic which really owes its existence to a form of historical criticism which sees apocalyptic on the one hand as pseudepigraphic and yet also susceptible to historical decoding and reconstruction with the result that pseudonymity fooled everyone or no one.<sup>12</sup> The result moves apocalyptic between symbolic literalism, fulfilment and obscurantism which exists as a literary-theological artefact intended to offer a positive linkage between a nation under oppression and its ancient texts. What is lost in the process is the canonical connectedness that sees apocalyptic in its intertextuality despite the potential for disjunction within biblical tradition. What is crucial however is the theological roots and goals of apocalyptic from within a tradition that is continuous. This offers a useful constraint that privileges transcendence from “above” yet locates its experience imaginatively within the redemptive hope of both the created order and the experience of election in Israel’s written collective memory towards its horizon of ultimate fulfilment against which its own history seemed to conspire.

In order to connect apocalyptic literature with our discussion of transcendence it is necessary to ask whether its context is strictly that of intertestamental thought defined through exile and oppression or whether the language and speech of apocalyptic has a more extensive history. Indeed, since apocalyptic is by definition the disclosure of the counsels of God in such a prophetic fashion that revelatory insight could not otherwise be known, the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic needs to be outlined. Christopher Seitz describes the two approaches

12 See, Joyce G. Baldwin, “Is There Pseudonymity in the Old Testament?” *Themelios* 4.1 (1978): 612, who defends the absence of pseudonymity in the Old Testament.

of Gerhard von Rad and Paul Hanson.<sup>13</sup> Von Rad links apocalyptic to the Old Testament wisdom tradition in which conventional wisdom as depicted in Proverbs receives renewed exploration in Job and Ecclesiastes neither of which reject the Deuteronomic wisdom of Proverbs but rather probe its boundaries and limitations in light of lived experience. Likewise according to Seitz, Hanson argues that "... apocalyptic emerges when the mundane (this-world) concerns of prophecy no longer find plausibility, and mythic patterns reassert themselves to cover this lost ground. The 'dawn of apocalyptic' casts its shadow after the dusk of prophecy has fallen".<sup>14</sup> For Seitz himself,

... apocalyptic discourse is rooted in certain instincts known to be cultivated among Israel's sages... it is not spontaneous, inspired address, concerned with the righteousness of God in the events of Israel's history, delivered (with all the consequences) to the broadest possible constituency, in the full light of day. Rather, inspiration is understood as the capacity to interpret either texts or revelations vouchsafed in private, so as to disclose eternal realities. These realities have been fixed from eternity, and are manifested through a revelation (apocalypse) for all who have the capacity to comprehend what has been shown forth, and acknowledge what they receive as true. This requires wisdom and a commonly held body of sacred texts, which generally constitute the raw material combusting in the disclosure. It also requires an agent of disclosure, accepted as truly sent by God. As such, one can speak of apocalyptic in connection with prophecy as that which is interpreted truly, usually through the lens of sacred texts, rather than the inspired delivering of God's fresh word.<sup>15</sup>

The implication of this approach to a biblical view of transcendence and the sacred is that it robs the apocalyptic genre of the sensational which only flowers in extreme situations of oppression or moral crisis. While this particular context is by no means excluded the median position of Seitz does not require the attenuation of either the wisdom or prophetic traditions since these are themselves conceptually linked. In fact, the context of crisis might be viewed as a subset of the wider and more ancient Israelite appreciation that its entire life and formation is singularly the result of divine choice and election and this, being true, necessarily presented the community with an enlarged concept of its trajectory into future horizons. Considered alongside Seitz' view that apocalyptic literature needed "a commonly held body of sacred texts" it becomes apparent that apocalyptic represents a hermeneutical perspective capable of joining past, present and future. The intertestamental situation of Israel's post-exilic history naturally afforded ample opportunity to test the value of apocalyptic in relation to its existing textual tradi-

13 Christopher R. Seitz, "Old Testament Apocalyptic", *Evangel 17.3* (1999): 74.

14 Christopher R. Seitz, "Old Testament Apocalyptic", *Evangel 17.3* (1999): 74.

15 Seitz, "Apocalyptic", 74.

tions. What is notable is the New Testament's remarkable restraint in its use of an apocalyptic mindset.

The point to be made here is that the boundaries of apocalyptic literature need to be extended to account for biblical language and rhetoric which anticipates the apocalyptic rhetoric of Daniel and Zechariah for example, but which actually supplies the language and theological perspective which makes later apocalyptic possible. The early use of shared symbolic language gives the reader of apocalyptic the necessary intellectual and theological framework of the ancient sacred texts as they remain in solution (so to speak) with mundane experience yet in constantly developing contexts which challenge any community that treasures its foundations. To achieve this apocalyptic needs to use metaphor and symbol which are both sufficiently understood and yet also shocking—we might say, “subversive” in the sense that generations pressed to consider apocalyptic literature may need to be rescued from the spiritual and ethical atrophy of familiarity and unchallenged assumptions. This point is made by Sandy who understands (prophetic) apocalyptic language as,

Looking for ways to show [people] God and what it is like to be in the presence of the Holy, the prophets used metaphoric descriptions of the abstractions of God's presence and character. The intent was to raise the consciousness of God in the hearts of people who were transfixed by the world's values. But without categories of earth bound language to describe the Eternal, this was a special challenge.<sup>16</sup>

The dialectic between wisdom, prophecy and apocalyptic is clearly suggested in Daniel where the text in chapters 1–6 portrays Daniel as both sage and prophet—one who integrates the necessary wisdom to interpret dreams while fulfilling the traditional role of a prophet in terms of covenant faithfulness—who yet must explore the contours of the future under the providence of God while remaining under the apparent immovable authority of Babylon. The true trajectory of human history, whether construed through a Maccabean or Persian context is necessarily defined through an apocalyptic lens if the reader is to allow divine transcendence to guide one's commitments in the present. Such a scenario is fundamental to the hermeneutic proposed by Seitz.

The apocalyptic outlook can be viewed prophetically through Isaiah's use of key themes and motifs. The hermeneutical framework is that of ancient hidden truth made fresh in an indeterminate future through respect and faithful remembrance for an ancient tradition made present in the work of the prophet. For example, Isaiah affirms the permanence of the word of God over and above the contingencies of history:

16 D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks. Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 71.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.<sup>17</sup>

Naturally, this “word” is that which is mediated prophetically but is fundamentally guaranteed by the absolute reliability of divine revelation and Israel’s God whose activity and purpose cannot be measured in human terms. Thus, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord”.<sup>18</sup> This gives the necessary transcendent distance so that ancient texts can be reliably used in future contexts because of divine sanction, not human hermeneutical manipulation:

The former things I declared of old, they went forth from my mouth and I made them known; then suddenly I did them and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from of old, before they came to pass I announced them to you, lest you should say, “My idol did them, my graven image and my molten image commanded them”. “You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forth I make you hear new things, hidden things which you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, ‘Behold, I knew them’. “You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would deal very treacherously, and that from birth you were called a rebel”.<sup>19</sup>

The safety valve for inspired apocalyptic lies in its dependency on existing, albeit ancient, theological themes that in themselves speak into the formative identity of Israel thus creating convincing hermeneutical space for that linkage to continue in the generational present and also toward an undefined future—in fact, any undefined future. In other words, God complies with his own prophetic standards found in Deuteronomy 18:20-22. Prophecy itself could only recall the past, judge it and exhort the community to renewed moral and covenant obedience. This does not constitute a failure of prophecy but an acknowledgement that moral persuasion is insufficient to transform persons, even by means of the divine imperatives of Moses. Hence Peter can affirm, “Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”<sup>20</sup> Notice that Peter in this instance makes his ap-

17 Isaiah 55:10-11.

18 Isaiah 55:8.

19 Isaiah 48:3-8.

20 Acts 15:10.

peal not only to the ancient tradition but, as the result of fresh wisdom from God, interprets and escalates that tradition away from human effort toward the sovereign action of God in Christ. The incarnation brings a new transcendence, an “immanence”, which the later Fathers (and Richard Hooker) understood as deification.

A further example from Isaiah 25 illustrates the larger point. The chapter begins with a long view of the ancient order of creation and God’s purposes within it, though hidden. “O Lord, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure”.<sup>21</sup> Here we see the characteristic prophetic appreciation which acknowledges the wonder of creation, the election of Israel and the reliability of that revelation. As the chapter develops, the more ominous indications of ruin and oppression from foreign power as well as the plight of the poor and dispossessed for whom the prophetic remedy while formally correct and true in covenant terms remains largely unfulfilled. This establishes the necessary conditions within which to invoke the characteristic language of apocalyptic:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation”. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trodden down in his place, as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit. And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim; but the Lord will lay low his pride together with the skill of his hands. And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, even to the dust.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the reader is presented with “the mountain”, “covering”, “rejoice in his salvation”, “the hand of the Lord”, “on that day”, “reproach”, in which is embedded the eschatological metaphor of the banquet. It is possible that the intertextual allusions are to be found in the sparse details of the covenant meal of Exodus 24 which presents the astonishing meeting of the Israelite delegation and God on “the mountain” whereupon they see God and feast.

21 Isaiah 25:1.

22 Isaiah 25:6-12.

And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.<sup>23</sup>

The significance of the Isaianic banquet described in elaborate terms is the discordant presence of death which is eaten and swallowed by God. The outcome of this pushes the reader away from the immediate political realities of Israel's contingent fate among the nations to the existential threat that faces "all the earth"—that is, death. For this, there is no political solution—indeed there is no manufactured solution of any kind—any outcome that causes a person or a community to rejoice according to Isaiah 25 can only come from God. It is therefore necessary for the authentic community to wait in hope and trust: "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (25:9)—there is no viable alternative to ultimate questions here understood to be death. Any human strategy will be partial at best and risks collapse under the weight of universal original corruption. The emergence of apocalyptic is not therefore a disconnected and perhaps restricted response to intractable socio-political realities, but rather an essential aspect of biblical thought. It may be found not only in the classic apocalyptic texts but also among texts not normally considered for this purpose.

The achievement of apocalyptic literature is the recapitulation and escalation of prophetic hope in each generation by re-directing the reader's focus to a certainty of divine control with cosmic as well as immanent realities. Naturally, we ask if this sort of literature and its hermeneutic can find a place in a postmodern context. I think an affirmative answer is possible but it requires not the suspension of belief but the intensification of a biblical hope bred through long-term exposure to an intimate and comprehensive canonical reading of the texts that supply the groundswell of apocalyptic. Stephen Travis aptly sums up the positive theological value of apocalyptic literature as we writes,

... we may acknowledge first our debt to the apocalyptists' transcendent eschatology, with its insistence that the meaning of history can only be found beyond history, and that a human being can only find ultimate value for his life in a resurrection beyond death... we may be grateful for the apocalyptists' doctrine of final judgement. It asserts the ultimate triumph of God and the vindication of his purposes. It declares that men are accountable to God for their actions, and therefore their actions have value and significance. It proclaims the relativity of all human judgements before the day of judgement. It is interesting how often in 1 Corinthians Paul counters the attitudes and arguments of the Corinthians with this note of future judgement. Human assessments, human convictions, human achievements must not be absolutized in the light of that day... the belief that human life and history is moving towards a goal beyond death and be-

23 Exodus 24:10f.

yond history enables the believer to give a proper evaluation to the present. He does not devalue the present, because it is the sphere in which the kingdom of God has dawned. But he does not over-value it, because it is not his ultimate goal. This matter of perspective is fundamental for Christian spirituality and ethics... paradoxically, apocalyptic brings a new sense of responsibility towards the world, because it feeds hope for the transformation of the world. Social action... becomes pointless without this apocalyptic vision because there are no grounds in past history for expecting a lasting change for the better in human affairs. Only belief in God as one who breaks in against the possibilities resident within human history can provide the hope that makes any present reforming action worth the effort.<sup>24</sup>

Travis' practical theological assessment of apocalyptic is a welcome corrective to the conceptual difficulties identified earlier in which apocalyptic is equated with the sensational interpretation of history through the fulfilment in time of God's purposes released through a hidden understanding of apocalyptic symbolism. Such purposes are disclosed prophetically through a chosen human agent wherein the mundane is drawn back to reveal the true meaning of history decoded for an indeterminate future. In the absence of a viable hermeneutic, apocalyptic takes on a life of its own and exposes it to an unconvincing arbitrariness whose contours are left to the creativity of the interpreter. The true loss however, as Travis suggests, is a credible ethic that a defensible apocalyptic hermeneutic can otherwise achieve.

### Conclusion

The human search and desire to penetrate the mystery of "something" rather than "nothing" expresses itself in the metaphoric language and habits of thought available to us. The desire to pursue mystery and ponder it is characteristic of universal human inquiry. Yet in the absence of a religious sensibility transcendence remains a human project whose locus is bounded by existential loss—knowledge alone cannot bring the satisfactions of desire for our gods always look like us. Still, all is not lost. The inherent dignity of the human person, their god-likeness and that for which we reach but cannot attain comes as no mere accident, at least from a biblical perspective, inasmuch as God wills to be known. But as to the nature of God and his self-disclosure, this is the question. To contend that the universe itself is drenched with divinity is not to make a mere whimsical unreferenced deistic statement in our more reflective moments but to align ourselves with the very starting point of biblical narrative, to recognise ourselves within it, and embrace its redemptive outcomes. Such outcomes point to a divine horizon seemingly far away yet more immanent than we may think. Within the world of biblical discourse, especially that created by apocalyptic discourse there can be no talk of transcendence without a comparable discussion of divine immanence and to see in

24 Stephen H. Travis, "The Value of Apocalyptic", *Tyndale Bulletin* 30.1 (1979): 74-76.

this no contingent accident but something that resides both in the heart of God and our own desire. The world of apocalyptic brings a forceful and robust set of conditions that rescues human hope and desire from any possibility that human projections can be achieve their own goals within history. Apocalyptic literature re-writes the human story into the comprehensive biblical narrative which offers the best place to consider matters of transcendence, mystery and the sacred.

Therefore, it is reasonable to reclaim apocalyptic in Christian proclamation since the New Testament already does so as a serious and necessary corrective to a humanised version of salvation. The French philosopher, Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) who, writing in the midst of Enlightenment optimism declared,

... one cannot think or act anywhere as if we do not all have a supernatural destiny. Because, since it concerns the human being such as he is, *in concreto*, in his living and total reality, not in a simple state of hypothetical nature, nothing is truly complete (*boucle*), even in the sheerly natural order.<sup>25</sup>

It is impossible not to recognize the insufficiency of the natural order in its totality and not to feel an ulterior need; it is impossible to find within oneself something to satisfy this religious need. It is necessary; and it is impracticable... Absolutely impossible and absolutely necessary for man, that is properly the notion of the supernatural. Man's action goes beyond man; and all the effort of his reason is to see that he cannot, that he must not restrict himself to it. A deeply felt expectation of an unknown messiah; a baptism of desire, which human science [knowledge, academic inquiry] lacks the power to evoke, because this need itself is a gift. Science can show its necessity, it cannot give it birth.<sup>26</sup>

Thus we "... find only in the spirit of the gospel the supreme and decisive guarantee of justice and of the moral conditions of peace, stability, and social prosperity".<sup>27</sup> I contend that our aptness to acknowledge the desires which Blondel and so many others named, from the ancient prophets to Jesus and the Apostles evoked in the imaginative world of apocalyptic constitutes a search which is sympathetically understood by our biblical writers and theologians, discloses the redemptive ways of God and calls forth our grateful worship.

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25 Peter J. Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Francaise* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 74.

26 Blondel cited in Bernardi, *Blondel*, 49.

27 Blondel cited in Bernardi, *Blondel*, 70.

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