

*Revelation 13:*Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial,
a Reading from Brazil**Vítor Westhelle****Introduction: The Apocalyptic Ethos**

Apocalypsis is the Greek word for revelation. Its Latin equivalent, *revelatio*, is the origin of the English word “revelation.” Revelation is a word that often suggests positive connotations, for it implies the self-manifestation of God’s power, glory, and love. However, the English word “apocalypse,” which is transliterated directly from the Greek, evokes in us peculiar and frightening images: cataclysm, catastrophe, calamity, devastation, Judgment Day, Armageddon, and so forth. Many of these images are in fact drawn from the *Book of Revelation* itself. When viewed as a literary work, the “book” of *Revelation* is commonly accepted as apocalyptic literature. Its fantastic and rich imagery, its colorful language, and its clear-cut dualism of opposing sides have long been associated with a given literary genre that we label “apocalyptic.” However it is important to remember that Christians consider all the scriptural writings to be constitutive of God’s self-revelation; so, the *Book of Revelation* represents only one expression of apocalypticism as revelation, albeit an important expression.

In considering these popular ways of defining “apocalyptic” as a literary genre and as a fantastic narration, we should be careful to avoid two pitfalls. First, apocalypticism should not be defined in terms of a literary genre alone. The *Book of Revelation* is only one expression of a larger apocalyptic *ethos* that pervaded the time right before, during, and for a while after the New Testament writings were penned. The diverse writings of the New Testament, as I have said, frame an apocalyptic message about the impending coming of the Kingdom of God in differing ways and in a variety of genres, representing various expressions of a larger apocalyptic milieu.¹ The point is this: The manifestations of apocalypticism have less to do with

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the literary "apocalyptic genre" than with the larger "apocalyptic ethos," an ethos that reflects a distinctive attitude toward reality. Hence, it is more helpful to focus on the apocalyptic ethos in general than on the literary genre by itself. The literary genre is a particular expression within this larger apocalyptic ethos.

The second pitfall to be avoided in defining apocalypticism is that we might get so caught up in the fantastic images associated with the *Book of Revelation* that we end up focusing only on their surface meaning. Hence, we might miss the fact that these extravagant images are "tropes," namely, figurative utterances straining to express an experience of the world that ordinary language and parsimonious prose unable to convey in depth. The apocalyptic experience of the world that these tropes bore in the first century cannot be easily or entirely recouped, because they belong to a context that is different from ours. Of course, this situation complicates our efforts to understand *Revelation*. Nevertheless, the tropes or images in *Revelation* are not totally obtuse, and the first-century experience of the world to which they point is not entirely inaccessible. The historical data assembled is arguably more reliable now than it was for the generations of believers in the decades that followed Jesus' crucifixion.

By seeing apocalyptic images as figurative expressions of an experience of the world, we open up the *Book of Revelation* so that its symbolism serves as an invitation for us to use the same or similar tropes to express *our* experience of the world. Instead of limiting their meaning to a religious allegory created toward the end of the first century to describe the end of time, we can see the power and illumination of these images in such a way that they can apply symbolically in many and different contexts. In other words, the tropes of *Revelation* have symbolic power far beyond their application to first-century realities. To treat the tropes as symbols, instead of allegories, is to apply their dynamics potentially to any and every institution or system, *including our own institutions and systems*.² As such, we are invited to employ the images of *Revelation* in fresh ways in our context and to resort to our own ways of employing figurative language in our context to convey the message that John of Patmos was articulating with the imagery he found relevant in his day. Even the fantastic figures that emerge in *Revelation* regain unexpected meanings in different contexts.

In the extended example that follows, we shall see how the richness of the language of *Revelation* played out in the Brazilian context, offering a language to name realities in the experience of the people that the conventional vernacular failed to fully address. This naming of situations far distant in space and time from the context of the "Seer of Patmos" is what Paul Ricoeur called the "surplus of semantic meaning," a phrase expressing the idea that a text has meaning that exceeds the meaning intended by the original author. As we shall see in the case study presented below, "the sense of a text is not behind it but in front of it";³ that is, the sense of a text is not in the author's intentionality but in the reader's appropriation of the text in a different context and in another semantic field.

The Brazilian Context

As a result of residing first in Brazil, my native country, then in Denmark and in South Africa for several semesters, and most recently in the United States for the last decade, I cannot but regard myself now as a “hybrid” person shaped by very diverse cultural and socio-economic matrixes. The places I carry in me, which have made me who I am today and which continue to shape my being, have given me an experience of the world that I share with an increasing number of people—a situation that accounts for what sociologists call the most significant sociological phenomenon of the turn of the millennium, namely, *migration*.⁴ The hybrid nature of my identity has become clear to me many times when going through immigration at an airport in the United States. As an example, in a recent entry into the country I hand over my Brazilian passport, which bears the history of my various residences and visits, to the immigration officer. He looks through the passport and then asks me for my visa. So I give him a plastic card that says “Resident Alien.” The officer then gives the passport back to me with the comment: “This is worth nothing.” Holding up my plastic green card, he adds, “This is what really counts.” Apparently, having lived in and visited many different countries no longer means much. The only thing that counts is that I have *official* permission to be in the United States; my identity is suddenly restricted to what is encoded in that plastic card that says “Resident Alien.” The card just states *officially* that I do not belong. Due to their heterogeneity, hybrids do not belong; they are strangers wherever they are, whether they are there legally or illegally.

Hybrid as I am, it is my Brazilian homeland that I wish to lift up here. I grew up in a context in Brazil that was heavily laden with apocalyptic motives and attitudes. The military coup of 1964, along with events that took place during the subsequent military regime in Brazil, shaped for many of us a perception of reality that was filled with stories of persecution, imprisonment, torture, displacement, and exile. For many of us living through it, these were not just stories but naked realities of ourselves and of the names and places of our friends and relatives, realities that shaped and reshaped our attitude toward the world. In this context, we searched for language adequate to express the bewildering experience of such havoc. From this struggle, engaged in the student movement throughout the 1970s, I have learned that one does not really choose to be apocalyptic; rather, one is lured into it by the extremity of circumstances. Later, in the middle 1980s, having finished a Ph.D. and serving as a pastor in a rural area of southwest Brazil, near Paraguay, the extremity of circumstances would shape yet another apocalyptic experience.

During this period of time, I was involved in leading a day-long Bible study with displaced and landless peasants in Brazil. The focus was placed on chapter 13 of the *Book of Revelation*. My purpose here is to provide an account of that Bible study and the larger framework of events that led to it.

The Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) was (and still is) an ecumenical organization originally formed in 1975 by the Roman Catholic Conference of Bishops of Brazil to work with landless peasants.⁵ Landless peasants are the largest social group affected by the rise to power of the military regime and by the subsequent enforcement of its economic program and agrarian policies. These peasants were rendered landless by the drastic and devastating agrarian reform instituted by the new military regime, which created incentives for monocultural farming and which set aside extensive areas that deterred small and multicultural farming. As a result of these agrarian policies, one-third of the entire population of Brazil was displaced from their life on small farms on the land. A simple demographic before-and-after comparison demonstrates the drastic dimensions of those policies. In 1965 (at the beginning of the military regime, shortly after the military coup), two-thirds of the population of Brazil lived in rural areas. Only twenty years later, in 1985 (when democracy was slowly being reintroduced), not more than one-third of the population lived in rural areas.

Most of the peasants who were driven from their land swarmed into crowded urban areas.⁶ However, a huge number of the peasants who were displaced—a contingent ranging from fifteen to twenty million people—became landless peasants living on occasional work and seasonal labor in large monoculture farms (often these peasants would be working on land that they once owned but that was now incorporated into a latifundium). Upon being displaced from the small farming plots they owned, these peasants did not follow the mass-migration to the cities, because they could not be assimilated into the over-saturated urban areas. Or if they did go to the cities, after awhile they returned to the countryside, now as displaced peasants, when the dire conditions of city slums were no longer bearable. For the most part, however, they became “squatters” living in small communities of fifty to three hundred persons in tents and makeshift shelters on federal land and other unoccupied areas from which they would often be expelled by police and military force.

In the late 1980s, I served as coordinator for the work of the CPT in the southern State of Paraná. Our task in working with this population of displaced peasants was threefold: first, to accompany them pastorally by caring for their spiritual needs; second, to do advocacy work on their behalf; and, third, to engage them in continuing education, which included training in technical skills such as ecological agriculture, natural medicine, political instruction, and biblical-theological formation. This brings us to the Bible study of *Revelation* 13. However, before I move into an account of that event, I want to introduce some concepts that will illustrate the larger political context of our work with these displaced people and that will explain the larger apocalyptic ethos in which we lived and worked.

Some Working Concepts

My work with CPT was done in conjunction with an organized people's movement called the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). This movement represented a shift among the peasants from a naïve acceptance of their situation to a profound awareness of the dynamics of the conditions under which they were living. This raising of consciousness represents a transition from *colonialism* to *postcolonialism*. A colonial situation is characterized by two main features. The first feature of colonialism is called *hegemony*,⁷ the capability of a dominant group to exercise power over the subjected or *subaltern* group without overt use of force. Hegemony is distinguished from tyranny by the fact that it presupposes the tacit assent given by the subaltern group to this exercise of power. Hence, there is the presence of power but the absence of the need for the dominant hegemonic culture to use overt force to maintain control, which is possible because of the tacit assent by the subalterns. In colonialism, the subaltern group simply accepts their situation as the way things are. The second feature of colonialism is the passive acceptance by the subaltern group of the *representations* or identity that is projected upon them by the dominant group. Again, the subaltern group accepts these representations of themselves as matters of fact.⁸

By contrast, a postcolonial situation prevails when these two conditions no longer apply, that is, when the subaltern group no longer assents to hegemonic rule by the dominant group and when the subaltern group no longer accepts the imposed representations of who they are by the dominant group. In Brazil the latter process is called, after Paulo Freire, *conscientização*.⁹ When these new conditions prevail, the oppressed have succeeded in breaking with hegemony and are already engaged in shaping a new world.¹⁰

However, there is also a transitional phase between a colonial and a postcolonial situation. This transitional phase is like a twilight zone whereby there is a growing awareness by the subaltern group of these two features (namely, tacit assent to hegemony and acceptance of the identity given to them by the dominant group) and a political practice that contests the group's situation—but without yet being able to break totally away from it.

This twilight zone between colonialism and postcolonialism is what creates the conditions for an apocalyptic attitude and an apocalyptic ethos to emerge. As a working definition, I am suggesting that an *apocalyptic ethos* is characteristic of this "being on the way" between colonialism and postcolonialism. The colonial attitude takes the world as it is; the postcolonial attitude is already able to strategize in creating another world. An apocalyptic attitude exists between these two conditions. In the apocalyptic ethos of this transition period, people no longer conform, but at the

same time they are not yet able to strategize and build a new world. The distinguishing feature of apocalyptic is neither passivity (as in a colonial situation) nor strategy (as in a postcolonial situation) but tactics.

It is important to distinguish *strategy* from *tactics*. Strategy, which defines the actions of a social group in a postcolonial condition, is the organizing of available resources and power to be expended in achieving a goal that lies beyond the present condition. Strategy, then, presupposes a surplus and allocation of resources. By contrast, tactics, which characterizes the actions of a subaltern group in the in-between state, is the craft of the weak. By becoming aware of their condition, although not yet able to summon any extra resources to use in strategizing, the weak are nevertheless able to create a living space in the midst of the struggle itself. In a postcolonial situation in which strategy can be employed, power has a "territory," a place that can be conquered or negotiated regarding its use. By contrast, in the in-between situation in which one must resort to tactics, power is a network of relations without a proper place (in the system) and without even an external territory to be occupied. There is simply no external location or means to build another world. Tactics is the art of escaping a colonial condition by plunging into the heart of it.¹¹

All this is well illustrated by the apocalypticism present in *Revelation*. John of Patmos's apocalyptic perspective represents the transitional state in between colonialism and postcolonialism. On the one hand, the Seer clearly rejects the colonialism of the Roman Empire. He refuses to accept Roman hegemony for any Christian group, and he repudiates the Roman representation of its subjects. On the other hand, John is not yet in a postcolonial situation in which he has access to resources and territory as means to strategize the building of a new world. Rather, John is in the in-between state of weakness with no political leverage of his own. Nevertheless, in this situation, the author plunges into the heart of the situation with tactics designed to carve out the vision of a new world and to give his communities a new identity—even in the midst of the colonial situation.

This act of escape by plunging into the heart of the colonial situation is the case with apocalypticism insofar as it implies the loss of the world, including the surrender of all commerce, all negotiations, all means of exchange—a situation in which one has chosen to relinquish or has lost any possibility of making it in the existing system. In the very demise of these things, in the moment when all these things are relinquished or lost, a new world order is already dawning. When one gives up accepting things as they are, gives up compromising with the prevailing system, then one can begin to imagine a new and different world.

In this regard, it makes sense when the author of *Revelation* presents a vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" in which "the sea was no more" (21:1). The sea (the Mediterranean Sea or the Aegean Sea) represented the maritime commerce and the cultural exchange of the dominant power of Rome as well as a major means by which Rome exercised hegemony.¹² Hence, the "sea" is a metonymy for the *modus*

operandi of the dominant international and imperial economy at the time. What was regarded first and most important in this Roman world will be the last or least—or, more accurately, “no more”—in the coming world of John’s apocalyptic vision. The Seer’s apocalyptic vision calls for a radical option between these two—to be either hot or cold, but not lukewarm, and to be for this new world rather than against it or indifferent to it. Only those who have resources to trade can afford to be lukewarm, and, from an apocalyptic viewpoint, this capacity to trade is of no avail (3:15-17). When one has lost or chosen to relinquish all resources and means of trade and exchange, then one can imagine a new world that does not include such means of domination. This awareness of an impending reversal of conditions and values is a fundamental feature characteristic of an apocalyptic ethos. This awareness of a new world is the space opened up by the apocalyptic ethos in the midst of a situation that otherwise could only lead to despair.

What makes biblical apocalyptic different from an apocalypticism of inevitable catastrophe (a cosmic cataclysm, an Armageddon) is that there is no surrendering of hope. This capacity to maintain hope is what is entailed in the craft of biblical apocalyptic. To use an oxymoron, it is a “desperate form of hope,” which Paul called “the hope against all hope” (*Romans* 4:1). It is not “the horror, the horror,” as in Joseph Conrad’s description of the brutal Belgian colonialism in the Congo at the beginning of the twentieth century as presented in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. Nor is it like the film *Apocalypse Now* in which Francis Ford Coppola renders Conrad’s tale in the context of the United States war in Vietnam. What is different in the biblical apocalyptic and what we still encounter among people living in the twilight zone on the way from colonialism to postcolonialism is that hope is present. And this hope affords resilience. To express such hope in the midst of a colonial situation requires tactics. The tactics for the sustenance of such hope, however, are not easy to detect by those outside the apocalyptic environment. It is not easy because the tactics employed in an apocalyptic situation are aimed precisely at preventing the detection of the subalterns’ new-found awareness by the colonial power. This covert means of expressing the tactics of hope is *dissimulation*.

Dissimulation or dissembling is, in some sense, an act of deception. It is the art or tactic of appearing to defer to those who have power but to do this act of deference in such a way as to express, albeit in covert ways, one’s resistance to that situation. It is a survival tactic, an act of self-protection in the face of being confronted by overwhelming supremacy, while at the same time both resisting the hegemony and also preserving an alternative identity, albeit in a hidden way. Dissimulation stands between, on the one hand, total subservience to the dominant narrative of the colonial power and, on the other hand, the overt and explicit naming of the conditions of oppression, which becomes possible only in a postcolonial situation. Surely, the overt naming of the conditions of oppression is the ultimate goal to be pursued. But it is naïve, idealistic, and romantic to engage in the overt naming of oppression in

the context of overwhelming supremacy. Many well-intended outsiders who come to "liberate" people fail to grasp the significance of this situation and as such fail to appreciate (or even to discern) the dynamics of resistance that the tactics of dissimulation represent. Outsiders tend to think the native people are being naïvely subservient, when in fact they are cunningly resisting in the only way they can.

Octavio Paz compares the craft of dissimulation to the skill of acting. "Dissimulation," he writes, "is an activity very much like that of actors in the theater, but the true actor surrenders himself to the role he is playing . . . [while] the dissembler never surrenders or forgets himself, because he would no longer be dissembling if he became one with his image."¹³ If dissemblers became one with their image, either they would be surrendering themselves or else they would be insane—giving themselves over to an identity that they knew was not their own. Such forms of mental illness are not uncommon among those in transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, which is also the reason why apocalypticism is often associated with madness. A more apt comparison even than that of Paz's analogy with the theater might be the similarity between dissembling and the masks of the carnival. In the carnival atmosphere, an *alter* personality is allowed to jest and make fun of the powers that be, all the while being "protected" by the mask. The difference is that dissembling in real life does not happen in the permissible space of the carnival, where it is tolerated and where it can be easily decoded. Instead, dissembling happens in everyday life, where jesting against the powers is not permissible and where the expressions of resistance dare not be decoded.

The fact that dissembling is not overt is precisely the reason outsiders often view it either as sheer surrender or as a psychological disorder, when in fact it is neither. An outsider who is not trusted by the group (and it takes years of work for an outsider to gain trust) is very unlikely to discover the rules of dissembling—partly because the tactics of dissembling are copious and partly because they keep changing constantly and are therefore elusive. For the outsider, the fine line distinguishing dissimulation, on the one hand, from surrender or mental illness, on the other hand, is extremely difficult to discern, yet very clear for those living in the midst of the apocalyptic ethos.

The *Book of Revelation* engages in such dissimulation. The author does so as a tactic in the in-between state of apocalyptic. On the one hand, John condemns capitulation to Roman hegemony. He excoriates Jezebel and the Nicolaitans—Christians who, for whatever reasons, simply go along with emperor worship and the eating of meats offered to idols. In their acts of political manipulation, there is no resistance to Rome, but only subservience. By contrast, John offers resistance, but he does so covertly. John does not really use language that "reveals" openly and explicitly his own view of the Roman order. He dissimulates. Thus, while John does name the political realities of Roman hegemony, he does so in language that is indirect, either

because it is encoded or because it is cryptic. He condemns Rome with bizarre images and with reference to fantastic creatures. He says much that explains why people are enamored with Rome, “drunk with the wine of her fornication” (17:6). He even portrays the glory of Rome in positive ways, but he does this in language that is so configured as to suggest covertly by exaggeration that such glorifying of Rome is idolatry. Yet, in so doing, he remains within the bounds of dissimulation. If you will notice carefully, he never explicitly names Rome or the emperor or the emperor’s minions. The Seer uses language designed to reveal the truth to insiders at the same time that it conceals this message to outsiders—which is the art of tactics. As outsiders, we modern readers have to work hard to understand this dynamic, yet when we read *Revelation* under similar apocalyptic conditions, such work becomes surprisingly suggestive and evocative.

The Choice to Study *Revelation* 13

The year was 1987. A group of landless peasants was camped on the side of a major highway linking Brazil to Paraguay in the southwest part of the country—a common scene! The camp was squeezed between the runway and the fence of a well-guarded nearby large farm, near the city of Cascavel. Nearly 150 people—children, women, and men of all ages—lived under black plastic tents that were like ovens under the burning tropical sun. They had been there already for a number of months after being expelled by force from a farm they had occupied. Two of us from CPT, a Capuchin brother and I, were called in to help this group process some internal conflicts in the camp. Dysfunctional communal relations were never surprising under those stressful and dire conditions. Among the activities that took place during the two days we spent with them was a Bible study carried out with the whole camp. Many of those in the group were illiterate or had received little formal education, which meant that the printed text alone was not enough to convey the content of the chosen text. So, in addition to using the printed text, we resorted to storytelling, dramatic performance, and artistic portrayals of scenes.

The text chosen was *Revelation* 13. We selected this text deliberately, for three reasons. First of all, we opted for this book of the Bible because, notwithstanding the spatial and temporal distance, the context of the *Book of Revelation* is framed in a socio-political and economic milieu that bears striking resemblance to the situation of the landless peasants. Second, we chose this particular passage in *Revelation* because it has to do with the naming of one’s reality. As we explained above, in an apocalyptic situation, hope resides in striving to name boldly one’s own reality—with the recognition that this bold naming will be done in the form of dissimulation, a dissimulation that must not allow the “apparent” deference to authorities to take over one’s personality; that is, without forgetting that subservience and madness are always the nearest

neighbors of the dissembler. Chapter 13 of *Revelation* seemed to be a text that would allow for this naming to be raised in a contemporary context and even, as we shall see, to bring some surprises. Finally, we chose this particular chapter because the text itself is a lesson on how to use dissimulation as a way to name a reality.

Based on the limited availability of bibliographical resources, we laid out for the people some historical and literary presuppositions of the text we were working with. We needed to do this in order to construct a plausible first-century scenario that would help to explain how the narrative of the passage unfolded. In addition to historical-critical considerations, the grounds for making some of our exegetical decisions were rooted in the narrative itself and were hermeneutical in nature; that is, we were more concerned with how the text was being read in relation to its original context than in what its original intention might have been. Our focus was on what the relation between narration and politics evinced.

We assumed that the text was written toward the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81–96 c.e.). Political and personal characteristics of the emperor and of his reign are crucial for understanding some of the imagery used in chapter 13.¹⁴ Domitian was by and large hated by the aristocracy in general and by the senate in particular (members of which, along with his wife, planned and carried out his assassination in 96 c.e.). He was, however, popular among the common citizens. And he was particularly appreciated by the army, because he had raised the salaries of the soldiers to unprecedented heights a number of times during his reign. Also worth mentioning is the image he projected of himself. At the meetings of the Roman senate, for example, he would wear triumphal dress. At the games over which he presided, he wore a golden crown, with his fellow judges also wearing crowns and with his own effigy engraved among the effigies of the Olympian gods. In addition, he insisted on being addressed as *dominus et deus* (“lord and god”).

Besides these political and personal characteristics, there are some other features of Domitian’s reign that needed to be lifted up in the context of reading *Revelation*. Although Rome had had a long and honorable history of freedom of speech, this commitment started to change at the beginning of the first century c.e. with the introduction of official censorship by the emperor Augustus. But it was only at the end of the century, during the reign of Domitian, that free speech was totally suppressed. A slightly critical reference to Domitian or about him may have been enough for execution (as happened to a historian, as well as to the historian’s secretaries who were crucified with him). Dramatists and poets were thrown to the dogs or at minimum banished, practices that might, incidentally, account for our author’s own exile on the isle of Patmos (1:9).

This emperor’s relationship to Christianity had some remarkable features as well. In 95 c.e., Domitian executed his cousin Flavius Clemens, presumed to be a Christian, on charges of *atheotes*—of being an atheist. Atheism or irreligion was a common accusation against Jews, Christians, and some philosophical groups.

Unlike many of his predecessors and his successors, however, Domitian did not carry out mass executions of common Christian folk. Rather, his instrument of persecution was more subtle and sophisticated. Domitian's most effective measures against Christian communities and other groups were implemented through high taxation, confiscation of property, and economic marginalization. As is the case also today, it is easier to spot and condemn a dictator for his cruelty in taking lives than it is to recognize the brutality and to count the victims of an exploitative economic system. These, then, are some relevant characteristics of the broader political context in which *Revelation* was written.

The Bible Study of *Revelation* 13

During the Bible study, this background information about *Revelation* was conveyed to the camp as a means to place John the Seer in their own company as someone struggling to find a language to express the dynamics of oppression that were so elusive. What John of Patmos *was seeing*, most of his fellow Christians *were not seeing*. Furthermore, John had to express what he was seeing in a language that was coarse enough to wake people from their slumber but skillfully dissimulating enough to elude (Roman) censorship—something, as we have indicated, that subaltern people and those who have lived under military dictatorships would readily understand. In short, the author of *Revelation* was a master at bringing together an apocalyptic attitude with the practice of dissimulation.

The meaning of much of the imagery that John employs in this chapter (and throughout the book) still eludes us, and it is plausible to suppose that contemporaries of John were so much more equipped to discern the meanings and nuances of the images than we are now. Nevertheless, what we were able to identify was enough to fill a day-long Bible study. What follows, then, are some of the characteristics of the text that we lifted up for the landless peasants who participated in the Bible study that day.

First, we dealt with the way in which the text lays out a hierarchy of powers, pointing out that it does so in a way that is encoded. On top of the hierarchy is the dragon—the same dragon that in chapter 12 was persecuting the woman who gave birth to the child. The dragon is the mythical representation of the fallen angel expelled from heaven (12:7-8). Following the description of the dragon, chapter 13 is divided into two parts dealing respectively with two beasts, one emerging from the sea and the other emerging from the land. Finally, there is the creation of an image (perhaps a statue) of the first beast, which the people have to make and which is given life and speech by the second beast. The people must worship this image or else, if they refuse, they will likely be killed.

Decoding the images in the hierarchy for the contemporary situation can be done in two ways, either by reading them allegorically or by deciphering them sym-

bolically. If we treat the hierarchy as an *allegory*, each of the figures would represent a discrete particular person. The dragon would be Satan; the first beast would be the emperor; the second beast would be a consul or governor; the image of the beast would be a local authority who represents the people but whose power derives from the beast. Such allegories are not easy to apply to a different context with different political systems.¹⁵

The other way of decoding the hierarchy is to treat the images as *symbols*, each of which would stand for realities that are ubiquitous. In this approach, each image can apply to any group or institution as reflecting ambiguous and contradictory characteristics of the different figures in *Revelation*. The dragon symbolizes a power or system greater than any particular authority or power that could be specified or seen as an identifiable entity in itself. The first beast, the one that emerges from the sea (evoking the power of the international trade and political economy at the time), stands for the highest power on earth (call it "the global beast"). The second beast, the one that emerges from the land (which suggests the extension of the empire, its domain), stands for those who minister in lands beyond the center and who are directly accountable to the authority of the center (call it "the colonial beast"). The image/statue of the beast can be anything that *we produce* and that ends up enslaving us. One example of the "image of the beast" given in the Bible study by the peasants was a television set, and another example was a hoe, as the most common tool used by seasonal workers who weed soybean plantations. We left the option open and waited to see which would be the reading they chose, and we were surprised.

Second, we pointed out that in John's dissimulation there are a number of motifs ingeniously at work to provoke some cognitive dissonance in the reader. These motifs also bear dimensions of encoding, because they expose allegiance to Rome as idolatry and they do so cryptically by the means of flattery and allusion. One such dissonant motif is the use of the positive concept of "authority" in relation to the negative image of the satanic dragon (13: 4, 7, and 12). The dragon has authority of his own. The dragon then grants that authority to the beast that emerges from the sea (the global beast), which in turn delegates authority to the beast that emerges from the land (the local, colonial beast). In the text, the Greek word for "authority" is *exousia*. This is the same word that Paul used in *Romans* 13:1, to say that "there is no *authority* except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." Paul's view is clearly contrary to the Manichaean view that God and Satan are two independent forces in the cosmos vying against each other. It is hard to miss the irony in John's apparently cavalier remark that *exousia* is being instituted by the dragon, suggesting to his readers that Satan was a reality completely independent from God (rather than a fallen angel) and that there was here what in Latin American theology has been called a "battle of gods." However, John avoids Manichaeism, if barely, by suggesting that this authority is predicated upon the human willingness to

worship the dragon and upon the human failure to see the dragon (Satan) for what it really is. The problem is one of idolatry; but in order to say this as provocatively as possible, John himself needed to use the language of flattery in an exaggerated or hyperbolic way such that it would sound glorious to supporters of Rome but would border on blasphemy in a covert manner to the insiders who “had ears to hear.”

Another positive motif that causes dissonance in the reader is the coded image of prophecy that is associated with the second beast. John describes the second beast as one that works “great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of the people” (13:13). The Judeo-Christians whom John was addressing would hardly fail to notice that bringing fire down from heaven was proof of a true prophet, as it is portrayed, for example, in the story of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Once more, the point of this blunt dissonance in *Revelation* is to send an encoded message, which those (and only those) familiar with the Judeo-Christian Scriptures at the time would recognize. This is the author’s cryptic way of talking about idolatry. To be sure, it is subtle. Yet in a world in which Christians were regarded as irreligious, using this imagery of the beast verges again on blasphemy and, if detected by the Roman authorities, could be very dangerous. Nevertheless, this cryptic language involves a risk that John is willing to take in order to sharpen his message. His message is clear (to insiders), but it is not overt (and therefore it is hidden to the powers of the day).

An additional example of a motif that causes cognitive dissonance in the reader is an allusion to the book of *Exodus*. When John depicts the reasons why people from every tribe, tongue, and nation are willing to worship the beast, the author depicts them as saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). Anyone who was even barely familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures would not miss the irony. The motif is taken out of Miriam’s song of liberation in *Exodus* 15, in which a similar refrain is sung: “Who is like thee, O Lord?” That which the Hebrew people had addressed to God, the people of the earth are now saying about the beast. By means of this cryptic allusion, the author once again suggests to those who can “get it” that worshipping the beast is clearly idolatry.

“Who has ears, hear!” is the refrain repeated in the whole book again and again (2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9). It is an admonition from John for insiders to discern his true message. John the Seer sees, and what he sees needs to be communicated and must be heard. What he says is a subversive word, but a word that must be said in such a way as to be loud and clear for those who need to hear it, but concealed enough to be hidden to those who represent the hierarchy of powers he describes here in chapter 13.

Let us recapitulate: the Seer of Patmos introduces his vision of the beasts, naming each one of them in cryptic fashion for what they really are. Yet what John sees and what John calls them is not how the people of the earth, who idolize them, see

them. John himself gives the clues as to how others see these figures. The first beast is bedecked with diadems—a symbol of royalty, dignity, and respect. The second beast appears to be like a lamb, suggesting meekness and humbleness. The image/statue of the beast is a human production, giving the impression that it is under human control, yet it is nothing but an idol, a fetish. But what you see is not what you get, says the Seer to those who can and will hear: Listen to what the Spirit says, and you will discern the beast behind the adornments. Do you know what you see? Do you see what you know?

Next, an ingenious play of images is posited on the motif of “hearing.” It seems that, to John’s way of seeing, people are so captivated by the idolatrous sight of the image of the beast that they do not hear. And if they do hear, to whom are they listening? By the command of the (colonial) beast, the one that the emerged from the earth, people are to make an image/statue of the first (global) beast. The (colonial) beast gives breath or spirit (*pneuma*) to this built image of the (global) beast, so that it can speak and persecute those who refuse to bow down to it in adoration (13:15). Again verging on idolatrous blasphemy, the author attributes to the beast the power to give the gift that only God can give. For it is God alone who gives life and breath to humans (*Genesis* 2:7). At creation, God breathed into the creature of the earth (*adam*) the breath (*ruah* / *pneuma*) of life, a gift that allowed humans to name the world (*Genesis* 2:19-20). Whose spirit is it that they are now listening to? This is the question the Seer of Patmos is asking in an apocalyptic tone. It is a call for discernment—and discernment we will get!

Toward the end of chapter 13, after denouncing the persecution of those who do not worship the image of the beast, John offers a surprisingly blunt condemnation of what today would be the equivalent of the global market. Everyone, rich and poor, freedmen and slaves, had to have a mark on the forehead or on the hand, and no one would be permitted to “buy or sell” unless they had the mark, the name of the beast, or the number of the beast’s name. The second beast required that people submit to the first beast in worship and adoration or they would be prohibited from sharing in the wealth of the (Roman) economic system.

Then comes the climatic rhetorical moment of the narrative, for which John has been preparing the reader. This climax is almost a sarcastic way by which John teases the readers into admitting for themselves that all the exotic creatures that the Seer has just displayed are nothing but figments of an idolatrous imagination. After all this supernatural imagery of dragons and beasts, the narrative ends with a riddle. “This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is the number of a human. And its number is six hundred and sixty-six” (13:18). Behold the last surprise: the beast John has been talking about is *human*! Indeed, all too human! The number six symbolizes that which is close to perfection (seven) but not quite. In the words of *Psalms* 8, the human is made just “a little

less than” a god. Also, creating humans was the work God did on the *sixth* day, just before the closure of holy Shabbat. And a three-fold six is very likely an emphatic assertion that it is six, it is six, it is six; that is, it is *wholly human* (symbolized by the emphatic threefold repetition), and nothing more than a human. After awakening his readers with jarring language and the use of cognitive dissonance while dodging the censors with the far-fetched imagery of uncanny creatures, the Seer announces in a final ironic move that the incredible beings he has presented are nothing but God’s beloved creatures corrupted by power into bestiality!

Rhetorically speaking, the first move of our author was to show the essential wickedness of the powers, the powers that most people of the earth esteemed so highly for their apparent beauty and adornments. John’s naming of the wickedness of the powers leads the reader to see that the act of worshipping these beasts really amounts to nothing but a despicable idolization. In his second move, he exposes the beasts as merely human creatures. When he does this, the author undoes the supernatural implications of the imagery that he himself has used in order to accomplish the results aimed at by that first move. In so doing, he clarifies why their adoration is idolatry—because the objects of their devotion are only human beings or human-made fetishes! The trajectory that cuts through chapter 13 goes from alienation (the creature is adorned and worshiped) to dissimulation (it is an extraordinary beast, a supernatural creature) and ends by giving them the clue to the real identity, the *human* identity, of their object of devotion—but just short of explicitly naming it! It is this being “just short of” that signals the author’s final relinquishment of his own power of naming in favor of the reader. The Seer undoes his own use of extravagant imagery in a surprising twist. He sets it up so that, here at the end, it is now up to the readers to reckon the riddle and own the naming for themselves!

The Outcome of the Bible Study

This is also how the introduction to the Bible study ended, just short of naming the beast. One of the activities that followed was for people to do the naming of the beast for themselves and for their own situation, following the same tactic that John had used. The discussion groups then formed spontaneously, with no directions as to how they should be organized. When the community assembled again in the afternoon, the groups reported their findings. Some of the naming by the different groups was predictable to us. The beasts they named in their situation included the military, the government, the capitalist system, the rural-based oligarchy, the lumber industry, and so on. These were the beasts that had brought them to this place and the beasts with which they as a community still had to contend. However, this naming involved forces that were all external to the community, and it in no way

addressed the issues for which we had come to the camp, namely, the internal issues that were plaguing the community itself. To use the Seer's vision, there was the need not only to name the external beasts oppressing them but also to name the *image(s)* of the beast—those things that the community “worshiped” but that were really of their own making (v. 14).

Then, to our surprise, one of the groups named some of the intracommunal “images” of the beast. This group was comprised only of women (all the other groups were mixed). Their words cut to the chase. In their report, there was *parrhesia*, the boldness that takes a risk by speaking up. Their naming included three related things: pans (a symbol for the arduous work, normally done by women, of cooking over a small open fire under a hot black plastic tent filled with smoke); alcohol (which mostly men indulged in at night); and the “central committee” of the camp (which was ultimately responsible for administering the camp and which, in this particular camp, unlike the others, was comprised of males only). This was the naming that took the courage of a “parrhesiast,” a bold speaker. The naming of the beasts by other groups were definitely true, and, due to their political training, these groups were able to identify those beasts—perhaps even without our Seer's help. However, the naming of the *image* of the beast, the human-made idol, was the key that enabled the members of this community to enter into the deeper levels of what structures of oppression are able to produce and to replicate, even among the oppressed themselves. The more subtle mechanisms of the structures of oppression, being of our own making, elude us, and we do not realize that they are nothing but the *re-production* of the very beast in our midst. And indeed, at least to the men, these images had looked rather nice and innocent!

Like Rome, the image of the beast looks good and appealing to us. We may benefit from it greatly, as many people benefited from the Roman Empire in the first century. In so doing, however, it blinds us to the corrupt and destructive reality of the thing and prevents us from seeing the idolatrous allegiance we have given to it. But if we name it out loud—whether it be the Roman Empire or the Brazilian military regime or the patterns of sexism in our very midst—we may be able to see it for what it is and dispel its power over us.

As Paul Ricoeur said, the “sense of a text lies in front of it.” Indeed the meaning of *Revelation* 13 for this community of landless peasants lay not in what John the Seer had intended for his particular situation, but in what he evoked by leaving the naming to his readers, beyond his control and even two millennia later and in place even unknown to him. John of Patmos ends his composition of chapter 13 not with a riddle, as it is often supposed, but with an ellipsis. . . . He left it up to his readers to fill it in. That is what those peasants did, and that is what we also are invited to do.

Notes

1. See the influential essays by Ernst Käsemann, "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie" and "Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik," 82–131. His main thesis is that "the apocalyptic was . . . the mother of all Christian theology," 100.
2. Since Goethe, the difference between symbol and allegory is defined in aesthetic theory in the following terms: "It makes a great difference whether the poet starts with the universal and searches for the particular, or beholds the universal in the particular. The former mode of procedure generates the allegory, in which the particular is taken as an illustration, an example of the universal. The latter reveals . . . the truth of symbolism, that the particular represents the universal not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living instantaneous revelation of the inscrutable." Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, 67–68.
3. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 87.
4. A helpful collection of essays on the social and theological significance of migration in the contemporary world can be found in Gioachino Campese and Pietro Ciallelle, eds., *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization*.
5. For more information, see Marcelo de Barros Souza, Vítor Westhelle, and Ivo Poletto, *Luta pela Terra: Caminho da Fé*.
6. See Sérgio Sauer, *Reforma Agrária e Geração de Emprego e renda no Meio Rural*, 30–48.
7. The notion of "hegemony" was developed by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci to describe a situation in which "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' [*dominio*] and as 'intellectual and moral leadership' [*direzione*]." *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 249.
8. On the question of the representation of the subaltern, see the excellent essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 271–313.
9. The word is poorly rendered in English as "consciousness raising." It conveys the notion that one produces by oneself the awareness of who one is within communitarian relations of solidarity. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia del oprimido*.
10. The literature in the field of postcolonial studies is immense; some of the most celebrated postcolonial writers are Amílcar Cabral, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Aimé Césaire, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak. A good collection of representative writers and a comprehensive bibliography can be found in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*.
11. This distinction between strategy and tactics is finely elaborated in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 34–39.
12. For an excellent discussion of the politico-economic significance of this expression, see Barbara Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, 144–47.
13. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 29 and 42. A similar analysis of the phenomenon of dissimulation is offered by Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, under the notion of mimicry. See pp. 85–92 on "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." For further discussion on the phenomenon of dissimulation, see Vítor Westhelle, "Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism, and the Apocalyptic," 3–13.
14. For more information on Domitian as emperor, see F. E. Adcock Cook, and M. P. Charlesworth, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 11 S.A. 22–45; and the article "Domitianus," in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, eds., *Der neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike*, vol. 3.
15. The allegory, said Goethe, "transforms appearance into a concept and the concept into an image so that the concept is always limited by the image, but also fully expressed in it." Goethe, *Maximen*, 192.