



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 46-53)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

The history of American apocalyptic thought offers much reason for discouragement. Christians have been too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 13:28-37

Meditation†

There is certainly a shadowy and sinister side to apocalyptic, or should we say pseudo-apocalyptic, ... [that encourages] sectarianism and exclusivism....

Here we can appeal to the apocalyptic vision itself, which is universal and cosmic. God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ restores humanity and the entire created order, and we move toward the end of history not aimlessly, but with the renewing and transforming of divine energies within us.... What is God's intent? The redemption of humanity and the cosmos. That should be our interpretive lens. There is nothing in apocalyptic theology that demands that our outlook be sectarian or exclusive.

Scott M. Lewis, S.J.

Reflection

Many Christians want to know more about Islamic practices, the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and how Muslim societies are organized. They may be ministering to Muslim immigrants or meeting new coworkers, guiding missionary projects or organizing business activities around the world, traveling more widely or retreating in fear of jihadist violence. Unfortunately, looming over their newfound interest are the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Some are misconstruing Islam through events in Revelation. "The horrific collapse of the World Trade Center towers might well turn one's thoughts to the apocalypse, but something more than horror is at work," Thomas Kidd writes. "Although the details have changed over time, American Christians have actually been speculating about connections between Islam and the apocalypse for centuries. The level of apocalyptic interest generated by 9/11 is new. The pattern of thought is not." Kidd traces this apocalyptic perspective on Islam through the centuries.

- ▶ *Colonial-era Protestants perceived Islam as a threat* as Ottoman armies expanded into central Europe until 1683 and Barbary pirates attacked ships through the 17th and 18th centuries. They claimed that Roman Catholicism was the antichrist of 1 and 2 John, the rise of Islam was the locust plague of Revelation 9:2-3, and that God would destroy them both before Christ returned. The drying up of the Euphrates River (Revelation 16:12) betokened the defeat of the Ottomans. Later prophets, like Baptist layman William Miller who forecast Christ's return in 1843 or 1844, popularized such views.
- ▶ *Dispensationalists moved Islam to the center of eschatology.* As failed predictions like Miller's cast doubt on historicist readings of texts (as referring to past events), Dispensationalists took apocalyptic



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texts to predict future events. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) suggests Revelation 9:2-3 refers to demonic activity in the reign of the coming Antichrist. They said the literal return of Jews to Palestine would spark end-time events like “the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, the rise of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, and the physical return of Jesus to Earth,” Kidd notes. “The anticipation of these developments led to an associated focus on the people living in Palestine, particularly Arab Muslims.”

- ▶ *Speculation took on new life in World War I.* The British capture of Jerusalem from Ottoman Turks in 1917 and promise to create a Jewish homeland, the Zionist movement in the 1920s and 30s, the Nazi Holocaust, and the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinians were taken as signs of the end times. Many evangelicals predicted Israel would soon destroy the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount. Arab Muslims, on this view, stood obstinately in the way of God’s plan.
- ▶ *9/11 inspired new apocalyptic interpretations,* such as Muslims naturally hate the friends of Israel; Arab Muslims will join Russia in the Gog and Magog attack (Revelation 20:7-8); and Mahdi, a messianic figure in Shi’a Islam, will be the Antichrist who burns people with the mark of a Muslim creed.

While Christians and Muslims should recognize “there are essential differences between the faiths,” Kidd concludes, those differences do not give them “the right to harm, insult, or demonize the other. Anger over jihadist terror does not license the invention of extra-biblical forecasts of apocalyptic destruction.”

Study Questions

1. How has the Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam changed over the centuries? How has it remained disturbingly the same?
2. Discuss how that perspective has been distorted by non-religious political and social events over the centuries. What events of this sort are influencing Christian attitudes today?
3. How should Jesus’ warning on watchfulness (Mark 13:28-37) inform the political applications of apocalyptic passages?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar” (vv. 1 and 2)

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation of honor, and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

G. K. Chesterton (1906)

Suggested Tunes: LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE

† Scott M. Lewis, S.J., *What Are They Saying about New Testament Apocalyptic?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 81-83.

Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how American Christians have misused biblical apocalyptic writings to denigrate Islam over the centuries.
2. To recognize how political and social events continue to influence a Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam today.
3. To discuss how Jesus' warning on humble watchfulness should limit our political applications of biblical apocalyptic passages.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O God of Earth and Altar" locate the familiar tunes LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE in your church's hymnal or in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

"Before 9/11, Islam had played a significant role in American apocalyptic thought. But the terrorist attacks of that day sharpened Protestant conservatives' attention to Islam like no other event," Thomas Kidd reminds us. "Often, the initial reaction was anger and rage toward Islam itself. Samaritan Purse's Franklin Graham called Islam a 'very evil and wicked religion,' while Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell opined on *60 Minutes* that the Prophet 'Muhammad was a terrorist.' Most notoriously, former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines said in 2002 that Muhammad was a 'demon-possessed pedophile'" (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 51).

In this era of anger and anxiety over terrorism, we may be sorely tempted to misuse biblical apocalyptic writings to denigrate Islam. Kidd helps us to step back and weigh our statements and actions in both historical and biblical perspective.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment in interpreting the biblical apocalyptic writings in light of current events.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 13:28-37 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The earlier studies in this series addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings (see “The Church as a Company of Nomads”) and warned against using apocalyptic cosmic battle imagery to justify violence (“Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?”). This one applies that warning to the American Christian apocalyptic perspectives on Islam. Thomas Kidd briefly sketches the history of this perspective from the Colonial era to today, but this study focuses on developments through the 1940s. Group members probably are more familiar with recent developments in the perspective, but if not, you can enrich this discussion by considering some of the currently popular views that Kidd mentions.

Study Questions

1. Members may notice how the focus on particular Muslim societies has shifted over the centuries, roughly from west to east and from north to south. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries the focus was on Mediterranean states from Turkey (the home of the Ottoman Empire) to North Africa (the havens of Barbary pirates). In the mid-twentieth century the focus began to shift eastward to Egypt, the newly formed Arab states of the Middle East, and the Arab Palestinians. More recently the non-Arabic Islamic Republics to the east (e.g. Iraq, Iran, Pakistan) and African nations with significant Muslim populations to the south (e.g. Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia) have been the focus of attention. A second, but related change is the focus on the formation of the modern state of Israel in the twentieth century.

The method of interpreting apocalyptic writings changed as well. Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used the historicist method that interpreted passages as prophecies which had already been fulfilled in the past. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Dispensational theologians interpreted the same passages as prophecies about events that will occur in the future.

Nevertheless, the Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam remained fixated on the religion’s “supposedly duplicitous and violent nature, and its coming demise.” Thomas Kidd continues, “Christians often seem to indulge extremes when it comes to Islam, either denouncing all Muslims as violent and demonic, or (as is the case with some more liberal Christians) papering over all differences with hopeful assertions that we are all God’s children. Perhaps there is a middle way. Christians should refuse to indulge sensational characterizations of Muslims or the Prophet Muhammad, or ghoulish scenarios of Muslims’ demise in the last days. But honest understanding and dialogue with Muslims must also acknowledge that there are essential differences between the faiths that cannot be ignored.”

2. The expansionist policies of the Ottoman Empire, the violent disruption of shipping by pirates from North Africa, military alliances in World Wars I and II, the creation of the secular state of Israel and dislocation of the Palestinians, the creation of the state of Pakistan, discovery of vast oil reserves in states surrounding the Persian Gulf and in Nigeria and the formation of OPEC, Cold War politics between the United States and Russia, the failure of modern states formed from a mix of tribal territories (as in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia), and so on, have influenced American Christian attitudes toward Islam over the years. Members may mention more recent influences such as international terrorism by groups like Al Qaida and localized terrorism by the Taliban which claim to represent a radical interpretation of Islam, violence between followers of Sunni and Shi’a Islam, piracy in eastern Africa, development of nuclear weapon programs in Pakistan and Iran, and state-sponsored political disarray in the Palestinian territories.
3. Concerning the identification and timing of apocalyptic events, Jesus clearly warns, “no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were embarrassed by their failed identifications of end-time events; Dispensationalist theologians have fared better because their identifications are often in the indefinite future.

Jesus concludes the so-called “Little Apocalypse” in Mark 13 by urging his disciples to “Keep awake” (13:37). Discuss how we can remain vigilant today if we stop trying to correlate apocalyptic passages with current political events and predict a date for Christ’s return.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.