

FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE WORLD (2)
THE LIVING AND THE DEAD¹
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When preparing for the festival of Michael, we looked at the way our human role in the world is highlighted in the call of the archangel, as heard in the prayers of this festival time.² After the Creed has described Christ's resurrection it speaks of the way Christ, since his ascension, lives as "the fulfiller of the fatherly deeds of the ground of the world". But he does not only fulfill those fatherly deeds which keep the world as it is in good shape, but he, the Son will, "for the advancement of the world", unite with all those whom he, through their bearing, can wrest from the death of matter. Thus Christ's resurrection becomes world-scale resurrection. But this will only become possible when human beings heed that call of Michael, heard in the prayers of his festival. Only when we come to a deeper, a higher awareness, a new grasp of this deed of life and death on Golgotha, will Christ's forces of resurrection work in us, human beings on earth. To become a creative force, a light-carrying force which will keep alive heavenly light in the darkness of our earthly existence.

The Creed actually introduces Christ by first stating his human connection: "through whom human beings attain the re-enlivening of the dying earth-existence"; then, he is also introduced as "the Son born in eternity". "The helper of the souls of the dead", he in future will ally himself with those whom he can wrest from the death of matter. Truly he is the "God of Man", as is said in the prayers which describe Michael as the countenance of this god. Christ has become the helper of all human beings, both the living and the dead, of all those who have taken his transubstantiating power into their thinking.

With Michael, we are moving into an apocalyptic world, into a world turning more and more apocalyptic. Recently, the line between the physical and the spiritual has become diffuse, the threshold between the world of earth and the world of spirit having shifted. Not only are nowadays human beings able to reach out across the threshold, the threshold as such is "moving down" into the human being itself. This creates a totally new situation, putting human beings into their role of actually becoming co-actors, "players", becoming directly, actively engaged in the eschatological drama which begins when the world slowly prepares for its "last stage" of death and judgment, of new heaven and new earth. In the book of the Apocalypse, the "Apocalypse to John", we can perceive how humanity becomes more and more engaged in this process, both while on earth as well as in heaven. It shows how the Christ mystery, encompassing both earth and heaven, is becoming more powerful within a Christian humanity on its way to maturity.³

"With Michael", I said, meaning on the one hand that Michael, who is the archangel specifically active in our times, presents us with a unique opportunity to become conscious of how to cross that line between the physical and spiritual, at least in intention (see the talk titled *Michael's Call*). On the other hand, in the course of the Christian year, from the festival of Michael onwards through Advent, our Christian Community gospel readings carry this apocalyptic signature, first during Michaelmas in the sense that for us living on earth this line between the physical and the spiritual has already shifted with many consequences in our personal sphere. In November we look more at the apocalyptic process on a world-scale, as mirrored in the last book of the Bible. Advent heightens our apocalyptic awareness for the "second coming" of Christ in an apocalyptic setting, until at Christmas the fact that Christ appears on earth can be grasped as an historical and at the same time continuing reality. . At least half the gospel readings of those 12 to 13 weeks are taken from the *Apocalypse*, the *Revelation to John*. Here, we'll focus on this aspect. By the way, this is the great yearly recurring example of the "the hour is

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² "For the Advancement of the World – Michael's call", September 2006

³ Rudolf Frieling has traced and described this evolution in the last chapter of his *Christianity and Reincarnation* (Floris Books, Edinburgh 1977, pp 90-117): "Human Evolution in the Apocalypse of John".

coming and is now” of John’s gospel (4:23 and 5:25), of which Christ’s “second coming” is the prime example. He has come, he has risen – but between him and our conscious perception the distance has grown which his disciples experienced as his ascension. Christ’s presence has become obscured to our perceptions; hence for us he needs to “come again”, needs a “second coming”.

The book of the *Apocalypse* describes many visions seen by John. Its first main vision centers on “a Son of Man”, whom John, having turned around when called, sees in the midst of seven golden lampstands, and on his words which John writes down in letters to seven churches (chapters 1-3). With an open door in heaven and John “having come up thither” begins the second vision, of a throne and one seated on the throne – center of heavenly activity and deadlock (chapter 4). In the last main vision John sees a new heaven and a new earth, the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (chapter 21). Human evolution, both of those living and those dead, is becoming clearly visible in the descriptions of the unfolding apocalyptic drama.

In the first main vision, that of one like a son of man in the midst of seven golden lampstands, the one who died and since is alive for evermore tells John to write letters to the angels of seven Christian churches. In the letters, he speaks of the strengths and weaknesses of people in the various communities, of temptations and pitfalls, of the aims and goals for those who persevere and conquer. A kind of evolutionary picture of human possibilities and goals within the apocalyptic landscape arises, the last letter with its “I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21) preparing for the second vision.

In his second vision, John moves into the higher world, following the “Come up hither” from the voice which had already spoken to him, to be confronted by a throne in heaven. The One seated on the throne (who in descriptions is never named, except when addressed in the last vision of the throne) is pictured in many colors; he is surrounded by a rainbow and twenty-four thrones for twenty-four elders. Flashes of lightning, voices and peals of thunder emanate from the throne; before it burn seven torches of fire and lies something like a sea of glass, like crystal. On each side of the throne, all around, four living creatures never cease to sing a “Holy, holy, holy”, taken up by the elders.

But otherwise all is static; nothing more happens. A scroll in the hand of the one sitting on the throne stays closed, sealed, and an angel calls out for one worthy to change this deadlock. And then John perceives a Lamb standing in the midst of the throne, of the living creatures and the elders: a Lamb “as if sacrificed”, who goes to take the scroll, to open the seven seals one after the other. This is honored by a new song by the living creatures and the elders, holding bowls full of incense “which are the prayers of the saints” – a new song singing about human beings ransomed by the Lamb for God, who shall reign on earth as kings and priests. Then all living creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea respond with their own hymn. So, indeed, “the deed of life and death on Golgotha”, here appearing in the picture of a Lamb-as-if-sacrificed, in this first apocalyptic heavenly picture also receives a response from human beings on earth.

This first impression of human Christian activity in the heavens (“bowls full of incense, the prayers of the saints”) is followed by a different scene: of “souls” of Christian martyrs under the heavenly altar before the throne (6:9, see 8:3), after the 5th seal has been opened. They seem to be newly martyred, tender yet, and very unsatisfied, longing for vengeance: “How long yet before....?”, as they are still mired in an eye-for-an-eye experience of destiny. But they are told to rest a little longer, until the Mystery of Golgotha has matured in people on earth (as “constructive aid”, with Rudolf Frieling). But they receive, each of them, a white garment, in order to be able to exist here in a new “body”.

During a pause between the 6th and 7th seal, with a shift to the earth, the 144,000 are sealed (a number heard in Spirit, 7:4), “structured onto resurrection”. This kind of sealing we have already met when Christ speaks about the bread of life in the Gospel of John (6:27): that the Father has set his seal on the Son of Man, in preparation for resurrection “at the last day”, that he be able to offer food which remains as life throughout the ages. This is the “pharmakon athanasias” of which the early Christian

writer Ignatius of Antioch speaks, who himself was martyred around 108 AD in Rome, when writing his letter to the Ephesians: the “medicine of immortality” (20:2).

Thereafter, actually “after a great while” (7:9), in the heavens a great multitude is seen, having come from everywhere on earth, having already prepared their white garments on earth, as is explained to John: they have come out of the great tribulation, having come to terms with their destiny without being stained (7:14). They break out not in a lament but in a great hymn: “Salvation to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb” (7:10). They know what to call the “One sitting on the throne”, and perceive the Lamb present there. The “soteria”, “salvation”, which they speak unto God and the Lamb, shows that through human beings the redeeming deed of Christ on earth now is mirrored back into the heavens – and the angels now take up this song of praise (7:11) of the news “into which they themselves longed to look” (with 1 Peter 1:12). As explained to John, the dead who carry the seed of resurrection in themselves are privileged to become active in heaven, guided to spring of living water by their shepherd in the midst of the throne (7:15-18).

When then the 7th seal is opened, silence envelops the heavens for a while (8:1). Now the seven angels standing before God each receive a trumpet, signaling that the next stage of Christian engagement is about to begin. Another angel stands at the heavenly altar to mix much new incense with the “prayers of all the saints”, which have risen up from the earth, in a golden censer. Then, adding fire from the altar, the censer is thrown on the earth, bringing about the same elemental phenomena as first observed as coming from the throne – as well as an earthquake (8:5 and 4:5). In the increasing destruction “sounded in” over the earth by the trumpets, inner human Christian deeds will play a role.

Continuing in the text, we would be able to follow this human evolution in its various stages. For the moment, I’d just mention how Rudolf Frieling, at the end of his essay “Human Evolution in the Apocalypse of John”⁴, looks back at specific places in the text of the Apocalypse. He focuses on the places at which “the visions are inserted which have as their content *the progressive development of the excarnated Christian souls* in the higher world”. He finds that they appear about the end of the three main structural elements of the book, the vision of the sevenfold opening of the seals, of the sevenfold sounding of the trumpets and of the sevenfold pouring out of the bowls of wrath. This happens between the opening of the 6th and 7th seal out of which the sequence of the trumpets grows: in the vision of the great multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb, singing their song of salvation (7:9-17). Once more this progress becomes visible when the aftereffects of the 7th trumpet have all died away: in the vision of “those who had conquered the beast”, and now are standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hand, singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (15:2-4). And finally, after the 7th bowl of wrath has been poured out: in the visions of those appearing as knights with white horses, and working as priests and kings, seated on thrones (19:14 and 20:4).

In the last vision of the Apocalypse a new heaven and a new earth appear, and John sees the holy city, new Jerusalem, come down out of heaven from God: the dwelling of God has arrived among human beings. Those who conquer will receive from the fountain of the water of life, the water of life which flows as a river from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city, with the tree of life on either side of the river (21:1-22:5). It is that city of which the wall is built according to a man’s measure, which is that of an angel.

Between the words of the Risen Christ to his congregations, appearing as “a Son of Man” in the first vision, and the last vision of the World of Resurrection on a human scale, within a new heaven and a new earth, we find the middle, main part of the Apocalypse, grounded in visions of the throne. In what emanates from the throne an increasingly active role, as we have seen, is played by human beings who are either incarnated on earth or live without a physical body in the heavens.

When the world turns apocalyptic, it’s not all roses over here on earth. Neither when, according to descriptions in the Gospels, at first we are only dealing with, and suffering from, “the beginning of the

⁴ See Note 3, pp 114-115

birth-pangs” (Mt 24:8, Mk 13:8). Tribulation, death, hate will come to those who will try to keep their Christianity in those days – those who endure will meet tribulations on the human and on the cosmic scale. In the “Letters to the seven churches” in the *Apocalypse*, we find described the gamut of inner and outer problems those who intend to endure will experience, of virtues to be developed, of gifts waiting to be received.

Many of those confronted with apocalyptic texts in the New Testament, by various ways and means, try to get out from under the reality of what is described – some smart-aleck intellectuality often being used as the driving force to question either the intentions of the writer or the contents of the book. Indeed, the apocalyptic process can’t be taken realistically without realizing that we ourselves, and that many times, will be part of the stages of both earthly as well as heavenly human evolution, of which we get a glimpse in this book of an “Apocalypse”. Without, indeed, the idea of reincarnation, without the reality of human evolution incorporated in this idea, one would, if one would at all attain one of the stages of heavenly bliss depicted, stay mired in that stage, without anymore being able to move onward. At the end of human evolution we would be left with a kind of staggered humanity – humanity mired in evolutionary stages, in the way fossils make visible some of the many preparatory physical stages on the way to the “full” human being on earth. Words of Christ in the “Apocalypse from the Mount of Olives” in the Gospels, inklings of Paul in his letters, and a text like the *Apocalypse to John* show that we all have to make the grade, the full grade – or will be left outside ongoing human evolution. For a while already, and not only for our own sakes, we have, both “living” as well as “dead”, been part of an evolution for the sake of “the advancement of the world”.

The Act of Consecration of Man prepares us for the world of resurrection, letting us already have a share in it – not yet fully in the body but in the soul. It is remarkable that the structure of this Divine Service in a way mirrors the way the *Revelation to John* unfolds, when we look at it in the way described above.

The Gospel Reading in the service corresponds with the experiences which John has in his first vision, of Christ as a Son of Man and of his words. In this part of the service, the word of Christ can flow from the priest’s lips out of a pure heart. In the Creed the congregation formulates its consciousness of human involvement with Christ’s deed.

What opens up in the second vision in the *Apocalypse* and continues through six other visions corresponds with the Offertory and Transubstantiation part of the service. We reach out to the realm of the Father, the Ground of the World, addressing him 7 times, to bring our offering, to let our offering merge with Christ’s offering, praying that Christ’s body, his blood, live in the Christ offering, that He receive this offering. We do this while conscious of the dead, praying for their input, their sheltering power.

The last part of the service, Communion, is as the first part of the service fully Christ-orientated: on him, whose body and blood heal the soul, that it continue to live, keep strong the soul that in the time to come it will not die. Here, a world of resurrection on a human scale begins to be realized – even when only for moments, by way of people receiving the healing medicine which grows into the “pharmakon athanasias” which we need to be able to live in the heavens in the periods when we are dead to the earth.

Both in the *Apocalypse to John* and the Act of Consecration of Man, in a different but similar way, the Coming Christ unites himself with human beings ardently awaiting the God of Man, who also is the Son of Man.