

Anthropology-as-theology: Violent endings and the permanence of new beginnings

Joseph Webster 

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge,
UK

Correspondence

Dr Joseph Webster, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9BS.

Email: jw557@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the temporality of dispensationalist imaginings of the apocalypse, with a particular focus on why such imaginings often have an acutely violent character. For the Brethren and for Jehovah's Witnesses, the most convincing signs of the imminent apocalypse are violent ones. By drawing on a mixture of biblical and extra-biblical images—flames, hail, missiles—dispensationalism creates a semiotic landscape filled with natural, supernatural, and “man-made” disaster. By analyzing different images of “violent endings” in circulation among the Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses, this article asks two questions, namely, what are the temporal effects of such violent imaginings, and what imaginings exist on the other side of such violence, after its perpetration? I seek to answer these questions by developing a mode of inquiry I call *anthropology-as-theology*, whereby anthropological analysis deliberately surrenders to theological ideas. I suggest that, when viewed from the perspective of anthropology-as-theology, violent dispensationalist visions about the end of the world can provide new perspectives on permanence, which, seen through the lens of revelation, comes to be understood as both novel and eternal.

KEYWORDS

apocalypse, theology, time, millenarianism, Christianity

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la temporalidad de las imaginaciones dispensacionistas del apocalipsis con un enfoque particular en cómo tales imaginaciones a menudo tienen un carácter extremadamente violento. Para los hermanos y los testigos de Jehová, las señales más convincentes del inminente apocalipsis son violentas. Al basarse en una mezcla de imágenes bíblicas y extrabíblicas –llamas, granizo, misiles– el dispensacionismo crea un paisaje semiótico colmado de desastre natural, sobrenatural y hecho por humanos. Al analizar imágenes diferentes de “finales violentos” en circulación entre los hermanos y los testigos de Jehová, este artículo hace dos preguntas, a saber, ¿cuáles son los efectos temporales de tales imaginaciones violentas? Y ¿qué imaginaciones existen en el otro lado de tal violencia, después de su perpetración? Busco responder

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estas preguntas al desarrollar un modo de investigación que llamo *antropología-como-teología*, a través del cual el análisis antropológico deliberadamente se entrega a las ideas teológicas. Sugiero que, cuando visto desde la perspectiva de la antropología-como-teología, las visiones dispensacionalistas violentas acerca del final del mundo pueden proveer nuevas perspectivas sobre la permanencia, la cual vista a través del lente de la revelación, llega a ser entendida tanto como novedosa como perpetua. [*apocalipsis, teología, tiempo, milenarismo, cristianismo*]

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel untersucht das Zeitverständnis dispensationalistischer Apokalypse-Vorstellungen, mit Schwerpunkt auf der Frage, warum solchen Vorstellungen oft ein akut gewaltsamer Charakter innewohnt. Für Brüdergemeinden und Zeugen Jehovas gehört Gewalt zu den überzeugendsten Zeichen einer unmittelbar bevorstehenden Apokalypse. In einer Mischung aus biblischen und außerbiblischen Bildern—Flammen, Hagel, Raketen—erschafft ihr Dispensationalismus eine semiotische Landschaft, die mit natürlichen, übernatürlichen und menschengemachten Katastrophen gefüllt ist. Der Artikel analysiert derartige “gewaltsame Enden,” die unter Brüdern und Zeugen Jehovas zirkulieren, und stellt dabei zwei Fragen: was sind die temporalen Effekte solcher gewaltsamen Vorstellungen, und welchen Vorstellungen existieren zur anderen Seite dieser Gewalt, d.h. wenn diese verübt worden ist? Ich versuche diese Fragen mit einer Untersuchungsmethode zu beantworten, die ich Ethnologie-als-Theologie nenne, da sich hier Ethnologie absichtlich theologischen Ideen unterwirft. Ich werde aufzeigen, dass gewaltsame dispensationalistische Visionen, wenn sie aus der Perspektive der Ethnologie-als-Theologie betrachtet werden, neue Perspektiven auf Permanenz aufscheinen lassen, die wiederum durch die Linse der Offenbarung betrachtet als neu und ewig zugleich verstanden werden kann. [*apokalypse, theologie, zeit, millenarismus, Christentum*]

INTRODUCTION

“There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

—2 Peter 3:3–4

To some, the Christian apocalypse has a dubiously permanent presence, with the end of the world having been “just around the corner” in every day and generation. Such observations are not new, with the Apostle Peter using his Second Epistle to preempt such skeptical objections to the *longue durée* of apocalypticism. Peter’s rebuttal to these “scoffers”—that the Earth is “reserved unto fire against the day of judgment” (2 Peter 3:7)—offers a useful introduction to the main theme of this article: the temporal framing of eschatological violence as revealed through text, image, and everyday life. I argue that the violence of Christian millenarianism needs to be apprehended in ways that cap-

ture what I want to call its “temporally omnivorous” character. Existing anthropological attempts to theorize millenarian temporality falter as a result of their efforts to identify specific apocalyptic moments as characteristic of the eschatological experiences of those being studied. Instead of locating millenarian time within specific moments, such as within the “near” and “distant” future (Guyer 2007), or within the “expansive present” (Haynes 2020), I argue that millenarianism (as read, depicted, and lived) is temporally omnivorous insofar as its theology lays claim to *all* of time, greedily swallowing up every manifestation of “the event” (Das 1995; Humphrey 2008) via its intentionally immodest insistence upon the eternal omnipresence of permanence.

This is true for the Brethren and Jehovah’s Witnesses, where human history runs from the ancient to the recent past, into the prophetic present, to the near and distant future, and finally into the eternity of what the Brethren call the “New Heaven and New Earth” and Witnesses call the “New World.” Understanding this all-consuming millenarian temporality provides new perspectives on permanence. For dispensationalists, if “what stays” postapocalypse is a paradisaical New World established through divine acts of destructive violence, then experiences of permanence cannot be conflated with

longevity. Instead, millenarian temporality shows permanence to be always marked by a present novelty that is held, simultaneously, to be ancient and futuristic. In dispensationalist terms, the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21—which will be utterly permanent—is Eden returned. Understood thus, permanence is the common denominator of millenarian religion, promising unending communion with God, “which is, and which was, and which is to come” (Revelation 1:8). More specifically, millenarian permanence is realized through “temporal coalescence,” a term that, with Jacob Hickman (Hickman and Webster, in press), I use to refer to this amalgamation of present, past, and future, which are inhabited *simultaneously*, and also, with the arrival of the millennium, inhabited *eternally*.

With this temporality in mind, what appears below deliberately seeks to pursue an anthropological theorization of millenarian temporality that submits to the eschatology of the Brethren and Witnesses. By analyzing the biblical texts, extra-biblical images, and everyday events that reveal these “last of the last days,” what I offer is not simply a “theologically engaged anthropology” (Lemons 2018) but an anthropology of theology, and, more than this, an anthropology-as-theology. While the former seeks to make ethnographic sense of theology in anthropological terms, the latter seems less safe, undertaking anthropology as a theological enterprise. Critical commentators like Asad (1993) and Sahlins (1996) have argued that anthropology has been unreflexively influenced (even tainted) by its theological prehistory. In this reading, anthropologists have long been conducting anthropology-as-theology but have failed to notice (or admit) that this is what they do. Others, including Cannell (2005), are more ambivalent about whether this haunting of the anthro- by the theo- is a problem or an opportunity. Robbins and Engelke (2010, 625) go further, calling anthropologists “not just to think *about* religion ... but also *with* it.”

In his most recent account, Robbins (2020) goes further still by highlighting what he sees as the main achievement of the ontological turn (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017)—namely, “treating the understandings of others as potentially theoretical” (Robbins 2020, 19)—as a route to exploring “the possibility of doing anthropology not with Indian or Melanesian or Amazonian concepts, but rather with theological ones” (19). What Robbins advocates is not just thinking *with* religion but also *with* theology by getting “close to some of the existential stakes involved in conversion for the people that we study” (55). If an anthropology of theology treats theology as ethnographic data, and if an anthropology *with* theology treats theology as useful in anthropological theory-building, what could be gained by undertaking anthropology-as-theology? Because of the status of the Bible as the sole authoritative source of all dispensationalist theology, one route to answering this question is to draw closer to dispensationalist ontology by first drawing closer to its epistemology—a venture that demands a methodology capable of paying attention to how these unapologetically logocentric Christians frame their relationship with scripture.

For the Brethren of Gamrie, in Northeast Scotland, the Bible is the “living Word”—a book “still warm with the breath of God.” Gamrie’s Brethren, furthermore, did not regard themselves as interpreting the Bible, but receiving it—“I’m not reading *into* the Bible, I’m reading *out* of it!” preachers declared. Marty and Appleby’s (1994) analy-

sis of fundamentalism as a religious antihermeneutic is useful here as a reminder that many Protestants treat the Bible as ongoing divine revelation, as is Harding’s (2000, 28) suggestion that such fundamentalists view their own lives in revelatory terms, as “third testaments.” Similarly, the Brethren and Jehovah’s Witnesses regard their theology as a divinely coordinated *recovery* of biblical truths. In Gamrie, Brethren theologies about separation from worldliness, for example, were held as revealed to founding Brethren figure John Nelson Darby as a “divine shaft of light” sent from God—a process mirroring Luther’s experience of receiving the doctrine of *sola gratia*. Here, biblical revelation, like the future New Jerusalem, comes down from heaven in a starkly unmediated form.

Witnesses, too, know their theology as “new light” given to them by God—allowing the Watch Tower movement to identify Charles Taze Russell within biblical end-times prophecy as the “man with the writer’s inkhorn described in Ezekiel 9:2” (WTBTS 1917, 6028).¹ As this new light “grows brighter and brighter” (Proverbs 4:18), teaching on this point of doctrine has undergone “an adjustment” (WTBTS 2016, 16), with Witnesses currently identifying the man with the inkhorn as “Jesus Christ, the one behind the scenes who marks those who will survive [Armageddon]” (16). Yet Witnesses today still regard the biblical text and the truth that emerges from it as coming exclusively to them directly from Jehovah through deeply rational scripture study guided by holy spirit, confirming how “light has flashed up for the righteous” (Psalm 97:11). By drawing on a different biblical image—the “faithful and discreet slave” (Matthew 24:45)—Witnesses identify their own Governing Body with the first-century “apostles and elders in Jerusalem” (Acts 15:2) who “make important decisions on behalf of the entire anointed Christian congregation” by “yielding to the influence of God’s spirit” and by “*preparing and dispensing spiritual food*” (WTBTS 2012, 22–23; emphasis in original).

Conducting anthropology-as-theology would thus require something akin to Robbins’s (2020, 55) suggestion that theology be allowed to “get us close to some of the existential stakes involved” in lived eschatology by using the work of theologians to do more than “the artful telling of the stories of individual lives as they engage universal themes.” But beyond using theology as anthropological theory, Robbins gives little away about how this existential closeness might be fostered. Anthropology-as-theology helps close this gap by treating theology not as theory but as revelation. Unlike one prominent strand within the ontological turn, which seeks to recognize the diversity of ontological reality in order to bring about a “permanent decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro 2011, 128), anthropology-as-theology would seek a “possession” of anthropology by the “spirit” of confessional theology. For my purposes, this would mean anthropologically yielding to a legion of dispensationalist doctrinaires armed to the teeth with biblical citations and apocalyptic signs. Indeed, rather than doing battle, anthropology-as-theology would embrace “the embarrassing possibility of belief” (Ewing 1994, 571) by adopting a methodology of willing surrender.

As such, my approach also differs from Furani’s (2019, 177) account of “modern reason reconciling with revelation toward anthropological revitalization.” For Furani, “theology offers a promise of transforming

anthropology ... [by becoming] hospitable to revelation" (177). In Furani's view, revelation has "potency for teaching anthropology" (179), and, as "one such order of truth" (180) among others, should be regarded by anthropology "as a serious and useful mirror and companion to its very own reason" (181)—a reevaluation that would allow anthropology to have "theology truly by its side" (182). By taking my cue from the uncompromising singularism and totalism of dispensationalist eschatology (in contrast to Furani's amalgam of ancient Egyptian, Christian, and pre-Islamic theologies), my account of revelation sets up a necessarily less equitable relationship between anthropology and theology. Indeed, by claiming a monopoly over truth, the revelatory status of dispensationalist theology does not offer reconciliation, hospitality, or companionship, but conquest. By accepting defeat (cf. Gell 1998, 69), anthropology-as-theology would allow itself to be overtaken by this mono-ontology of eschatological truth, which, by virtue of its revelatory status, demands to be handled not through dialogical debate but with deliberate acquiescence. In short, within a dispensationalist framing of anthropology-as-theology, anthropology would not have theology "by its side" (Furani 2019, 182), for theology would stand atop it, and over it.

A major contribution this article makes is thus methodological, calling for the adoption of a submissive epistemological stance, both in the midst of fieldwork and during the analytical process of "writing up." Yet, while anthropology-as-theology, in its insistence on allowing theology to "possess" anthropology, is patently *not* methodological atheism (Berger [1967] 1996; cf. Bialecki 2014), neither is it methodological theism (Turner 1993) or ludism (Knibbe and Droogers 2011). For Knibbe and Droogers (2011, 285), methodological ludism is framed by Huizinga's emphasis on "serious play" and "the pleasure play comes with," which, characteristically, do "not need to serve a purpose." Indeed, in dispensationalism, it is neither play nor pleasure that characterizes the urgent awaiting of a violent apocalypse, but holy dread—"when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead" (Revelation 1:17).

Such encounter is also not purposeless for the anthro-theologian, since the emic stakes of *receiving* revelation are permitted to encompass the etic stakes of *understanding* revelation. Thus, where "ludism enables the researcher to separate 'science' as well as her own opinions on the subject of spirit worlds sharply from the claims" (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, 290) of "believers" (283), anthropology-as-theology seeks no such separation, nor a "suppressing [of] one's 'own' frame of reference" (291), but rather a replacing (or supplanting) of one's own frame of reference with a dispensationalist frame. In anthropology-as-theology, then, theological revelation *becomes* a kind of anthropological understanding—which in my case required a conflation of eschatological conviction with ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical analysis.

What about "methodological theism" (see Bialecki 2014)? While I find much that is compelling in Turner's critique of the "kindly pretense" (Turner 1993, 9) of the anthropologist left paralyzed by "a kind of religious frigidity" (11), what I am calling for in anthropology-as-theology is not methodological theism. This is not because I find methodological theism "too facile a way out" (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, 290) or because "it embraces all too easily the emic religious discourse" (290) but because my approach seeks to go beyond encountering "a peak

experience in a ritual" (Turner 1993, 9) by widening the remit of theology beyond that which is currently possible (or permissible) within anthropology. This widening asks the anthropologist to attend not only to moments of acute ethnographic encounter (which for Turner included spirit sightings, shamanic premonitions, and waves of curative energy) but also to something more chronic: to *epistemology*, to one's state of knowing and being known, as it comes to be altered by one's informants. I find myself, somewhat unusually, in strong disagreement here with Geertz, who is forthright in expressing his skepticism about entering into another's epistemology:

We cannot live other people's lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, they say about their lives.... Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces. (Geertz 1986, 373).

The problem with Geertz's assessment is that when applied to religious groups who pursue vigorous projects of proselytization, it remains spiritually important for such groups to magically intrude into (or spiritually transform) the consciousness of others. It was thus the Brethren who sought to intrude on me, and, as I describe below, in many respects they succeeded. If anthropology is all a matter of scratching surfaces, then it was *they* who scratched *me*, often quite deep. As my informants witnessed and preached to me, the words and images they offered traced out complex constellations of end-times signs drawn from a prophetic and semiotic landscape that I came to see and inhabit as my own. In my ethnographic experience among the Brethren of Gamrie, then, Geertz's formulation was reversed, for I could not *but* live other people's lives, and it would have been a piece of bad faith to try *not* to.

Yet, this methodology of epistemological surrender is not entirely new; it is just normally only applied to ethnographic fieldwork. Phenomenology takes immersive bodily participation in the practical tasks that fill our informants' lives as one of its core concerns. If one studies Icelandic farmers, one must *become* a milkmaid—"I could only succeed when I truly began *living the character*," Hastrup (2004, 465; emphasis in original) tells us. I, too, lived the character assigned to me as an apprentice dispensationalist, conforming my life and character to a certain type of Protestant piety. I became teetotal, I never swore, I was careful to avoid being alone with the opposite sex, I read the Bible and prayed daily, I wore plain dark suits at church (which I attended between seven and ten times a week), and, perhaps most importantly, I kept up to date with local and global news and traced out links between these events and what I read in my Bible, discussing their eschatological meaning with Gamrie's Christians. In sum, I took steps to transform myself into a Brethren believer.

Where ethnographic fieldwork involves undertaking "a series of apprenticeships" (Jenkins 1994, 442) by unlearning old habits and surrendering to new ones, anthropology-as-theology extends what Hastrup and Jenkins advocate in relation to participant observation

into the methodology of anthropological theory-building by not just *living the character* but also the *idea*—by becoming a theological apprentice. In Gamrie, this meant mirroring my informants' approach to the Bible by studying biblical prophecy and allowing these texts to exert an intellectual authority over me. To better explain what this looked like, I want to relate my experience to that of another anthropologist.

Within the anthropological literature on Christian premillennialism, an often-repeated vignette is offered of Susan Harding's near-miss car accident following an interview with a Southern Baptist pastor. As Harding (2000, 33) explains, "I slammed on the breaks, sat stunned for a split second, and asked myself 'What is God trying to tell me?' It was my voice but not my language. I had been inhabited by the fundamental Baptist tongue I was investigating." The moment revealed to Harding the extent to which she had begun "to acquire the language ... of faith" as she "stood at the crossroads ... in between being lost and saved, listening" (xi). Nonetheless, Harding was clear that she "did not convert" (xi). I remained less sure when faced with similar crossroads, largely due to my being pulled along the thorny path of dispensationalism by my informants, being scratched as I went. By becoming my informants' theological apprentice, I found myself "submitting to the Bible," for example, by reading prophecies about the Harlot and Beast of Revelation 17 not as generic symbols of evil but as literal preconfigurations of the coming tyranny of the EU and apostate churches. I began to view the world in dispensationalist terms, noticing "signs of the times" in situations as disparate as the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, Fraserburgh's chronic heroin problem, and, postfieldwork, in Brexit and in the global spread of COVID-19.

Such ways of seeing were new to me. Almost twenty years ago, as an undergraduate hailing from a moderate Anglican background, I can still remember my embarrassed incomprehension when I was first asked (by a Scots-Presbyterian) what my eschatology was—was I pre- or postmillennial? I had no idea, I replied, eventually admitting that I didn't know what those words meant. "Oh," came the reply, "you must be amillennial." Some months later, after my first lengthy discussion with a Jehovah's Witness, it dawned on me with intense incredulity that my conversation partner *really did* believe that the statue described in Daniel 2 was a geopolitical timeline, culminating in the apocalyptic machinations of the United Nations and "False Religion." It was not for another seven years, during the early stages of my doctoral fieldwork in Gamrie, that my baffled Anglican "amillennialism" was eroded by the urgent premillennialism of my Brethren informants, and it was here that my apprenticeship in dispensationalism scratched me most deeply. On more than one occasion, having suddenly realized that the room I was in had become unexpectedly silent and deserted, I caught myself awash with an anxiety that the rapture had occurred and that I had been "left behind." Did my lack of commitment to Brethrenism mean that eternal life had been irrevocably withheld from me, as so many gospel preachers had warned? Such thoughts were fleeting at first but grew into a nagging doubt about the validity of my faith. Such doubts remain, more than a decade on, reinforced, no doubt, by my decision to leave the Church of England, not for Brethrenism, but for the (again, comparatively moderate) Presbyterian Church of Ireland—a denomination regarded as apostate by many Brethren and all Witnesses.

As McIntosh (2004, 70) described of her immersion in the world of Giriama diviners in Kenya, I too "began to think that the membrane separating disbelief from belief was thinner than I had realized." Periodically, dispensationalist-inspired doubts about my own faith spill over into a conviction that the Brethren are right and that I am wrong, and therefore damned. This feeling impresses itself upon me most clearly whenever I read gospel tracts, which I still compulsively collect from wherever they are strategically deposited. Such Protestant fundamentalist pamphlets, which invariably end by demanding the reader make an immediate decision to be born-again, provoke within me a nervously equivocal reaction, which, in such moments, merely confirms to me that dispensationalist theology is God's truth and that I am lost as a result of my (as yet) incomplete commitment to it. Even my instinctive rejection of certain theologies I heard in Gamrie—Christian Zionism, credit cards as the Mark of the Beast—still leave me with the uncanny feeling that I do not support such doctrines precisely because I am destined to be "left behind."

Having recognized these moments of theological tension, I want to stretch the membrane between belief and unbelief further still by deliberately fostering opportunities to be "taken in by" (Willerslev and Suhr 2018, 73) theological alterity, allowing such disorientating (and reorienting) moments—acute rapture anxiety, chronic Brexit confusion—to migrate from fieldwork into written analysis. Since dispensationalist Christians understand millenarian time through their commitment to a temporally coalesced view of biblical prophecy, anthropology, too, must enter into this textually and pictorially mediated temporality if it is to more fully comprehend the violence of dispensational permanence. In short, if anthropologists want to get closer to the *existential stakes* of millenarianism, in the case of dispensationalism, this will require getting closer to its *existential means*, namely biblical prophecy. Anthropology-as-theology is my method for fostering such closeness by continuing in my role as an apprentice dispensationalist, even as I "write up."

As such, I do not see this apprenticeship as a kind of "bracketing." While bracketing seeks "to provide a way out of the eternal dilemma of how to take seriously the existence of supernatural beings ... by never making a claim about reality or truth" (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008, 51, 58), anthropology-as-theology affirms such claims as true, in the same way that a phenomenologist studying cattle farmers acts as a milkmaid. If, ethnographically, this approach involved transforming myself into a pious Brethren adherent, what might it look like postfieldwork? My answer is to mirror my informants' epistemology of preaching in my own written analysis—that is, to not write *into* dispensationalism, but to write *out* of it—by surrendering to the prophetic scriptures and their attendant "signs of the times" as an infallible and self-referential source of eschatological revelation. In what appears below, then, I write not just as an anthropologist but as an apprentice dispensationalist, without qualifying emic theological truth claims with the usual etic wording. Instead, I will quote the Bible as flatly true, and often without context—as my informants constantly did, and expected me to do, as well. I am aware that there will be many in anthropology who will be skeptical—either because they feel that surrender to dispensationalism is antithetical to critical scholarship or because they find

dispensationalism “repugnant” (Harding 1991). I simply ask the reader to keep an open mind in the hope that my argument about millenarian permanence will demonstrate the analytical value of anthropology-as-theology.

Before proceeding to offer this kind of dispensationalist empirical exegesis, it seems important to state that, at the time of writing, the majority of my ethnographic expertise is with the Open, Closed, and Exclusive Brethren movements, among whom I have conducted ethnographic research for over a decade, mostly in Northeast Scotland (Webster 2013, 2017, 2019), but also in Northern Ireland (Webster 2018). During these years of research with the Brethren, I frequently encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses, often by accepting a *Watchtower* magazine, before briefly introducing myself as someone who researches religion and the end times. The discussions that follow are frequently illustrated with contrasting images of the eternal superabundance of Paradise and torturous scenes of Armageddon. It was as a result of such discussions that I developed my current ethnographic project on the moral, visual, and hermeneutical dynamics of Witness eschatology, a work that I have been conducting full-time since April 2021.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have an extensive corpus of religious artwork within their *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines, which blend bold headlines and short paragraphs of text with illustrations, photos, and digital images, many of which depict the events of the “last days.” In contrast, Brethren publications remain text-heavy, often limited to bare transcriptions of conversational exegesis, known as “Bible readings.” Yet, the Brethren have long been avid consumers of dispensationalist charts, which map biblical prophecy by tracking past, present, and future fulfillments of different “signs of the times” and contain remarkably similar depictions of eschatological violence to the *Watchtower*. Importantly, my interest in dispensationalist visual culture not only concerns how biblical prophecy comes to be depicted but also how dispensationalism offers its adherents (and apprentices) a new way of seeing by training the eye to apprehend the world and its “signs” with marked apocalyptic urgency. To make sense of this, some theological context seems needful.

UNDERSTANDING DISPENSATIONALISM

Despite important doctrinal differences—especially concerning the deity of Christ and the doctrine of hell—a comparison of the written and visual eschatology of these two millenarian movements is justified,² especially because Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) developed the end-times beliefs of Jehovah’s Witnesses not only by reinterpreting William Miller’s (1782–1849) Adventism but also by reworking the dispensationalist theology of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) (Chrystides 2016, 58–59, 228). As a theology of the prophetic unfolding of history, dispensationalism reveals a linear model of time divided into successive “ages” or “dispensations.” Crucially, there is near-unanimous agreement among different dispensationalists that the dispensation humanity *currently* inhabits—referred to by the Brethren as the “church age” and by Witnesses as the current “system of things”—is the *penulti-*

mate dispensation, rendering the present as “the last of the last days.” For the Brethren and Witnesses, this temporal positioning is the foundational doctrinal and cosmological reality upon which the rest of religious experience rests, giving rise to a diverse set of apocalyptic signs.

For Gamrie’s Brethren, such signs focused upon EU fisheries management. The width of net mesh, the number of days at sea, and the minimum length of sellable langoustines were all regulated by the EU—the Antichrist—revealed as a demonic political puppet controlled by the devil with the aim of restricting global food supplies to impose a global apocalyptic famine. Other signs included rising divorce rates, harsh winters, the success of the Likud Party, and increasing reliance upon credit cards. Throughout their history, the early Bible Students and Witnesses, too, have identified a whole host of “signs of the times.” Steps toward creating the modern State of Israel, the appearance of multiheaded sheaves of wheat offering superabundant harvests, the mathematical proportions of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the violence of the First World War, the creation of the League of Nations and the UN—all showed that Armageddon was near (cf. Beckford 1975; Chrystides 2016; Knox 2018).

For most Brethren, the eschatological running order is as follows: the present last days, the rapture, the tribulation and the battle of Armageddon, the millennium, Satan’s last revolt, the renovation³ of the Earth by fire, and finally the eternal establishment of the New Heaven and New Earth. Chrystides (2016, 226) describes a very similar eschatological running order affirmed by Witnesses today.⁴ For brevity’s sake, I want to limit my comments to: (1) the present last days, (2) the tribulation and Armageddon, and (3) the final establishment of Paradise. In comparing these eschatological frameworks, my argument is that the most convincing apocalyptic signs are violent ones⁵ due to the ability of violence to produce temporal coalescence.

SEEING AND READING VIOLENT ENDINGS

Images and words from *Watchtower* reveal the “last days” in strongly violent terms. Armed robberies, drug addiction, terrorists in balaclavas pointing assault rifles, mothers holding the emaciated bodies of their famine-stricken infants, wives being abused by their husbands, armies of troops and tanks, and atomic mushroom clouds are all commonly depicted within Jehovah’s Witness literature addressing present-day signs of the times. Such images are always accompanied by written explanations communicating a sense of intense apocalyptic urgency:

Are we really at the brink of a great global disaster? Countries with a history of nuclear weaponry are... creating new deadlier ones. High blood pressure, obesity, air pollution, and drug abuse are increasing. Millions of people die every year from breathing contaminated air. Storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons, and earthquakes bring about devastating floods, crushing landslides, and other types of destruction. (WTBTS 2017, 3–5).

Such images are exceeded by *Watchtower* images of the near future of the great tribulation (Matthew 24:21) and Armageddon (Revelation 14:14–16), when Satan and his demonically inspired human governments are loosed upon the Earth.⁶ Permitted to do their worst, these evil forces are doomed to eventual destruction at the hands of Jesus and his heavenly army (WTBTS 2019, 1; cf. WTBTS 2021b, 192, 196), while faithful Witnesses “stand still, and see the salvation of Jehovah” (2 Chronicles 20:17). The events during Armageddon are depicted as exceptionally violent, with comets striking the planet, earthquakes leveling entire city blocks, fire consuming everything in its path, and, with the arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the loosing of arrows from the bows of their supernatural riders (WTBS 2003, 243). Discussing such images with a Witness contact of mine, they rightly pointed out how contemporary Witness depictions of end-times events were actually *less* violent than some of those produced decades earlier. To prove their point, they sent me twelve such examples, and while all were indeed gruesome, two in particular stood out. The cover of J. F. Rutherford’s (1935) *Universal War Near* shows a large heavenly sword dripping with blood hanging over the head of a terrified bishop, bearing the inscription “For Jehovah and for Gideon,” while the cover of an issue of *Consolation* (now *Awake!*) shows an innumerable mass of naked men brawling and stabling each other while others fall or are thrown into an abyss below (WTBTS 1940). In sharing these with me, it was clear that even my Witness contact found such images hard to look at.

Brethren images of this tribulation are no less violent. Popular among the Brethren are large pull-out prophetic charts produced by the American Baptist pastor Clarence Larkin (1850–1924). Larkin’s charts, strongly influenced by Darby’s dispensationalism and historically used at Brethren gospel rallies as visual teaching aids, were remembered fondly in Gamrie. In addition to pictures of the “wicked dead” burning in hell, Larkin’s (1918, *passim*) end-times depictions (always accompanied by written biblical references) include images of splitting mountains, lightning strikes, a sword-carrying Antichrist, a guillotine used to execute those who refuse to take the Mark of the Beast, the Scarlet Woman drunk on the blood of the Saints, armies of heavenly troops, and the Earth renovated by fire as depicted by a burning globe. The tribulation is depicted with reference to the Seven Trumpets and Vials of Revelation detailed by “burning mountains,” “the sun smitten,” “plagues of locusts,” “plagues of horsemen,” “plagues of boils,” and “plagues of hail” (Larkin 1918). Jehovah’s Witnesses, too, depict plagues of hail during the tribulation, adding images of collapsing buildings, lightning strikes, and the piling up of dead bodies (WTBTS 1988, 233; see also WTBTS 2021c).

Larkin’s charts also include explanatory text, which, as well as making reference to the First World War, discuss technological and civilizational advances that, as among Witnesses, are shown (on the basis of Daniel 12:4) to be both harbingers of doom and mechanisms for spreading the gospel:

THE PRESENT EVIL AGE: That this “Age” is EVIL is seen in the character of its civilization. After nearly 1900 years of gospel preaching the world is in a worse state than it was in the days of Christ, and seems headed

toward some great crisis. The spirit of lawlessness is in the air, and is strangely becoming unmanageable and perverse. How are we to account for this? The answer is that there are “TWO OPPOSING SPIRITS” at work in the world in this dispensation. The “HOLY SPIRIT” and the “SPIRIT OF THE WORLD.” As the “End of the Age” draws near [“STRONG DELUSIONS”] are being rapidly multiplied. The “SPIRIT OF THE WORLD” is SATAN. It is not likely that the Holy God imparted to men the knowledge that would enable them to invent such hellish instruments of warfare as were used in the great European War. It is clear then that there is some “SUPERNATURAL BEING” who is at the head of the “WORLD SYSTEM,” and that that “Being” is “SATAN.” His Program is to build up a magnificent Civilization without God. The world today sits on the mouth of a volcano, whose interior is a “foaming cauldron” of social unrest and commercial rottenness. (Larkin 1918, 44)

If Hofstadter ([1964] 2008, 21) was correct in his suggestion that “anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan,” then eschatological violence has always been the action-thriller of the dispensationalist. During fieldwork among the Brethren, I came to realize how literally true this was. Along with a family from Gamrie, I attended a Bible study series for Brethren youth (dubbed YBS, for “Youth Bible Study”) about the end times. The group’s discussions frequently referenced the *Left Behind* novels, which provided an accessible pop-culture framing for the complex eschatological accounts of Daniel and Revelation. At the end of the series, we watched Vic Sarin’s *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), prompting the assembled youth to consider their own eschatological readiness, especially during the film’s frequent action sequences.

Aptly, *Left Behind: The Movie* opens with the words “How do you describe both a beginning and an end?” Sarin’s answer is that the biblical story of endings and new beginnings is to be described violently. The first scene of the film, drawing on dispensationalist interpretations of Ezekiel 38 and 39, shows Iraqi and Syrian fighter jets encircling Jerusalem before miraculously exploding, leaving the Holy Land untouched. Next, the film moves to the United States to show the mass vanishings of the rapture (Luke 17:34–35; Thessalonians 4:16–17),⁷ which trigger enormous road traffic pileups, leading to scores of walking wounded. Other scenes across the *Left Behind* trilogy include rioting, tank attacks, car bombings, murder, assassinations, and biological warfare, as well as a pivotal role given to God’s Two Witnesses, who immolate those aligned with the Antichrist by breathing fire from their mouths (Revelation 11:3–5).

Such images were familiar to YBS members. In a detailed exegesis of 2 Thessalonians, for example, we were told how the Antichrist would rise to prominence from within the UN (Witnesses also regard the UN as eschatologically significant, identifying it as the revived Beast of Revelation 17; see WTBTS 1988, 247) by solving the global financial crisis. Next, this Antichrist would provide peace in the Middle East, only to turn his armies against Israel. This failed attack would lead to

the Antichrist's death—but only temporarily—since during the globally televised state funeral to follow, Satan would resurrect the Antichrist in a counterfeit of Christ's resurrection. Embracing this false sign, the world would worship the Antichrist as a god, who would then reduce the newly rebuilt Jewish Temple to rubble. Next, the Beast would slay God's Two Witnesses (Revelation 11), and Armageddon would occur. "The practical challenge for us," the YBS leader said, "is how effective is our witness? Are we worth killing?" All around the room, young people stared silently at their feet as they pondered their answer.

Notably, the Watch Tower film *The Bible: A Book of Fact and Prophecy* (WTBTS 1996) contains similar depictions of land and aerial warfare, rioting, burning corpses, mass graves, starvation, and nuclear mushroom clouds. Witnesses have been at the forefront of such productions, with Russell's eight-hour film *The Photo Drama of Creation*, first shown in 1914,⁸ depicting all of history, from before creation to after the arrival of the millennium. Here, too, the eschatological importance of violence—past, present, and future—is showcased in gruesome detail. The feeding of Christians to lions under Nero, the burning of Jews during the Middle Ages, heaps of corpses on the battlefields of the Crusades, the burning of early Protestant martyrs, the sexual and physical violence of the Inquisition, and the Christian's bodily and spiritual warfare involved in staying on the "Narrow Way" all feature within *The Photo Drama*.

Contra to Meneses et al. (2014, 85–86) in their article "Engaging the Religiously Committed Other: Anthropologists and Theologians in Dialogue," taking "the problem of human violence" as the key exemplar upon which to construct "a broader anthropology" via "a Christian perspectival epistemology" may obscure more than it reveals. This seems especially true for dispensationalists, who find their fervent anticipation of eschatological violence displaced by Meneses's insistence that violence is primarily a "problem" and a "human" phenomenon. By adopting the differently aligned perspective of anthropology-as-theology—in this case, by surrendering to the dispensationalist visions of one's informants rather than advocating for, say, one's own Christian commitments, be they "orthodox, evangelical, ecumenical" (84), Anglican, Presbyterian, or whatever—what can be seen is not only the problem of human violence but the *solution of divine violence*. Here, Meneses's statement that "Christianity's solution to the problem of violence is not tolerance, but love" (88), is a half-truth, since, for dispensationalists, the Christian solution of love is a *violent* solution emerging from a *violent* love. Not only is this violence founded upon "the self-giving love of ... the cross⁹ of Christ" (88), but the eschatologically purifying violence of Armageddon. What anthropology-as-theology helps us grasp is not a generically pan-Christian "ethic to end violence" (88) but a specifically dispensationalist expectation about a coming *violent end to violence*. Crucially, such eschatological violence is not the end it may appear—nor is it even the beginning of the end. Rather, the violence of the last days represents an entirely new and permanent beginning. In anthropology-as-theology, by treating theology not as theory but as revelation, what is revealed is a different "reading" and "vision" of violence, as well as its temporal properties. It is to this dispensationalist revelation that I now turn.

BELIEVING VIOLENT ENDINGS

While anthropological accounts of direct human experiences of violence may cumulatively showcase "the misery of the world" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003, 26), a different role may be attributed to anthropological accounts of human *imaginings* of violence, which showcase creativity alongside misery. From "the spectacularity of violence in Jamaica" embedded in the "historiography addressing slaves" (Thomas 2011, 19), to the circulation online of images of self-immolation among Tibetan monks and nuns (Sangster, 2012), to viewing images of genocide as part of the attraction of "dark tourism" in Rwanda (Robb 2009), to the careful maintenance of gable-end murals celebrating paramilitarism in Northern Ireland (Jarman 1997), the ethnographic record is replete with examples of the darkly creative force of human fascinations with images of violence.

Yet, unlike these violent images, those I am discussing are not primarily rooted in the past but concern future events, standing as semiotic promissory notes—images of a sure and certain future that is soon to arrive in the present day. Such violence—now anticipated, but soon real—is a conflation of the physicality of the violent break (buildings collapsing, hail crushing human bodies) with the temporality of dispensational transition: a transition from ancient biblical-prophetic time, to the present "last of the last days" to the tribulation, to the millennium, to the cleansing of the Earth, to its restoration as an eternal New World. The work of dispensationalist violence, then, is to conjoin the materiality of violent transformation with the temporality of permanent eschatological renovation. Consider, for example, this key biblical proof-text, which, for Witnesses, conjoins novelty, permanence, and violent endings:

In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. And this kingdom will not be passed on to any other people. It will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, and it alone will stand forever. (Daniel 2:44)

What anthropology-as-theology offers is the kind of "antihermeneutic" that takes for granted (as opposed to playing with or bracketing) the eschatological truth of the verse quoted above, thereby creating the kind of epistemology required to catapult the anthropologist into the temporally coalesced "last of the last days." Such an analysis unfolds as follows: in Daniel 2:44, we see how the "kingdom" to be set up by "the God of heaven" will be new by virtue of it being differentiated from that which it will "put an end to," namely "all these kingdoms" that precede it. Crucially, this newness, which is also simultaneously an "end," will be achieved violently, for "it will crush" that which went before it. This new kingdom will be uniquely eternal—"it alone will stand forever." Here, eschatological violence begets a new ending and thereby a new permanence—a permanence that is nonetheless rooted in the passing of time, for "in those days," that which ends by crushing is also that which, conversely, "will never be destroyed."

As God's promissory note, violent dispensationalist prophecies like Daniel 2:44 are not only directed toward the present and future but also toward the ancient past. Violent images of this kind allow a further conflation—not of the material and the temporal but of different temporal positionings. Dispensationalist violence reveals how the present is not only conflated with the soon-to-arrive violence of the apocalyptic future but also with the distant past of biblical time. Connecting the semiotics of the violent dispensationalist present with the semiotics of the violent dispensationalist past, millenarian believers undergo “temporal coalescence.” Here, while time is still understood as linear, the present is simultaneously futuristic and ancient—futuristic insofar as the present is a sign of things yet to come, and ancient insofar as that same present exists as an echo of (and thus a return to) biblical time. In anthropology-as-theology, it is the biblical text that allows dispensationalist revelation to supplant anthropological theory. Daniel 2:44 no longer stands as an example of the “expressions—representations, objectifications, discourses, performances, whatever—that we traffic” (Geertz 1986, 373) as analysts of religion but turns on us becoming the taskmaster of the anthro-theological apprentice rather than its servant. In short, the anthropologist-as-theologian no longer reads *into* scripture but reads *out* of it.

In being possessed by this emic antihermeneutic, the anthropologist may view a new world of “signs” through the eyes of a dispensationalist. To the extent that seeing really is believing, for Jehovah's Witnesses, temporal coalescence is found within the story of Noah's Ark, which, seen through the Genesis account and its retelling in Matthew 24, acknowledges the present to be “just as the days of Noah.” As such, the present is revealed as a time of military and individual violence—of marching armies, vicious beatings, and sexual exploitation, which, as in the days of Noah, will soon receive God's destructive judgment (see also WTBS 2021a). Temporal coalescence is also a central feature of the violent imaginings of the Brethren, who know the EU to be the Antichrist—not only a latter-day Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), but the Harlot who rides the Beast, drunk on the blood of the Saints (Revelation 17:1–6), as evidenced in the very architectural¹⁰ and monetary¹¹ iconography of the EU. Seeing dispensationalist violence is thus both an act of rupture and merger; it is both a severance and a conflation. The linear “now” of the last days is materially and temporally unique—an eschatological precipice like no other—and yet, at the same time, its violent visions of human suffering reach into the biblical past and the eschatological future, fusing them by observing a series of violent semiotic commonalities between the days of Noah and Babel, the present last days, and the soon-to-arrive eschaton.

In this religious vision, while the past and present offer little that is new, the future arrival of the eschaton exists as a time of genuine novelty and permanence. Thus, while Tomlinson's (2014, 171) related account of Fijian Methodist theodicy is right to “emphasize that suffering itself can become a focus of attention and that such attention's prospective force ... leads back toward an engagement with suffering,” in the case of Brethren and Witness eschatology, it is not the case that what is sought is “engagement with suffering *rather than* transcendence of it” (171; emphasis added). Instead, what is sought is semiotic engage-

ment with violent suffering as *a route* to permanent transcendence of it. Such is the permanence of the Edenic state to come—a return to Genesis's garden, the very first act of creation, which is simultaneously an entry into God's final act of creation, the New Jerusalem of Revelation. Among some Exclusive Brethren groupings from the 1960s, so strong was this insistence upon God's authorship of time that “clocks were removed from meeting rooms and Brethren were not to wear watches to meetings, [as] justified by appeal to Psalm 31:15, our ‘times are in thy hand’” (Holden 2018, 85). With all of time divinely conjoined, all that remains is permanence—the *in saecula saeculorum* of an eternal life born of violence.

CONCLUSIONS

If the aim of anthropology-as-theology is to get “close to some of the existential stakes [of] the people we study” (Robbins 2020, 55), for a study of dispensationalist Christians, this means getting existentially close to the source of their expectations of violence, namely biblical prophecy. Obtaining such closeness requires approaching the Bible as divinely self-interpreting and self-realizing—a book that speaks for itself and infallibly fulfills itself. Attempting to analytically surrender to the claim that “Bible prophecy is always right” (WTBS 2007, 9) may not be so different from ethnographic fieldworkers' attempts to surrender to the embodied dispositions of their informants, for both involve the deliberate undertaking of an apprenticeship (Jenkins 1994)—a “living the character” (Hastrup 2004, 465) and the ideation of dispensationalism.

What “surrendering” to this scripturally mediated dispensationalism achieves is an ability to obtain something of the kind of “existential closeness” Robbins calls for. By reading Daniel or Revelation, the dispensationalist and their anthro-theological apprentice encounters not just words on a page but God and His plan for “the ages.” This places the theological notion of revelation at the center of dispensationalist understanding of permanence in a way that refutes the human-centric social constructivism of much anthropology. Drawing on Kierkegaard's notion of a “leap of faith,” Willerslev and Suhr (2018, 74) are helpful here in warning against a view of “anthropological knowledge as merely produced or constructed,” proposing “that it also involves a kind of revelation over which we have little to no power.” Key to this is their claim that “knowledge depends not only on the actions we take, but, equally importantly, on our ability to receive” (74). While the Brethren and Witnesses would affirm this emphasis on *receiving* revelation, they would reject the prior claim to being *powerless* recipients, since revelation comes to them via deliberate Bible study (cf. Keller 2005), an act made no less agentive by choosing to submit to what one reads (cf. Rouse 2004).

As I have framed it, deliberately surrendering to dispensationalist ideas about divine revelation requires the anthropologist to be transformed into a theological novice who is willing to be taught—scratched even—by theological truths that were not initially their own. Crucially, having successfully searched out the two faces in Rubin's vase, I can no longer go back, despite my best efforts, to seeing the image as just a

vase (Webster 2020b, 90). So, too, with dispensationalism, which permanently revealed to me a previously unseen world of violent demonic conspiracy, as well as a world of divine deliverance offered through Bible reading and eschatological sign searching. I do not—I cannot—just see a vase; to claim otherwise would be dishonest (see also Ewing 1994, 575). In the same way, I do not and cannot go back to just seeing a recession, or a referendum, or a pandemic flu (see also Webster 2020a), since it has already been revealed to me that there is more to see—and thus more to write about.

While little else has been written anthropologically about theories of revelation beyond Furani's already-discussed contribution, Robbins briefly mentions the topic in *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. Discussing Jüngel's work on interruption, Robbins (2020, 45) explains how, for Jüngel, "interruption is not an end in itself"—a fact that leads Jüngel to ask "what is 'specifically Christian' about the Christian experience of interruption" (Robbins 2020, 45–46). Crucially for my argument about the centrality of the theological notion of revelation in understandings of permanence, Robbins's summary of Jüngel's answer—that in the specifically Christian experience of interruption "God is revealed" (46)—demonstrates that millenarian experiences of time based on a "destructively traumatic" (120) interruption-giving-way-to-eternality cannot be limited to the theological "fringe" of dispensationalism. Indeed, Robbins shows how, for Jüngel, God's revelation of Himself carries with it "the threat that the interrupted self might *cease to exist all together*" (45; emphasis added) and, at the same time, offers a "confidence in the *enhanced continuity* [of] ... something new and living out of the nothingness or nonbeing of the past" (47–48; emphasis added). Of course, Jüngel was not a dispensationalist, nor are many Lutherans. Conversely, in over a decade of ethnographic research, I have never met a dispensationalist who identified as a Lutheran. Yet, it is this interplay between the violent threat of existential cessation and the confident promise of continuous new life that shows how even nondispensationalist Christians like Jüngel may hold to some aspects of the millenarian view of time that I have described above.

For both the Brethren and Witnesses (and, as above, perhaps also for many other Christians), biblical revelation demonstrates how, throughout all of human history, violent interruption begets further violent interruption until—at the last—a permanent solution materializes, eternally drawing past, present, and future together through millenarian temporal coalescence. For the Brethren, this involves moving from the curse of the Fall (which brings pain and death into the world), to the Flood (which wipes out all of humanity save one family), to the crucifixion (which kills God's only Son), to the rapture (which triggers the violent horrors of the tribulation and Armageddon), to Satan's last revolt (which culminates with the renovation of the Earth by fire), to the final disappearance of violence through the establishment of the eternal New Heaven and New Earth. For Witnesses, the violent transition prophesied in scripture can be similarly summarized as a transition from a "dire state" into a "bright future":

The dire state of the world today was foretold in the Bible many centuries ago. And what is more, the Bible

specifically predicted a bright future for mankind. Those prophecies describe a world that some might say is spiraling out of control. According to the Bible, humans simply do not have the wisdom and power to bring about a permanent solution. Left to its own devices, the world could very likely face a global catastrophe. But that is not going to happen! Why? This is what the Bible says: God "has established the earth on its foundations; it will not be moved from its place forever and ever." "The righteous will possess the earth, and they will live forever on it." (WTBTS 2017, 6)

Here, dispensationalist expectations of violence demand their own permanent disappearance via a successive movement from violence to violence until history ends and eternal Paradise begins. Using anthropology-as-theology, I have tried to show how such a mode of analysis might usefully surrender to dispensationalist ideas about revelation, newness, and the eternal in order to "get us close to some of the existential stakes involved" (Robbins 2020, 55) in Brethren and Witness anticipations of violent endings and the permanence of new beginnings. I have suggested that millenarianism as "temporal coalescence" might best be comprehended through such an act of surrender, mirroring, as it does, the surrender to biblical revelation that dispensationalists embrace as the foundation of their eschatology. This is because getting close to the *existential stakes* of dispensationalism (that is, temporal coalescence) requires getting close to the *existential means* of dispensationalism, namely the prophetic scriptures, and their revelatory character. Crucially, such an approach may also be applied to other types of (non-Christian) millenarianism by getting close to *their* existential stakes via *their* existential means—whether ritual, spirit mediumship, astrology, or something else—in and through a commitment to theological and spiritual acquiescence.

This is a different mode of engagement to some proposed by theologians seeking to build bridges with anthropology. Coakley, for example, is convinced that "theology can and should be enriched by engagements with anthropology" (Coakley and Robbins 2018, 368) because, even where certain theologies find themselves committed to "a particular sort of religious *normativity*" (369; emphasis in original), such judgments are "varied" (369), just as they are within anthropology. Confronting the variety of these shared judgments, Coakley argues, reveals that those judgments "may not *all* be as different in the two disciplines as is commonly assumed" (369; emphasis in original). Yet, while this erosion of normative difference between anthropology and theology may well be notable if one adopts a theology that emphasizes the "local," the "lay," and the "feminist" (373), such differences are likely to remain rather more implacable if the theology in question is dispensationalism, which tends to be formulated by centrally organized elites committed to the hegemonic masculinity of prophetic and apostolic succession. From a different viewpoint, Banner (2014, 17) attempts to redirect moral theology toward social anthropology by calling the former discipline to "naturalize both the good and the bad" via a focus upon the "psychologically and socioculturally realistic." This, too, sits awkwardly with dispensationalist theology, which insists upon

the supremacy of divine revelation over the natural, psychological, and sociocultural.

If theology can be defined etymologically as “talking about God,” one (seemingly perverse) conclusion of anthropology-as-theology when applied to dispensationalism might be that dispensationalism is not theological at all. This is because neither the Brethren nor Witnesses regard their eschatology as talk *about* God (cf. Robbins 2020, 162). Instead, many Brethren, and I think many Witnesses, understand their eschatology to be talk *from* God. Taken as divine revelation, then, biblical end-times prophecies, which form the basis of dispensationalist life, are imparted to humanity in the form of God talking (and writing) about Himself. And it is this, ultimately, that gives such talk (such violent revelatory words and visions) their permanence—“for all flesh is like grass, and all its glory is like a blossom of the field; the grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the saying of Jehovah endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24–25).

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ORCID

Joseph Webster  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3840-5033>

NOTES

- 1 Authorship of all Jehovah's Witnesses publications is listed as Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, abbreviated to WTBS.
- 2 In pointing to certain notable similarities, it is not my intention to claim wholesale sameness, but to also note key differences where they emerge.
- 3 Larkin's use of the word “renovation” is also an apt description of this point of Witness eschatology, which states that the literal Earth “will not be moved from its place forever and ever” (Psalm 104:5) but will outlast Armageddon following the destruction of the current “system of things.”
- 4 It is in this sense that I refer to Witnesses as broadly “dispensationalist” while also acknowledging certain key differences (see, for example, end-note 6).
- 5 Violence overshadows even ostensibly nonviolent signs. Witnesses, for example, regard the global spread of their organization as a sign of the end times—a work that they anticipate will elicit a violent response from those committed to the current “system of things.”
- 6 An important distinction in Witness theology emerges here, namely that while the violence of the tribulation is a product of demonically inspired human wickedness, the violence of Armageddon is a *divine* act of purifying judgment against evil, leading to the righteous destruction of the wicked and thereby the saving of Jehovah's people. The majority of Witness depictions of end-times violence concern the former, and my chosen examples seek to reflect this predominance (for images of the lat-

ter, see, for example, WTBS 1988, 130; WTBS 2014a, 229; WTBS 2021b, 231).

- 7 The rapture is regarded as an essential eschatological doctrine among the Brethren but is largely rejected by Witnesses (see WTBS 2015, 18–19). However, according to “adjusted” Witness theology gained as a result of “new light,” a specific and limited event somewhat resembling the rapture now appears to be expected. The event concerns “all anointed Christians who still remain on earth ... after the initial part of the great tribulation” in order that this living remnant will be able to “receive their heavenly reward” prior to their return to fight “the battle of Armageddon” whereby “all of the 144,000 will share with Jesus in conquering the kings of the earth” (WTBS 2018, 16).
- 8 An eschatologically important year for Witnesses, identified by Russell as “The End of the Gentile Times” whereupon “Jesus Christ was installed as God's heavenly King” (WTBS 2014b, 217), evidenced by the outbreak of the First World War, as prophesied in Matthew 24:6.
- 9 Or, for Witnesses, an upright stake.
- 10 The European Parliament building in Strasburg as a reconstructed Tower of Babel (see also Foye 2020).
- 11 The Greek €2 coin depicting Europa abducted by Zeus as an icon of The Harlot who rides the Beast.

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