

Review essay

The double edge of lament: Love and justice at the end of the world

Anna Fisk

Reviewed works:

Catherine Keller, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2021), pp. xxii + 218, ISBN 978-1626984134. £18.99

Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*. Political Theologies (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. xiii + 200, ISBN 978-1350177185. £28.99

Alastair McIntosh, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020), pp. xi + 243, ISBN 978-1780276397. £9.99

Hannah Malcolm, ed., *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church* (London: SCM Press, 2020), pp. xxxv + 212, ISBN 978-0334059868. £15.99

Frances Ward, *Like There's No Tomorrow: Climate Crisis, Eco-Anxiety and God* (Durham, UK: Sacristy Press, 2020), pp. iv + 248, ISBN 978-1789590883. £12.99

Dr Anna Fisk is a climate justice activist, feminist theologian, editorial assistant of the journal Literature and Theology, and convenor of the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture's Ecotheologies panel.





Introduction

At the time of writing, there is only a matter of weeks before the UN climate change conference, the twenty-sixth ‘Conference of the Parties’ (COP26), comes to my Glasgow, the city I call home. The media and political hype around the event is saturated with the rhetoric of ‘most important ever’ and ‘our last chance’.¹ Climate justice campaigners, both local and global, are more sceptical, aware the current UK government are unlikely to shepherd an effective or just event, with sponsorship from corporate polluters, and limitations on participation of representatives from the Global South and Indigenous peoples due to COVID-19 restrictions.² I myself have grown suspicious of the usefulness and healthiness of deadlines and last chances as motivation for action on climate crisis. Like many others, I became involved with climate activism in the wake of the publication of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report titled “Global Warming of 1.5°C” three years ago.³ The media of October 2018 parsed the report’s findings with (misleading) headlines such as: “Planet has only until 2030 to stem catastrophic climate change” and “We have 12 years to act on climate change before the world as we know it is lost”.⁴ Since then, learning through bitter experience of activist burnout, as well as from the wisdom of more seasoned campaigners, I know we need to play the long game.⁵

My concern is not this current moment, not the COP itself, but what comes afterwards: the almost-certainly inevitable disappointment, exhaustion, prevarication, evasion, greenwashing. The climate crisis is one that we should all be reckoning with for the rest of our lives; it will not be ‘solved’ or ‘fixed’ during a two-week conference, nor even in the next nine years. What can sustain us in the protracted, painful, and repetitive struggle ahead? My conviction, along with many of the authors of the five recent books I survey in this essay, is that there are many theological resources that may be nourishing for a climate activism fit for the long-haul, whatever one’s faith commitment. In this review essay, I read the selected books alongside each other in exploring what can sustain long-term action in the face of climate and ecological catastrophe, with focus on the prophetic elements of the Christian tradition.

Catherine Keller’s *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (2021) is primarily a loose commentary on – what she terms a ‘dreamreading’ of – the biblical book of Revelation, with our



contemporary context in mind. A constructive theologian rather than a biblical scholar, Keller makes clear that this is ‘a work not of biblical history but of meditation on the present’ in which the political preoccupations of John of Patmos, within his own place and time, ‘release surprising relevancies for ours’ (p. xiv). She is adamant that these resonances across millennia – of rapacious greed, global empire, and ecological destruction – are not due to any miraculous foresight on John’s part, for ‘*prophecy is not prediction*’. Instead, she is reading this complex and controversial text for the ‘deep patterns’ that the ancient author perceived in his own present, patterns we see repeated in our world today (p. xiv, emphases in original).

The most strictly academic of the five works is Thomas Lynch’s *Apocalyptic Political Theology* (2019). In one sense it is not a book about climate change at all, but it includes an extended discussion of the theme of how to think about ‘the end of the world’ that is crucial to my interests in this essay. Lynch explores the preoccupation with apocalypticism in the field of political theology, predominately in what he calls its ‘narrow conception’, following Carl Schmitt, for how theological concepts endure in the secular political realm (p. 11), from Joachim of Fiore to Marx, via Hegel. Lynch draws on twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers Jacob Taubes and Catherine Malabou in positing a concept of ‘the world’ that should be opposed, disinvested from, a world for which ‘the only hope is for an end’ (p. 136).

Quaker writer and campaigner Alastair McIntosh’s *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being* (2020) is the only Scottish work reviewed in this essay, and is much rooted in the Hebridean land/seascapes and traditions of the author’s Lewis upbringing. An idiosyncratic overview of ‘the current state of play’ of climate science and politics, in some ways it is the least conventionally theological of the five texts (the opening chapters consist of a helpful and lucid summary of the hard science of the IPCC reports). Yet its core argument, that climate crisis calls all of us to ‘deeper layers of reflection’ for the ‘freeing up of long-blocked wells [...] to open up the flow to what gives life’ is a spiritual one, with ‘gift, as well as dread, in living through these times’ (p. xi).

Hannah Malcolm’s edited volume *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church* (2020) is the book that I would recommend most wholeheartedly to any potential reader; it is also the one I found most difficult to read, because of the painful truthfulness



of its subject matter and approach, which are as unflinching as the book's title. It brings together a multitude of voices from across the globe reflecting on climate and ecological grief and the Christian faith, naming the 'grief and anger both within the Church and without' (p. xxvii) with the aim of 'provok[ing] solidarity' and 'the courage to answer the call of God [...] in the days ahead' (p. xxviii).

Anglican priest and practical theologian Frances Ward's *Like There's No Tomorrow: Climate Crisis, Eco-anxiety and God* (2020) narrates a journey through the heartlands of England by canalboat, beneath the shadow of Ward's profound grief and fear in response to climate and ecological crisis. Part travelogue, part theological reflection on facing up to the realities of climate change and biodiversity loss, her key thesis – one I echo in this essay – is 'if we're to going to survive into the future, we need to develop the contemplative resources to support the inevitable activism that will be required' (p. 8).



Climate and ecological grief

Learning how to grieve well – with faith, love, and hope – in response to climate change is the central preoccupation of Malcolm's collection and Ward's memoir. The phenomenon of 'climate grief' is becoming more recognised and researched, with organisations like the Climate Psychology Alliance leading the way. Yet, as both Malcolm (p. xxvii) and Ward (p. 3) note, the church (at least in the Global North) has been slow to apply Christianity's rich traditions of mourning and lament to a pastoral response to the environmental crisis. This is perhaps due to reasons of guilt and denialism, but also the sheer complexity of climate and ecological grief as distinct from more straightforward bereavement: as well as the unfathomable scale of the loss, there is its bewildering temporality. From the imperceptible slowness of habitat loss and rising temperatures in contrast to the overnight destruction of fire and flood, the anticipatory grief based on consensus science projections of disaster alongside the 'too late' of what has already occurred, to the grief for expected futures now known never to be, climate grief does not correspond to any chronological predictability (see Oana Marian in Malcolm, p. 162).

As is clear from reading *Words for a Dying World's* first-person accounts of climate-induced disasters that have *already* happened, climate grief is vastly differentiated. There is an enormous gulf between Ward's



elegiac sadness for the skylark, the cuckoo and the lapwing, or middle-aged, middle-class protestors' fear for grandchildren they do not yet have, and Anderson Jeremiah's discussion of farmer suicide in India (pp. 79–87), or Sophia Chirongoma (pp. 94–99) and Nangula Eva-Liisa Kathindi's (pp. 136–41) experience of ministry in the wake of Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe and drought in northern Namibia respectively. Malcolm's introduction to the volume acknowledges this disparity: 'all humans are and will be wounded by these losses', though not 'in the same way or to the same extent' (p. xxxi).

Thus the call to truly *feel* the horrors of climate and ecological crisis, to resist the numbness that has contributed for decades to global political failure to take meaningful action, is appropriate in some contexts but not in others. Those already living with the trauma of flooding in Sri Lanka (see Archuna Ananthamohan in Malcolm, pp. 180–84), loss of vital source of food from the destruction of aquatic life (see Ella Maggang in Malcolm, pp. 145–50), and the imminent disappearance of their sacred and ancestral lands (see Christopher Douglas-Huriwai, pp. 13–19, and Jione Havea, pp. 115–20, in Malcolm) do not need to be told 'don't hide behind clever analysis and theories – feel the pain, own the loss' (Peter Fox and Miles Giljam in Malcolm, p. 52). Yet those of us living in the Global North for whom climate impacts are and will be cushioned by class and racial privilege should indeed allow our emotions to own the reality of what is happening, for 'the ability to respond depends upon our capacity to *feel* response' (Keller, p. 54, emphasis in original). In the words of Oana Marian, 'it is one thing to be informed about greenhouse gas emissions, ocean acidification, accelerating rates of extinction, and another thing altogether to *know*, to metabolize, the disaster within one's body' (in Malcolm, p. 161, emphasis in original).

As Ward and several authors in *Words for a Dying World* state, the biblical tradition provides ample resources for the essential work of grief. While documenting the degradation of tropical coral reefs – 'today, I survey graveyards' (in Malcolm, p. 132) – marine biologist Tim Gordon finds solace in the famously short Bible verse 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35): 'our grief, anger and distress in response to the world's suffering are not supposed to be suppressed or denied. They are feelings that God shared and fully embraced when he came to earth' (p. 133). For Keller, the 'mournful call' of the eagle in Revelation 8:13 – "'woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth'", that 'woe' being "'*ouai*'", a cry or sound used to

express lamentation or mourning’ (p. 51) is ‘the grief of God expressed ‘through an animal’ through which ‘we are called into a work of compassion – [...] of suffering-with’ (p. 53). That ‘*com-*’, the ‘*with*’, is crucial here: so that facing up to the heavy emotions of climate grief and fear does not give in to solipsistic self-pity, or despair that leads to nihilism, it must be anchored in solidarity and community. Throughout *Words for a Dying World*’s accounts from contexts at the sharp-edge of climate change, mourning is claimed as a fundamentally communal practice, in contrast to the grief-averse ‘dominant capitalist culture’ (María Alejandra Andrade Vinueza in Malcolm, p. 44) of the Global North. For Anupama Ranawana, ‘there is a need [...] for a theology of weeping, or for weeping to form the focus of our prayers’; weeping may even be ‘a decolonizing action’ (in Malcolm, p. 202). Malcolm closes the collection with reflections on grief and love, in which grief is ‘not only a response to losing something loved, or a motivator for behaving in loving ways, but a work of love itself’ (p. 208), especially through ‘becoming open to the grief of others’ (p. 209).



Guilt and lament

In his contribution to *Words for a Dying World*, Hugh Jones explores an aspect of environmental grief that he believes has been insufficiently addressed by the church, despite the ‘rich resources’ offered by the Christian tradition: *guilt* (in Malcolm, p. 127). A painful truth of facing up to climate crisis includes the knowledge that the ecological destruction we are increasingly witnessing is due to human activity. But once again, it is not all humans, and not all to the same extent (see Lynch, pp. 19–20). The core tenet of the climate justice movement is the *injustice* that those who are most affected by climate crisis have contributed to and benefitted the least from its causes. Guilt, whether rational or not, may be a common facet of the grief of personal bereavement, as Jones discusses, but for those in the Global North societies who have extracted and burnt fossil fuels to power lifestyles that the majority of the world have been denied (and have indeed made them poorer), guilt is a reasonable response, perhaps even an ethical one. For Ward, reflecting with Psalm 6: ‘We need to feel God’s wrath [...] That burden is one we need to carry’ (p. 9). But, as Jones notes, ‘feeling guilty is not, in Christian terms, expiatory, and self-condemnation is dangerously close to [...] despair’ (in Malcom, p. 129). ‘Healthy



grieving' is 'especially hard if you are culpable in causing the death you grieve' (Peter Fox and Miles Giljam, in Malcolm, pp. 48–54). And, I would add, when there is no clear path to repentance, to extricating yourself from or otherwise resisting the global economic system that is causing the ecological crisis as well as untold human suffering.

The climate crisis demands theological reflection on structural evil, of sin embedded in unjust social structures, and how this complicates guilt and the possibility of forgiveness. Jones's parsing of the complex interrelation of the 'mismatch between individual acts and collective responsibility' that 'haunts the environmental debate' is perhaps simplistic: 'a great many small sins adding up to one enormous sin' (in Malcolm, p. 129). McIntosh criticises contemporary campaigns focused on system change alone – 'to suggest that our predicament over climate change arises purely out of being the helpless victims of external oppressive forces is to deny both our share in responsibility [...] and our capacity for agency' (p. 118). This caricatures the discourse, fails to acknowledge the limits created by rampant inequality, and neglects how climate justice activism had adopted this rhetoric in answer to fossil fuel corporations' deliberate and sustained strategy of keeping the conversation on individual consumer choices.⁶ But even when we acknowledge the complexity of *both* the systemic *and* individual nature of culpability, ways forward are hard to find.

For US theologian Kyle B. T. Lambelet, the biblical practice of *lament*, exemplified in the Prophets and the Psalms, is a way to reconcile himself to his own complicity in climate crisis, symbolised by the family income generated by an oil well on his grandmother's land. Whereas the more generalised concept of 'settler-colonial capitalism' renders his culpability distant and abstract, reflection on 'my grandma's oil well grafts the reality of climate catastrophe into my own story [...] bound to my very blood and bones' (in Malcolm, p. 28). Lambelet resists any quick routes to expiation, whether by denouncing his grandmother, 'seeking to purify my own story at the expense of another' (p. 29), or working it off through activism or donations to the appropriate causes, thus reducing it to 'economic exchange, yet another repetition of the capitalist logic' (p. 31). Instead, through the 'messy prayers, polluted prayers' of lament, 'prayers at the end of human agency', Lambelet is able to 'confront the reality of our situation in recognition that things are not as they should be' (p. 29). *Lament* is a keyword repeated throughout *Words for a Dying Word* and



Ward's *Like There's No Tomorrow*; whereas for Lambelet, lament is about 'stay[ing] with the trouble'⁷ (in Malcolm, p. 31), for Ward it is a way through, 'the path from despair to hope' (p. 192). Similarly, for Tim Middleton, while lament is a way to 'acknowledge', 'mourn' and 'curse the darkness' it is also 'a place to start' that 'can liberate us to act' (in Malcolm, p. 93). But this is not a linear journey, as Ward says, the 'new normal' (p. 185) means wandering the spiralling paths from despair to hope, from guilt to resistance, for the rest of one's life (p. 180), but knowing we do not walk alone (p. 192).



Prophetic anger and loving justice

Providing pastoral resources for living with fear, trauma, grief, and guilt in relation to climate catastrophe is a vital task to which Christian theology is recently beginning to turn, as it continues to reckon with the Lynn White hypothesis of Christianity's role in the crisis,⁸ emphasising the goodness of creation and rethinking humankind's relation to it. These kinds of work remain important, but it is also needed for Christian theology on climate change to be a courageous prophetic voice, speaking truth to power on the root causes as well as calling for meaningful action. Advocating for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger means denouncing the neo-colonial trade system that pollutes and degrades land to feed the rich on the other side of the world, the weapons industry profiting from war, and a global economy based on limitless growth, leading to the climate change set to displace over a billion people from their homes in the coming decades.

Catherine Keller terms this 'the Hebrew heritage of the prophetic conditional: *if* we do not change our ways as a social order, our ways toward other humans and other species, then...the fire. And that "if" now demands attention, from all who seek justice' (p. 44, emphasis in original). She reads throughout Revelation's constellation of signs and symbols the prophetic repudiation of the 'the colonizing force of empire' and 'economic injustice' in ways that still speak to today's world (p. 30). Revelation 18's denunciation of the merchants, listing their wares – precious metals, jewels, ivory, spices – culminating in 'human bodies and souls' (18:13) is interpreted as a condemnation of slavery, 'the entire exploitative system that enriched an urban elite at the expense of the majority of the population'.⁹ Keller acknowledges potential objections to



any imagined equivalence between the Roman Empire and globalised capitalism, and those social, technological and democratic advances that have been made by modernity. And yet, a recent ‘Material Power Index’ of economic disparity in the US – the richest 100 households have 108,765 times the wealth of the lower 90 percent – notes this ‘corresponds roughly to the difference in material power between a senator and a slave at the height of the Roman Empire’. This, Keller argues, represents ‘a continuum of oligarchic power from antiquity’ that ‘expose[s] neoliberalism as neoimperialism’ (p. 123). This theme of global capitalism as destructive imperialism is echoed in *Words for a Dying World*: ‘The 300+ children who die *each hour*’, according to the World Health Organisation, ‘due to malnutrition (as the result of famines, unfair production and distribution) include many children (mostly black and ethnic minorities) in the shadows of modern empires’ (Jione Havea in Malcolm, p. 117). The ‘unfair production and distribution’ is parsed in stark terms by David Benjamin Blower as the ‘outsourced death’ that ‘makes our own exceptional life possible’ (in Malcolm, p. 151).

In her ‘anachronistic dreamreading’ (p. 119) of Revelation 17 and 18, of the Whore of Babylon astride the back of the Beast, Keller finds a potent image of ‘insatiability—brutally destructive and inevitably self-destructive’ (p. 116) that is startlingly, disturbingly apt for our times, of ‘civilization consuming and being consumed, even as it consumes the lives of its laboring populations and the life of its planet’ (p. 130). Yet she acknowledges the feminist critiques of the harmful way imperial domination is represented in the body of a woman, a sex worker, and how this grotesque metaphor is deeply problematic and has done great harm throughout its history (pp. 116–25). For me this is a reminder of the ambivalence of drawing on the biblical prophetic tradition as a resource for climate activism: not only Revelation (although it is arguably the most extreme example) but the Prophets, the Psalms, even the Gospels, are shot through with violent images and hate-filled language (in this case, as in much of the Hebrew Prophets, it is misogynist and pornographic in nature).

A key thesis of Keller’s *Facing Apocalypse* is that these disturbing aspects of the apocalyptic writing of John of Patmos should not be ignored, abjected by progressives as ugly and dangerous; rather, they must be ‘*minded*’ (p. xii, emphasis in original), reflected on carefully. This is due in part to how rooted Revelation’s strange configuration of dreams and

visions has become in the collective political unconscious: ‘Its metaphors have been cultural forces for nearly two thousand years, getting realized mindfully or mindlessly, in healing or in hatred’ (p. 18). Lynch surveys accounts (by Mark Lilla, John Gray, and Jayne Svenungsson) of how an ur-theological apocalypticism is played out in anti-liberal politics, be they fascist or leftist revolutionary, in which ‘seemingly non-religious ideas’ have ‘theological origins’ which ‘may have been forgotten, muted by secularization, but [...] continue to shape the political imaginary of the West’ (p. 10). Apocalyptic ‘vision[s] of social transformation’ were what ‘fired up’ radical groups across the centuries, from ‘the itinerant early Franciscans, the Radical Reformation and the German Peasant Revolt, [...] the Quakers, the utopianisms of the Shakers, and the activism of the Social Gospel’, which in turn inspired progressive ‘political revolutions of the modern epoch’ (Keller, p. 8). But apocalypticism also played out in the ultimately genocidal regimes of the twentieth century, as well as more recent populism. In her earlier monograph *Apocalypse Now and Then* (1996), Keller posited an ‘apocalypse pattern’ seen throughout the last two millennia. This pattern, arising in the wake of suffering, invokes an ‘either/or morality’ and tendency to ‘think and feel in polarities of “good” versus “evil”; to identify with the good and purge the evil from oneself’ and believes that ‘the good is getting victimized by the evil, which is diabolically overpowering’.¹⁰

I recognise the moral dualism of the pattern in activist campaigns I am part of or support against fossil fuel corporations, against extractivism on Indigenous lands, the imprisonment and murder of environmental defenders, landlords’ exploitation of tenants, racist border policies, capitalism. I recognise it in my own thinking and in my own heart. I see a parallel between the only slightly tongue-in-cheek leftist slogan ‘eat the rich’ and Revelation’s grisly ‘great supper of God’ in which the birds are called to eat the flesh of kings (19:17–18). I cannot abject this mode entirely, but I do want ‘the warmth of compassion and the heat of anger [to] rise together’ (Keller, p. 57) in a way that is sustaining and not consuming. I know all too well Keller’s observation that, ‘*as a habit*’, this dualist orientation to the world may be ‘destructive, and perhaps first of all as self-destructive’.¹¹

How to ‘do justice’ and ‘love kindness’ (Micah 6:8) is an enduring question for me as an activist, and hence the aspect of Keller’s *Facing Apocalypse* that I find most valuable is her exploration of the paradox of



‘peace and violence, of justice and vengeance, of love and fury’ (p. 143) that reverberates throughout Revelation. (Less helpful is Keller’s choice of the term ‘schizopocalypse’ to describe this paradox, even if it is based on etymology rather than deliberately deploying the stigma around mental health.) Throughout, but especially in the chapter “Weaponizing the Word”, from the images of Christ with a sword projected from his mouth (Rev 1:16 and 19:15), Keller recognises that there is a place for a ‘militant edge of desire’ (p. 10), that no ‘social change, however loving, is ever brought about without sharp *words*’, but all too easily ‘that cutting edge, that eschatos, of activism, of confrontation, of visionary courage’ may ‘harden into iron’ (p. 138, emphasis in original).

Perhaps the shadow of ‘the Weaponized Word [...] deployed to render oppression righteous, annihilation noble, and slaughter inevitable’ (Keller, p. 155) is what colours McIntosh’s critique of the undemocratic edge of Extinction Rebellion (XR)’s demands, their tactics of indiscriminate disruption, and especially the writings of its divisive and charismatic co-founder, Roger Hallam (pp. 104–18, 133–36). McIntosh never goes so far as to label XR or even Hallam as (proto) eco-fascist but, from his own ‘personal positions – some might say biases – towards [...] democracy that is constitutional’ (p.115) and *spiritual* non-violence, he expresses concern that it could tend that way. For McIntosh, the non-violent approach to mass civil disobedience on climate change exemplified by the (arguably apocalypse-patterned) XR must be rooted in ethical and spiritual commitment rather than the superficial argument that non-violence is more effective (p. 135). I do not disagree – not least because the arguments in support of the pragmatic approach to non-violence are spurious at best¹² – but, in my own experience as an activist with XR from late 2018 to early 2020, a lack of spirituality was not the problem (indeed, those who took part in the particularly controversial XR action cited by McIntosh, the October 2019 blocking of the Tube in working-class areas of London at rush hour that resulted in violent scenes, included members of subgroups Christian Climate Action and XR Buddhists). Rather, it was the disconnect between the XR values of *love* and *rage* without the connecting focus of *justice* that for me was most problematic, and eventually caused me to leave. With this in mind, Keller’s discussion of Revelation 19 is useful, in which the Lamb, representing ‘witness’ and ‘love’ is ‘indirectly blend[ed]’ with the Lion, who figures as ‘the Judge and Warrior-Word’, yet they never become one: the ‘dangerous paradox’ remains (p. 141). The



‘transform-ative tension’ cannot be smoothed over, nor should it be ‘split into we-good, you-bad’. Yet ‘prophetic witness’ looks beyond the wrongness of the current ordering of the world to envision, with eyes of ‘just love’, ‘a whole social order, a new world, a renewed “heaven and earth”’ (p. 162).



Apocalypse and the end of the world

I turn to new worlds, and the ending of this one, in the final part of this essay. As well as the more precise senses of the apocalyptic as a form of biblical literature or as political theological mode, in the popular imagination it means ‘the end of the world’. In the face of climate crisis, the ‘rhetoric of apocalypse will be amping up for the “foreseeable future”’ (Keller, p. xii) and, as I intimated in the introduction to this essay, apocalyptic language has predominated in headlines about climate change in recent years. McIntosh makes an important critique of ‘alarmism’ (or ‘doomism’) that overstates or ‘cherry-picks’ from the consensus science the severity and imminence of the impacts of global warming, particularly ‘near-term social collapse’ (pp. 119–27), including the work of Jem Bendell, who is often quoted with approval in Ward’s book and whose massively influential and contested “Deep Adaptation” paper cites an article by Lynch).¹³ For McIntosh, alarmism is a ‘a thief of time’ that ‘distorts our temporal horizons’ (p. 136) of what is still possible in averting the worst of the catastrophe in an ethically responsible way (p. 136). Yet, whatever the likelihood, or otherwise, of human extinction or ‘the collapse of civilization’ due to global warming, responding to climate and ecological crisis still involves thinking theologically about the end of the world, if not in the sense of all life on planet Earth, but rather the end of the current social order of which the world consists.

The core argument of Lynch’s *Apocalyptic Political Theology* is that ‘the world’ is constituted by the antagonisms of nature, capital, race, and gender, such that it is not possible to think of ‘changing’ the world (pp. 14–36; 125–41) or even to imagine a new one (p. 129). Here we return to Keller’s ‘apocalypse pattern’: ‘to expect some cataclysmic showdown in which, despite tremendous collateral damage (the destruction of the world as we know it), good must triumph [...] and live forever after in a fundamentally new world’.¹⁴ While the end of this world is anticipated by the likes of Bendell and sought after by anti-civilization primitivists,



Lynch acknowledges that anything ‘that could result in a new world [...] would lie beyond any ethical or political justification’, ‘sufficiently cataclysmic that to even desire such an event is itself problematic’ (p. 137). This resonates with McIntosh’s criticism of those who propose complete system change as the only solution to the climate and ecological crisis as not thinking through the impact of such social upheaval on the lives of ‘ordinary people’ and how they would ‘vary with one’s vantage point of privilege’ (p. 52). But, for Lynch, ‘it is also problematic to *not* desire such an event, for to do so is to will the continuation of the violence of the present’ (p. 138, emphasis mine).

I find persuasive Lynch’s political theological account of ‘active disinvestment’ (p. 127) in a world that I also believe to be profoundly, essentially *wrong*, although, as he himself acknowledges, his account perhaps needs to do more (p. 35) to win over those with ideological convictions rather different to my own. Lynch’s characterisation of ‘the demand for alternatives’ as ‘blackmail of affirmation’ (p. 129) is for me a satisfying riposte to liberal approaches, such as McIntosh eschewing utopian thinking because ‘you don’t abandon ship until you’ve got the lifeboat in the sea’, thus being ‘evolutionary not revolutionary’ (p. 153). I believe, with Lynch, that ‘the world is *already* maintained by perpetual violence that is often slow and invisible (to many). The choice is not between violent destruction and peace, but between different distributions of violence’ (p. 130, emphasis mine). But I am less convinced by Lynch’s attempt to sidestep what Keller calls ‘a *pacifying nihilism* [...] vaguely glamorized as radical’ (p. 17, emphasis in original). Lynch posits ‘a notion of pessimism that is not merely surrender’ (p. 131), figured as a Kierkegaardian ‘knight of apocalyptic pessimism’ who ‘does not seek to overcome the object of her desire but rejects the world that is itself the obstacle to desiring rightly’ (p. 139). But I cannot imagine this being enough to sustain healthy activism in my own privileged context, let alone the survival and resistance of those living on the frontline of the climate crisis. The accounts from the globe’s most-affected areas in *Words for a Dying World* resound with love and commitment, not abandonment.

With Keller, I seek for a way that ‘resists both optimistic denialism’, which is where I would place any expectation that the worst impacts of climate crisis can be avoided within the parameters set by global capitalism, ‘*and pessimistic nihilism*’ (p. 17, emphasis mine). While Lynch dismisses Rebecca Solnit’s influential account of activist hope¹⁵ as

Review essay: *The double edge of lament*

‘cruel optimism’¹⁶ (p. 136), I would argue that it differs profoundly from Lauren Berlant’s thesis of desire that is actually an obstacle to flourishing, because of how it shifts the temporal frame of hope, from the future to the here and now. To hope is to take action in the present in recognition that we cannot predict, and may never know, what their ultimate impacts will be (echoed in Keller, p. 17); we act not only in spite of this but *because* of this unknowing, this ‘hope in the dark’. I believe we need to rethink the temporality of climate crisis away from futurity, in the impacts that are already happening and the root causes that are centuries old, but also in how we envision hope for new, better worlds.

Keller’s meditations on Revelation’s New Jerusalem emphasise, with Maggi Dawn’s image of ‘a garden city’ (in Malcolm, p. 176), that it ‘offers no restoration of Eden’, nor a wholesale replacement of the current world; not ‘making all new *things*’ but rather ‘making all things *new*’ (Keller, p. 170, emphasises in original). As Revelation 21 provides a vision of God’s immanence, ‘dwelling with’ (Rev 21:3b, Keller, p. 168), the ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’ (Rev 22:13) reveals the ‘insistently nonlinear temporality’ of the divine (p. 196); together a reminder that the New Testament ‘hope of Christ’s “coming”’ has ‘no “again” or “second” attached: the term is *parousia*, which does not mean return. It means “presence”’ (pp. 134–35). Keller’s ‘dreamreading’ of the book of Revelation culminates with: ‘The struggle brings down to earth the Spirit that is always already here’ (p. 196). I see that spirit, that presence, in the prefigurative¹⁷ work of radical politics that builds examples of ‘the world we want to see’ in the hollowed-out spaces of the current system, from mutual aid groups and workers’ co-ops to urban gardens and community land ownership (an example discussed by McIntosh), actively creating new worlds within this world that is ending, this world that must end. This, for me, is a just hope, ‘bearing the double-edge of grief turning to anger turning to action – and of action turning to a creativity that weaves us into a world worthy of our best efforts’ (Keller, p. 196).



Notes

- ¹ For example, “COP26 Glasgow: Climate summit is world’s ‘last chance’ to avert disaster”, *The National*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19500422.cop26-glasgow-climate-summit-worlds-last-chance-aver-disaster/>; “Prince Charles says world is in ‘the last chance saloon’ ahead of climate summit”, *The Metro*, 21 August 2021, <https://metro.co.uk/2021/08/21/prince-charles-says-world-is-in-last-chance-saloon-ahead-of-cop26-15128328/>.
- ² Libby Brooks, “Scottish campaigners condemn Cop26 as ‘the most exclusionary ever’”, *The Guardian*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/09/scottish-campaigners-condemn-cop26-as-the-most-exclusionary-ever-accommodation>.
- ³ IPCC, “Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty”, 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.
- ⁴ Michael Marshall, “Why It’s Misleading to Say We Only Have 12 Years to Avert Dangerous Climate Change”, *Forbes*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelmarshalleurope/2018/10/08/why-its-misleading-to-say-we-only-have-12-years-to-avert-dangerous-climate-change/>.
- ⁵ See Anna Fisk, “Mercy Not Sacrifice: Reflections on a Healthy Prophetic Climate Movement”, *Chrim: The Journal of the Guild of Health & St Raphael*, Autumn-Winter 2021, forthcoming. Also available online in a series of blogposts: <https://annafisk.com/2021/06/26/reflections-on-a-healthy-prophetic-climate-movement-1/>.
- ⁶ See Rebecca Solnit, “Big oil coined ‘carbon footprints’ to blame us for their greed. Keep them on the hook”, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/23/big-oil-coined-carbon-footprints-to-blame-us-for-their-greed-keep-them-on-the-hook>.
- ⁷ After Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016).
- ⁸ See Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203–1207; Todd LeVasseur



Review essay: *The double edge of lament*

- and Anna Peterson, eds., *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The “Lynn White Thesis” at Fifty* (London: Routledge: 2016).
- ⁹ Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 8, cited in Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*, 114.
- ¹⁰ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.
- ¹¹ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 11, emphasis in original.
- ¹² See Nafeez Ahmed, “The Flawed Social Science Behind Extinction Rebellion’s Change Strategy”, *Resilience*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-10-31/the-flawed-social-science-behind-extinction-rebellions-change-strategy/>.
- ¹³ Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy”, 27 July 2018, 2nd revised edition, 27 July 2020, 15: <https://lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>. See Thomas Nicholas, Galen Hall, and Colleen Schmidt, “The Faulty Science, Doomism, and Flawed Conclusions of Deep Adaptation”, *Open Democracy*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/faulty-science-doomism-and-flawed-conclusions-deep-adaptation/>.
- ¹⁴ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 11.
- ¹⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).
- ¹⁶ After Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁷ Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

