Review Article
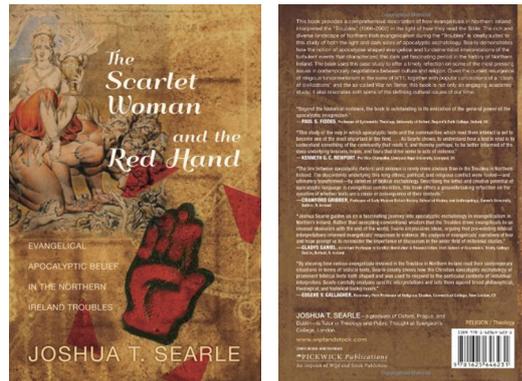# Apocalyptic Belief and Evangelical interpretations of the Northern Irish Troubles: is Ulster fixated on the end-times?

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KEY WORDS

| Apocalyptic | Eschatology |

| The Troubles | Northern Irish Politics |

| Prophecy | Moral Conservatism |

Although this book is written in a turgid style, the work is likely to interest a broader group than those focused solely on the history and politics of Northern Ireland. Searle interacts with millennial studies, hermeneutics, literary and critical theory as well as the historiography of the Troubles. Although the book has great inter-disciplinary reach, the Troubles – specifically Evangelical interpretations of this period – act as the primary focus.

The Troubles are that period of Northern Irish history, generally considered to cover 1966-1998, during which the conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities were at their most intense. The Northern Irish conflict has been variously interpreted as ethno-national, political and religious due to the strong political, ethnic and sectarian elements present. The Troubles saw heightened tension between the Protestant and Catholic communities of Northern Ireland, Unionist and Nationalist political parties (who, almost entirely, line up with the Protestant and Catholic communities respectively) and an increase in Loyalist Protestant and Republican Catholic paramilitary activities. The Troubles are largely considered to have ended with the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

From the outset, the author highlights his 'guiding presuppositions.' Centrally, he argues that human existence is inherently oriented toward eschatology with "an underlying will to hope."[1] In the Christian tradition, he avers, this will to hope sees its fulfilment primarily in apocalyptic-eschatological texts such as Revelation and Daniel as well as other prophetic

1. Searle, J.T., *The Scarlett Woman and the Red Hand*, (2014), p. 5.

books. Secondly, he presupposes the importance of interpretation. He comments "the way the Bible is interpreted by particular communities or individuals can determine how one relates to every issue of ethical concern."[2] It often seems these two underlying presumptions lead Searle to over-focus on apocalyptic-eschatological language at the expense of more ordinary explanations of Evangelical interpretations of the Troubles. For example, the author cites a Fundamentalist periodical – which categorises those who dismiss biblical prophecy outside Evangelicalism – in evidence that Northern Irish Evangelicals see the world in apocalyptic-eschatological terms.[3] Yet, this Fundamentalist periodical is simply defining who is 'in' or 'out' of the Evangelical camp (whether we agree or not). Indeed, to support his view, Searle infers that this Fundamentalist periodical's emphasis on prophecy specifically relates to apocalyptic-eschatological literature without explaining that not all prophecy is apocalyptic or eschatological. Here, as in a number of places, the author forces his own thesis where it may not necessarily fit.

Searle rightly notes that the differences between Evangelicals and Fundamentalists have been overstated in the Northern Irish context.[4] However, his definition of terms causes significant problems for readers. For instance, he fails to adequately define Protestantism and differentiate it from Evangelicalism. He states "Protestantism was not merely a radical political ideology but also a basic theological conviction,"[5] yet he wrongly ties it to Reformed theology. While the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) and Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster (FPCU) would fit this definition, it is a stretch for other denominations. Methodists and Anglicans (the second and third largest Evangelical denominations), along with Pentecostal, Charismatic and Brethren churches do not necessarily subscribe, or owe their heritage, to "the theology of John Calvin, or more accurately... John Knox and Christopher Goodman."[6]

In addition, Searle's categorisation of Protestant identity as more than political, and primarily theological, is certainly true for Evangelicalism but cannot be pressed to Protestantism. Claire Mitchell argues "cultural religion is a socially real process... Sometimes religious acts and symbols do just flag identity."[7] Bruce (*contra* Searle) is the strongest proponent of the cultural religion argument and makes a case for such a thing as "secular Protestants."[8] Secular, or cultural, Protestants are those who identify as Protestant, associate themselves with the language and symbols of Protestantism without necessarily having any personal religiosity or involvement with their self-identified religious tradition. Cultural Protestantism is an outworking in the Northern Irish context of the cultural religion phenomenon described by Mitchell and Bruce. Cultural Protestantism accounts for the existence of almost universally Atheistic Protestant Loyalist paramilitary men as well as the many people who identify as Protestant whilst simultaneously being non-religious. Searle's definition fails to account for cultural religion and misses how, and why, Protestants draw upon the language and symbolism of Evangelicalism. Cultural Protestant identity did not develop, as

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2.   *Ibid*, p. 6.

3.   *Ibid*, p. 9.

4.   As per Ganiel, G., *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland*, (2008).

5.   Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 25.

6   *Ibid*.

7   Mitchell, C., *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*, (2006), p. 6.

8   See Bruce, S., *God Save Ulster! The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism*, (1986), p. 263.

Searle supposes, from Calvinistic doctrine but the ability of Evangelicalism to reduce diverse traditions and practices within Protestantism down to one "simple, individualistic creed that stressed the primacy of personal salvation."[9] As such, Evangelicalism can be seen primarily as a theological conviction whilst Protestantism should be viewed as an identity attached to the language and symbolism of Evangelicalism without necessarily including "any participation or a sense of personal involvement *per se*."[10] Given his definition, when Wallis, Bruce and Taylor claim "the aspirations of Protestants were [largely] restricted to the maintenance of their position and cultural autonomy within Ulster,"[11] Searle insists this was not the case for those Protestants "whose aspirations were directed toward the 'eternal glory' (2 Tim 2:10)."[12] Yet, Searle's objection surely only extends to Evangelicalism and does not deny Wallis, Bruce and Taylor's, likely correct, assertion in respect to Protestantism at large. A better definition of Protestantism, and differentiation from Evangelicalism, would have helped.

Searle's chapter on texts, contexts and culture relies heavily on the literary theory of deconstructionism associated with Derrida. Searle argues:

> Historians and biblical scholars have been accustomed to establishing cause and effect relationships between their texts and contexts, sometimes forgetting that a context, in common with a text, can be deconstructed: that is, it can be liberated to yield multiple, possibly infinite meanings

based on the experience and aspirations of the interpreter.[13]

Yet, Northern Irish Evangelicalism — despite using the same biblical apocalyptic-eschatological texts that may lead to "multiple, possibly infinite meanings" — has only alighted on three major eschatological interpretations: Premillennialism, Postmillennialism and Amillennialism (of which, only Premillennialism and Amillennialism pertain for the majority of Evangelicals in the region).[14] This deconstructionist position becomes less tenable when one recognises, outside the Northern Irish context, these same few eschatological positions persist. Searle comments "The Evangelical appeal to a single, definitive text thus seems to be at variance to the poststructuralist critique of the notion of a single text or context that provides an omnipotent hermeneutical perspective."[15] Though it is certainly true that Evangelicals would consider the Bible to be their final authority in matters of faith and practice, just as these three Evangelical eschatological positions speak against "infinite meanings" so too they speak against a belief that scripture can provide "an omnipotent hermeneutical perspective." Indeed, many Evangelicals within Northern Ireland – even of a Fundamentalist disposition – are prepared to relegate eschatological views to the realm of secondary issues or legitimate difference.[16]

Similarly, Searle argues "Hermeneutical

9. Jackson, A., *Ireland: 1798-1998*, (2005), p. 67.

10. Demerath, N.J. III, *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics*, (New Brunswick, 2001), p. 59.

11. Wallis, R., Bruce, S. And Taylor, D., 'Ethnicity and Evangelicalism: Ian Paisley and Protestant Politics in Ulster', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:2, (Apr., 1987), p. 301.

12. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 137.

13. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 57.

14. One could make an argument for four categories which split Premillenialism into pre-tribulation dispensational and historic. Nevertheless, Premillenialism and Amillenialism are by far and away the most prevalent views amongst Evangelicals in Northern Ireland .

15. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 65.

16. For example, see Bruce, S., *Paisley: Religion and Politics in Northern Ireland*, (2007), p. 48.

issues pertain not merely to the interpretation of the biblical texts but also to their selection."[17] He states that some apocalyptic-eschatological passages (most notably Revelation) resonated among Evangelicals, especially Fundamentalists. As in a number of other instances, Searle cites Alan Campbell in support of his view. Yet, as both Steve Bruce[18] and Ian Wood[19] allude, Campbell is far from representative of Evangelicalism or Fundamentalism. In particular, Searle cites Campbell's British Israelism without noting this doctrinal position is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Evangelicals.[20] In fact, British Israelism only held sway amongst some paramilitary men and those sympathetic to their activities.[21] Likewise, Searle argues that the prophecy of Zechariah was pertinent for many Evangelicals.[22] Yet, once again, he cites only Alan Campbell in support and gives no substantive evidence that such views were prevalent within Evangelicalism. Further, Searle quotes Ian Boxall to support his view that apocalyptic-eschatological texts were given undue preference by Evangelicals in their interpretation of the Troubles.[23] However, Boxall's comments are not specific to Northern Ireland or Evangelicalism but, as Searle himself notes, pertain to Christians in general. If anything, Boxall underlines the notion that Northern Irish Evangelicals are no more committed to apocalyptic-eschatological texts than Christians elsewhere.

Searle's central thesis is that:

Evangelicals used an apocalyptic-eschatological contextual paradigm not only to interpret other (apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic) biblical texts but also other non-verbal "texts" such as the decisive events in the political, social and cultural history of the Troubles. Thus when speaking of a "text" we must not confine ourselves to the analysis of literary or biblical texts.[24]

Yet, as Bruce points out, "a large proportion even of conservative Protestants have no firm views" about eschatology and the end times.[25] As such, it is difficult to maintain that the majority of Northern Irish Evangelicals "used an apocalyptic-eschatological contextual paradigm" to interpret the Troubles. Although Searle argues "many Northern Ireland Evangelicals considered the Pope to be the Antichrist,"[26] such views were not uniform even within the FPCU (the primary denomination pressing this view of the Papacy), let alone throughout Evangelicalism.[27] Searle's desire to make much of such apocalyptic-eschatological views undoubtedly explains his overreliance on Ian Paisley and Alan Campbell throughout the work. Claire Mitchell is much more tempered when she asserts "*some* Protestants read the political situation through the lens of Revelation"[28] whilst making clear that this is not simply theological conviction but both theology and politics helping shape one another. Most notably, "in some cases, politics reinforces theology rather than simply the other way round."[29]

17. Searle (2014, *Op Cit.*, p. 66.

18. Bruce (2007), *Op Cit.*, p. 241.

19. Wood, I.S., *Crimes of Loyalty: A History of the UDA*, (2006), p. 208.

20. Bruce (2007), *Op Cit.*, p. 242.

21. Mitchell (2006), *Op Cit.*, p. 124.

22. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 78.

23. As quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 69.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

25. Bruce (2007), *Op Cit.*, p. 48.

26. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 120.

27. Note Stanley Barnes' quote in Bruce (2007), *Op Cit.*, p. 47.

28. Mitchell (2006), *Op Cit.*, p. 126 (emphasis added)

29. *Ibid.*, p. 127

Instead of seeing Evangelical interpretations of the Troubles in apocalyptic-eschatological terms, it is far better to understand them in relation to Protestant identity and moral conservatism. Even Ian Paisley's political responses to the GFA – the culmination of the Peace Process – were not made with reference to eschatology but morality. For example, responses to the GFA have often been presented in moral terms, "issues such as the perceived immorality of early prisoner releases and governmental power-sharing with 'unrepentant terrorists' have been at the forefront of unionist problems with the agreement."[30] Thus, Mitchell and Tilley note moral conservatism is the best indicator of voter affiliation and political identity.[31] Though apocalyptic-eschatological concerns may appear to have a similar affect, when the relative moral conservatism of Premillennialists and Amillennialists is taken into account, we see these eschatological views are best understood as an outworking of the moral conservative paradigm.[32]

Even when Searle quotes Evangelicals in support of his apocalyptic-eschatological theory, one cannot fail to detect the obvious moral terms employed. For example, he cites a PCI statement in the wake of Bloody Sunday which says "this orgy of lawlessness is... the natural outcome of deep-rooted tendencies in our thinking which have affected alike our religion and our law. It is a breakdown in the moral character of our people."[33] Searle

claims, presumably on the strength of the word "lawlessness" alone, the PCI statement shows that Evangelicals outside Ian Paisley's narrow circle saw the crisis as a contemporary fulfilment of apocalyptic-eschatological biblical writings.[34] Such examples do not reinforce Searle's thesis but underscore the moral terms in which the conflict has long been couched. Likewise, Searle enlists PCI statements regarding the World Council of Churches (WCC) in support of the view, pressed at one time by Ian Paisley, the WCC represented an eschatological grouping redolent of Revelation imagery linked to the Papacy.[35] However, these PCI statements carry no such connotation or inference. Moreover, the history of Presbyterianism is characterised by splits over increasing liberalism. The citations put forward by Searle sit better on a liberal-conservative spectrum than any sort of eschatological framework. It seems clear from the quoted PCI statements,[36] those who wished to remain in the WCC did so based upon more liberal concerns whereas those seeking separation argued from a conservative standpoint.[37] In neither case is it clear apocalyptic-eschatological considerations were paramount.

Despite his overemphasis on apocalyptic-eschatological language, Searle notes "much of the theological reflection on apocalyptic eschatology by Northern Ireland Evangelicals was not so much a response to specific events

30. Mitchell, C. and Tilley, J., 'The Moral Minority: Evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland and their Voting Behaviour', *Political Studies*, 52:4, (2004), p. 598.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 594.

32. See Kneale, S., *For God and Ulster: The Politicisation of Evangelicals in Northern Ireland, 1966-Present-day*, (unpublished master's thesis, Kings Evangelical Divinity School accredited by University of Wales, Lampeter, 2010), pp. 45-52.

33. As quoted in Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 83.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Ibid., p. 101.

36. Incidentally, Searle offers no direct citation or quote of any PCI member giving reasons to leave the WCC based upon apocalyptic-eschatological grounds but does offer several linked to liberal or conservative theological standpoints.

37. That is not to say those who wished to remain in the WCC can necessarily be considered liberal. But it is to say, on a liberal-conservative spectrum, they would be more liberal than those seeking to separate. Equally, it is interesting to note how several of the statements were made in moral terms.

as it was a pre-determined framework through which these events were interpreted."[38] Though I disagree this apocalyptic-eschatological framework was the primary paradigm for Evangelical interpretations of the Troubles, Searle is correct in noting this framework pre-dated the Troubles and did not result from the crisis itself. Nevertheless, he notes several years after the GFA and Loyalist-Republican ceasefires that "Evangelicals still used the language of crisis, *which if not explicitly apocalyptic or eschatological*, nevertheless evoked a sense of urgency which resonated with the notion of apocalyptic discontinuity, crisis and confusion."[39] There is no doubt, at times, the language of apocalyptic-eschatology was brought to boot in Evangelical discussion of the Troubles. Yet, as the above quote shows, such apocalyptic-eschatological language was far less prevalent following the GFA. At best, this leads us to conclude – for at least the last c. 15 years – apocalyptic-eschatological interpretations have not been central for Evangelical understandings of the Troubles. More likely still, the GFA hasn't turned out to be the threat to the Union – fundamental to Protestant identity – previously feared. As such, employing apocalyptic rhetoric would seem exaggerated at best and redundant at worst suggesting this language is, and always was, rhetorical (rather than interpretative) and not indicative – as Searle wants to argue – of Northern Irish obsessions with the end times.

Searle is on much safer ground when he argues that the group Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI)[40] rooted their language of reconciliation in apocalyptic-eschatological texts. Though this is true,

two points must be made. Firstly, we cannot escape the conservative moral paradigm at play; eschatological views are often borne out of conservative moral attitudes rather than the other way around.[41] That ECONI use apocalyptic-eschatological language does not necessarily imply this is their primary framework for interpreting the Troubles. Instead, it is preferable to see eschatological language acting as a rhetorical device from which their desires for reconciliation, borne out of their place on the moral conservative-liberal spectrum, are given expression.[42] Just as apocalyptic language lent itself to the doomsday vision pressed by Ian Paisley when the Union appeared in danger, so too eschatological language lent itself to the reconciliatory vision of ECONI toward sectarian divisions. These apocalyptic-eschatological texts did not determine the interpretation; rather they were a framework within which pre-existing morally determined views could be expressed. Secondly, we cannot overlook the relatively small influence ECONI had on Evangelicalism in the region.[43] If Searle's overemphasis on Paisley and Campbell diminish his argument that apocalyptic-eschatological texts were a key interpretative framework for wider Evangelicalism (and I would argue it does), his similar use of ECONI at the other end of the spectrum is worse still. Though Alan Campbell is far from representative, Ian Paisley was obviously influential within FPCU circles. Yet,

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38. Searle (2014), *Op Cit.*, p. 85.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 87 (emphasis added).

40. This group is now known as the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI).

41. See earlier comments from Mitchell (2006).

42. That is to say, their less morally conservative attitudes (or, more morally liberal attitudes) when compared with other branches of Evangelicalism led to their use of language and rhetoric this way.

43. See Mitchel, P., *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster, 1921-1998*, (Oxford, 2003) p. 282; Ganiel, G., 'Explaining New Forms of Evangelical Activism in Northern Ireland: Comparative Perspectives from the USA and Canada', *Journal of Church and State*, 50:3, (2008), p. 488; Bruce (2007), *Op Cit.*, p. 264.

we cannot ignore the relatively small number of FPCU adherents when compared with other Evangelical denominations. Outside of the FPCU, Paisley's influence within Evangelicalism is limited. If Ian Paisley cannot be considered representative of wider Evangelicalism, much less can ECONI whose influence was smaller still.

In short, Searle's central argument is far from proven by the end of his work. His dedication to the deconstructionism of Derrida, and his view that text is an active "change-agent" of contextual reality, forces his thesis onto Northern Irish Evangelical interpretations of the Troubles. In reality, apocalyptic-eschatological text provided the language by which moral conservatism was given expression. Though more conservative and more liberal, Paisleyite and ECONI-esque, Evangelicals all attached themselves at times to apocalyptic-eschatological language, such was always an expression of their relative moral conservatism. This, coupled with views of Protestant identity, was the key interpretative framework by which the Troubles were assessed by Evangelicals.

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