End game: Living joyfully in an apocalyptic time

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In her 2004 book The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation (*Westview*), *Barbara R. Rossing challenged notions about the rapture and the end-times destruction of the earth that are popular in evangelical Christian circles and are elaborated in the Left Behind series of novels. She has since had a number of opportunities to engage in public discussions on end-times theology and the interpretation of Revelation. A professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Rossing did her Ph.D. work on Revelation and ecology. The CENTURY spoke to her about her research and about the meaning of the end in Christian belief*.

Did you grow up hearing about "the rapture"?

I grew up Lutheran, so I never encountered premillennial dispensationalist theology. My first exposure to it came in college, where I was intimidated by the people who referred to Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. I didn't know how to respond to the Christians who were saying, "If you don't believe this you're going to get left behind."

So how did you get into studying the Bible and the end times?

Environmental interests were what first drew me to study Revelation. I was a geology major in college, and during my first year at Yale Divinity School I was still thinking of taking courses at Yale's School of Forestry. During seminary I worked summers as a park ranger at Mesa Verde National Park, and I loved being in the mountains. After I became a pastor I didn't do any more academic study of environmental issues, but that was always my passion.

A key moment during doctoral studies at Harvard was when my adviser, Helmut Koester, asked me what I wanted to write my dissertation on. When I told him I was interested in ecology he suggested that I work on the vision of the New Jerusalem at

the end of the book of Revelation. It's terrible to admit now, but I asked, "What's that?" I had thought that the New Jerusalem was just a vision of heaven. It's a vision of God coming down to earth, and it includes a river of life and the wondrous tree of life. That sent me to work on the intersection between ecology and the Bible.

I was horrified when I heard about the Left Behind novels, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and about their idea that we are called to escape from the earth, that God has a different place for us. The novels' graphic fixation on plagues, war, rapture and end-times violence can too easily lead to the escapist idea that we could trash this planet.

Since your book was published, have you had any discussion with proponents of the rapture theory?

Yes, but not with LaHaye or Jenkins. Probably the most significant discussion I had was on a radio show in Chicago with a professor from Moody Bible Institute, who said we should not judge dispensational theology by the novelists' version of it—a valid point. But most people get their dispensationalist theology through popularized versions of it, like the novels.

What should Christians be saying about eschatology and what should ministers be teaching?

There is a sense of an end in the New Testament. I don't think the New Testament affirms a world without end. To the extent that that notion has crept into our hymnody it's a mistake. Nonetheless, our job is to care for the world and to believe that this physical earth is not about to be destroyed.

What is it that is coming to an end? That's the question. In Revelation what is described as coming to an end is primarily the *oikoumene*, which I translate as "imperial world," the world under Roman rule. Rome laid claim to the whole *oikoumene*—the lands and the seas, world without end. It's the word that's used in the Gospel of Luke's Christmas story, for example, in which Caesar Augustus decrees that the whole world should be enrolled in a census. Revelation proclaims that this imperial world must come to an end.

If we translate *oikoumene* as "imperial world" in a verse such as Revelation 3:10, then the "hour of trial that is coming upon the whole *oikoumene*" is not at all what rapture proponents claim—a general end-times tribulation that God will inflict during

the earth's final seven years—but rather a courtroom scene in which God puts the empire on trial.

Two other Greek words, for earth (*ge*) and world (*kosmos*), are used more positively in the New Testament. A key verse is Revelation 11:18 in which God says, "I'm going to destroy the *destroyers* of the earth," not "I'm going to destroy the earth." The word for earth there is *ge*, which is used some 80 times in Revelation, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. God created the earth and still loves it, even though it also falls under judgment. The passages that refer to *oikoumene* in the New Testament are all negative. That is not case with *ge* or *kosmos*.

We are facing an end right now in our culture. Christians need to address that sense of an end. Very likely the supply of oil is going to end in my lifetime. And because of global warming we face an end to glaciers and much else in the world as we know and love it. The New Testament proclaims that there's a hope and a future beyond the end of *oikoumene*, beyond the end of empire. What may be ending today is our unsustainable way of life, but not the earth itself.

We have to help churches see that we don't have to tie ourselves to dependency on oil. The Christian vision is one of abundant life beyond the trappings of culture and whatever the empire promises. Though I say that the world is going to end, I think we need to proclaim a different understanding of that end. And we need to assure people that we have a future hope and relationship with God in Christ no matter what happens.

On *60 Minutes* LaHaye referred to your Jesus as a "wimpy Jesus."

If a loving Jesus means a wimpy Jesus, then Christianity is in trouble. But I don't think it does. We have to refute those who equate a loving Jesus with wimpiness. The Jesus in Revelation is very powerful, but he conquers in a different way—not by killing people but by being killed, by giving his own life.

I borrow the term "lamb power" from Ward Ewing at General Theological Seminary in New York. Lamb power is the power of suffering, the power of nonviolent love to change the world. So when dispensationalist pastors call for violence and war—a U.S. attack on Iran, for example, as John Hagee is advocating—we need to say that violent conquering is not the vision of power that the Bible and Revelation give us.

Part of the appeal of the Left Behind series seems to be the way it draws on the New Testament's language about judgment. How should that scriptural tradition be articulated?

Revelation has at least two judgment scenes, and their purpose is exhortation, not prediction. Chapter 20 depicts the judgment of individuals before the great white throne: those who have done good works go to heaven, while those who haven't are thrown into a lake of fire. That judgment scene was a favorite in medieval cathedrals and is pictured in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

The other scene of judgment may be more important today. It's the judgment of the empire, the "whore of Babylon," in chapters 17 and 18. The figure starts out as a woman in chapter 17 but then shifts to the empire. God says to the empire, "Because you shed the blood of prophets, saints, and all the people of the earth, you're going to be judged."

Revelation warns that the unsustainable, unjust practices of the empire will lead to its end. It's not so much a punishment as the consequences and logical end of its actions. The angel of the rivers cries out that this result is "axiomatic."

That axiom of judgment can serve as a warning, a wake-up call, for us to see the consequences of our actions, to get us on the path that God wants for us. The Bible's threats of judgment are meant to lead to repentance, not to a kind of predictive gloating by which one plans to escape and then watch the torments of others. That kind of voyeuristic violence is one of the worst features of the Left Behind series. The adherents of that view plan to watch the judgment, but they believe they're not going to suffer it.

By *empire* you mean not just the official powers that subdue the planet and people, but all of us who participate in that?

We're all part of it. Revelation calls us to come out of empire. Some of us do participate in it more than others. I'm interested in how Christian communities in the first century lived according to the gospel as an alternative way of life, a life starting from "the smallest of all seeds" that Jesus talks about sowing. That's what Revelation means by coming out of empire.

What are the political implications of your reading of Revelation?

My colleague David Rhoads asks, What if we used the New Testament as a manual for life at the end of the world? That's probably what it was for first-century Christians. We are called to create a new world without waiting for leaders of the nation to lead the way. We need to start living joyfully, downsizing, sharing with the poor, preaching good news. Abundant life doesn't mean acquiring more and more. In John's Gospel, it's something other than that. We should work on being communities that follow the calling of Jesus counterculturally as we face the possibility of the end.

In *Power Down: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, Richard Heinberg describes four possible scenarios for facing the end of oil. The first one is the path of competition over remaining resources. The U.S. seems to be engaged in that—just trying to win the race for resources. Another is waiting for a magic elixir and indulging in wishful thinking, false hopes and denial. Heinberg describes two paths that we can use as Christians. One is called "power down": it involves conservation, sharing, and deciding that you don't have to use up all the resources that you have access to. You can actually reduce your ecological footprint. Communities can do that—and it is a lot easier when you're doing it in community with others. Heinberg calls his final option "building lifeboats"—the path by which some people step out of culture, and in which monastic-type communities embody an alternative way of life.

Have you seen specific examples of this?

A community that has been formative for me is Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains. During seminary I also visited Taizé and the Bruderhof Community in upstate New York. All churches can be such communities—sharing the biblical vision of koinonia, life together in love, according to a different vision of abundance.

I'm fascinated by the story in Mark 10 about the rich man who comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It says Jesus "looked at him and loved him." There's no other character that the Gospel of Mark says Jesus loves that way. But still the man turns away and leaves by himself. The really scary part: he leaves because he can't let go of his possessions.

That story can help us because we're in the same predicament as that rich man; we're in danger of turning away because of our possessions. Jesus loves the rich man unconditionally before he makes the hard demand, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and come, follow me." When the man goes away weeping,

clearly he misses out on community, on the joy that the disciples have discovered. Eternal life is a matter of giving up something, but even more it is a matter of finding something—life for the ages, life that can last, life in the presence of Jesus' love, abundant life.

We've been seduced into a way of life that isn't even making us happy. We're suffering from what filmmaker John DeGraaf calls affluenza. The Affluenza Web site points out that the average American house in the 1950s was 900 square feet; today that's the size of a three-car garage. We're not that much happier than people were in the 1950s.

How should Christians talk about apocalypse?

Hurricane Katrina was a kind of apocalypse. It pulled back a veil and showed us something that maybe we hadn't been able to see. That's the root meaning of the word *apocalypse*—pulling back a curtain to expose something, showing the difference between illusion and reality. We can ask where apocalyptic moments are happening today, and how such experiences can transform us, since apocalypses are also about transformation. Though we may say "Yes, there's an end," we should look beyond that end and insist that we're called as God's people never to give up on the earth because God is not going to leave it behind and neither can we.

Don't we have to be careful about talking in apocalyptic tones?

The problem arises when talk about the apocalypse is taken up by the powerful. Revelation is not a script or battle plan for those in power. To the extent that we are the ones in power we need to be very careful about how we deploy apocalyptic rhetoric.

But apocalypses can also help us. We need their vision of hope as well as their radical diagnosis of the sorrows of empire. The plagues of Revelation can wake us up to the urgent lament of creation. Revelation also gives more attention to creation than some other books of scripture. Animals and plants join in singing praise to God. Jesus is portrayed as a lamb. Heaven comes down to earth.

Theologian Leonardo Boff argues that we have to listen both to the cry of the poor in the Bible, which he hears in Exodus, and to the cry of the earth, which he hears in the groaning of creation in Romans 8. I hear both of these cries in Revelation: the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. God answers those cries in the river of life for all who thirst, in the tree of life for the world's healing.