

Robert TULIP

The Human Number: Theological Reflections on Empire

In the Bible story of Jonah, God tells the prophet to go to Ninevah, a city on the Tigris River in present-day Iraq, to foretell its doom. Jonah is terrified by this divine command and tries to escape by ship.

God is determined to fulfill the original plan and sends a storm of such ferocity that Jonah asks his fellow sailors to save themselves by tossing him into the sea, as he knows his prophetic knowledge is the source of the problem.

A whale swallows him and coughs him up on shore after three days. Jonah then does God's bidding and goes to Ninevah. Upon his arrival in the evil city, he tells the Ninevans of the impending divine wrath.

To Jonah's surprise, the residents accept his advice and repent of their sins. Even more amazingly, God then forgives Ninevah, telling Jonah their repentance has saved the city from the punishment predicted earlier.

Jonah was an ordinary person burdened with an extraordinary message. He felt deeply angry towards God, firstly for presenting him with such a dangerous prophecy, and then for making him endure a terrible storm, three days in the belly of a whale and the social confrontation in Ninevah. When God failed to carry out the original destructive promise in which he had invested so much expectation, Jonah wanted to die.

Status of Revelation

The story of Jonah, with its message of repentance leading to unexpected forgiveness and reconciliation, is recounted here to introduce a new look at that most controversial of Biblical themes, the central prophecy of the apocalypse, the human number 666.

God's forgiveness of Ninevah shows how expectations can be proved wrong when the divine presence reveals itself through a higher wisdom. Perhaps the stories of the apocalypse will have an equally unexpected outcome?

The prophecy of the apocalypse is central to Christian faith and places Christianity in a special position as the world religion which most explicitly addresses God's intervention in history. But the nature of this intervention is far from clear.

Robert TULIP is a member of the Uniting Church in Australia. He obtained a Master of Arts Honours degree from Macquarie University for his philosophy thesis *The Place of Ethics in Martin Heidegger's Ontology*. He works for the Australian Government for the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). His main contact with WSCF was as part of a delegation in 1989 to Korea, and through involvement in the annual Universal Day of Prayer for Students (UDPS). He has been involved with SCM during his university studies in Sydney, and since then in Canberra, where he is secretary of the SCM Area Council. His email address is rtulip2005@yahoo.com.au.



The Book of Revelations, the weird vision which closes the New Testament, is difficult to discuss rationally. The overwhelming nature of its images such as resurrection of the dead and the battle of Armageddon—and the impossibility of fundamentalist interpretations—has made rational people deeply wary of discussing it, leading many to deride the predictions of the Bible as irrelevant.

Within theology, interpretation has long been split into liberal and fundamentalist camps. Both, for opposite reasons, see an unbridgeable gap between modern thought and Bible stories of the end times.

The liberal approach dismisses the images of revelation as symbolic explanations of the trials of the early Church. At the other extreme, fundamentalists hold to unscientific beliefs such as the rapture of the faithful, assuming the allegories of the Bible are literally true.

Literal readings deserve scepticism, but it is equally wrong to assume modern rationality has the last word. The possibility that Revelation could contain a real historical prophecy from Jesus Christ is often denied because the literal story is farfetched, but this denial amounts to rejection of a central message of the Christian faith.

Cutting through this debate, this essay suggests that Revelation contains a simple and accurate prediction which goes to the centre of the relation between humanity and reality. Looking past the fearful visions, this essay presents a new reading of Revelation, with the aims of justifying the claim of Christianity to a unique understanding of the structure of world history and reclaiming the Christian vision as the guiding light of human civilization.

A New Reading

The key text is Revelation 13, which predicts a time when “People ... worshipped the beast, saying ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’ ... And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation... so that no one can buy or sell unless one has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let one who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty six.”

The interpretation explored here is that this prophecy of the beast of the apocalypse predicts the current dominant place in world affairs of the United States of America.

In the terms of the question “who is like the beast and who can fight against it?” the power of the United States is indeed such that no one equals her. U.S. leadership of the world seems beyond challenge, now that it has become the first state ever to dominate the Earth as a sole superpower, fulfilling the circumstance at the core of the Biblical prophecy.

The prophecy suggests a time when the world would be ruled by a person and a currency whose common number is 666. This prophecy, intriguingly, is exactly fulfilled by the United States dollar and the recent American President Ronald Wilson REAGAN. Together the Dollar and REAGAN exercised the world leadership predicted by the Bible, and they both have six letters in each of their three names.

A Global Eschatology

Identification of the USA as 666 implies the current time is the *end of the age* predicted in the Bible. The Bible actually indicates that no time before now could have been the end of the age when Jesus says “this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24,14).

Only now, when Western society has contacted every part of the world, accompanied by the Christian Church, has this condition been fulfilled. Only now, with the arrival of globalization, has the Gospel truly been preached to the whole world, setting the scene for the end of the age, as a rupture of the old Earth in the terms Paul predicted in Romans 8,22 rather than as the rapture of traditional fundamentalism.

There are signs that such a broad shift in epoch is underway. The age of colonial imperialism is drawing to a close, while globalization is emerging as a defining principle of the new age.

This interpretation sets a definite historical boundary to the notion of the *close of the age* presented in the Bible. But, recalling God’s unexpected forgiveness of Ninevah in the story of Jonah, the end of the age need not mean the end of humanity.

Rather, it should be a time of promise and opportunity, a time of discarding the unjust and worn out ways of the old age, a time to begin a new age and make all things new, as envisioned in Revelation 21,5.

The challenge presented by the new age is to make the principle of love the basis for public policy. This is not a simple matter of redistribution, but of finding ways to re-order economic and social systems to make globalization sustainable, and to ensure that principles such as merit, justice, inclusion and ecology hold sway.

The growth of globalization is a defining social reality. Technology increasingly allows standards to be harmonized by communication, making the concealment of evil difficult. Such transparency means the coming age will display the *rule of principle* over power.

By contrast, 2000 years ago the last age responded to the message of divine truth, in the person of Jesus Christ, with crucifixion. Such a response was only possible because at that time imperial power exercised such dominance over principle.

We are in the midst of transition from a society ordered on the basis of belief to a society ordered on the basis of knowledge. This unfolding transformation in human history is a turning point between epochs, away from the stage in human evolution in which no final certainty was available and into an age where scientific knowledge is becoming the basis of human activity.

False beliefs, which formerly underpinned all social practices at some level, are steadily becoming less tenable. The spread to the entire planet of scientific knowledge leaves no room for people to make decisions based on beliefs which are demonstrably false. This is leading to the sweeping away of untrue beliefs and the creation of a *new age of knowledge*.

The USA in World History

If belief was the ruling theme of the last two millennia, the United States as 666 represents the culmination of the old culture of false belief and of the imperial military epoch. The United States, as the dominant power of this age, continues in some essential respects to apply *imperial* principles which came to prominence at the time of Jesus Christ and which characterize the whole of the age of belief.

In particular, American reliance on military power as the guarantor of state policy stands in a direct historical line of descent from Roman imperial practice. Armed force will undoubtedly remain a basis of security, but U.S. military policy is so grandly bizarre, with its nuclear weapons and other excesses, that its policies are clearly not rational.

Another element of imperialism is its heedless frontier attitude towards the natural world. This mentality is the greatest threat to biodiversity and climate. The imperial principle of state domination is based on false beliefs and is manifestly not adequate to global needs, making the end of the age of belief an urgent matter.

The brutality inflicted by Western imperial powers on people at their margins has been extreme. From ancient Rome through the colonial period to the present, Western rule has been a bringer of death for indigenous cultures.

When Jesus confronted the Roman Empire and his own religion with God's demand to love those at the margins, the instinctive brutal response was to crucify and persecute the messenger. A similar arrogant streak, albeit much humanised, remains prominent in U.S. behaviour today.

Biblical Critique of U.S. Culture

The United States is in many ways a religious society, but mainstream U.S. Christianity is doing little to slow the destructive trends. Instead, it promotes a selfish individual doctrine of redemption which looks to save souls from the world, rather than seeking an integrated vision of how the world might be saved from itself.

Yet the Bible says that God came into the world through Jesus Christ not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3,17). Jesus says that people will be judged by their works of compassion (Matthew 25,31–46).

Against this guiding Christian spirit of love, the U.S. ethos is dangerously lacking. The dominant American culture is far from Jesus Christ, even in its so-called Christian aspects, having accepted a number of false values which threaten the future of humanity and the world.

The self-absorption of the consumer society is inimical to an ethic of love and conceals beneath the material success major problems that are unsustainable in their present form. At their root is the power of money.

The USA and the 666

The United States dollar, the monetary foundation of our world system, exactly fulfills the Bible's prophecy of a time when 'no one can buy or sell unless he has ... the 666.' The USA has led the world financial system since the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference established the dollar as the reserve currency for international trade. All

money now ultimately depends on exchange against the United States dollar for its value, making the dollar the basis of our world financial system, in precise fulfillment of the prophecy.

The correlation between the 666 and Ronald Wilson REAGAN is equally simple as a fulfillment of the Biblical prediction of a person with unrivalled authority. REAGAN remains a leading icon of U.S. power, in large part because of his emphasis on security through military domination rather than through peaceful relationships.

His and nuclear brinkmanship was a main factor which to me made the coincidence of his name and the 666 so disturbing. The world was indeed lucky to escape nuclear war in the 1980s with REAGAN at the helm.

The Bible says the 666 is a human number, meaning something deeply embedded at the centre of human life which continually tempts us to deny God. The U.S. dollar fulfills this requirement more than anything else.

Worship of money is a dominant theme of modern society, an idolatry which puts the United States and kindred societies (including) in direct conflict with the teaching of Jesus Christ that we cannot serve both God and Mammon.

The Bible says that understanding the human dimension of the 666 calls for wisdom. This can only mean we should look for the 666 in something with a long-standing presence in the life of the world, with a direct continuity back to Jesus Christ's teachings on the nature of sin.

The dollar fulfills these conditions precisely, considering Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 6,10 that the love of money is the root of all evil. Looking for the human dimension of the 666 in this way shows the error of the common tendency to imagine the 666 as something mysterious or alien, an upwelling from a Satanic underworld, rather than looking where the Bible clearly says we should, at the major central features of fallen human life.

The correlation between the 666 and the U.S. dollar suggests the 666 is the defining message from God of the danger of the corrupting power of money. Acceptance of this interpretation could give the United States the capacity honestly to analyse its behaviour against Christian principles, just as Ninevah repented when it heard the message from God through Jonah. The issue here, however, is corruption, rather than finance as such, given the need to retain a rigorous understanding of the relation between economics and poverty.

It is a conundrum how the Bible could contain the devastating critique of the United States suggested here when Christianity contributed so much to U.S. success through the Puritan tradition. The Bible endorses essential U.S. ideals including liberty, adherence to principle and respect for hard work. Jesus gave his blessing to freedom of enterprise and prudent investment in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25,29), where he said "to every one who has will more be given."

How could the United States, with its dynamism, brilliance and productivity, possibly be the beast of the apocalypse, an image usually linked with genocidal monsters like STALIN and HITLER? The problem is not America's strengths but its weaknesses, the unseen shadow cast by its positive self-image.

The identification of the United States as the 666 suggests that U.S. dominance poses

particular dangers to the world. Despite the United States' good faith and good deeds, the historical truth is that America exemplifies a heedless materialism which is deeply selfish and exploitative and which cannot be sustained.

To understand the dangers presented by U.S. values, it is essential to look at the United States in the historical perspective of the *imperial* tradition. The United States stands at the historical culmination of the legal, administrative and military systems developed by the Roman Empire which were responsible in coordination with local authorities for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

There is continuity between the hostility to the divine among the powers dominating the West in Biblical times and the present. In Paul's words in Romans 1,25, both worship the creature rather than the Creator.

To the extent the United States continues the imperial tradition, the theory of her as the 666 can be viewed as a warning sign from God and the ultimate message of the incarnation of Christ, indicating where humanity would stray from the path of our own long-term welfare.

Implications for Theology

If the United States really is the 666, the Revelation contains the central major truth of the culmination of human history. Such a suggestion jars against the secular trend of the physical sciences.

For the 666 to be an actual prediction about the United States, its appearance in the Bible, a book written 2000 years ago, and its retention in the canon by the Church despite its implausibility, goes beyond anything science can yet understand.

In light of this mysterious dimension, the whole topic needs to be approached with some respect for the possibility that a truth beyond our understanding is at work. Remembering the story of Jonah, the journey into this interpretation should be joined, not with alarm, but with the expectation that God is at work to overturn our preconceptions and secure our salvation.

At the very least, it is an extraordinary and uncanny coincidence that the U.S. dollar and former President REAGAN so accurately fulfill the Biblical prophecy of a time when the name of the ruler of the world and his currency would have the number 666.

The fact that the United States so neatly fits the central features of the Biblical prophecy is enough by itself to justify a critical examination of the suggestion that she is the 666, with a view to finding an elegant and coherent basis for a new scientific approach to Christian theology.

Such a claim deserves to be approached with some scepticism, considering that people throughout the ages have imagined they saw the beast in their own time. While remaining mindful of this legitimate doubt, I believe the logic inherent in the argument is compelling and that it provides the key to resolving twenty centuries of uncertainty about the status of Jesus as Messiah and the truth of the Christian message.

Previous interpretations of the 666, such as the associations drawn with NERO, some of the Popes, or HITLER, have relied on metaphor and obscure mathematical claims to make the facts fit the prophecy.

Here no such effort is required because the correlations with the dollar and REAGAN

are exact and simple. Setting out the alternate associations shows the contrast with earlier forced interpretations.

For example, the teaching that 666 applies to NERO takes a relatively uncommon form of NERO's name, NERO Cæsar and adds an "n", resulting in NERON Cæsar. Next the Latin is transliterated into Aramaic, resulting in *nrvn qsr*, which when using the numeric equivalent of the letters, then adds up to 666. Similarly farfetched is the claim that letters supposedly inscribed in a papal miter are 'VICARIUS FILII DEI', which add to 666 by similar mathematical contortion.

The problem, unlike these earlier efforts to demonise an opponent, might rather be to ask whether the beast really is the absolute evil of traditional imagery. Perhaps instead it is more like a stumbling blind giant which lacks the capacity, despite its good will, to secure its future from its own resources, and needs external help to put it on the right path.

The implications of the claim that the United States is the beast should be treated with caution, given the momentous nature of what is being said, and its potential to test our political structures and the meaning of Christian faith.

For my part, as an admirer of U.S. achievements, the need for caution and surety has led me to consider the issues privately since REAGAN was in power. I believe the arguments presented here demonstrate that the United States is indeed predicted in the Biblical prophecy, but the implications for the future are by no means so clear.

For example, it does not inevitably mean the United States will degenerate along the lines of traditional images of the beast into an evil force bent on death and destruction. The correlation with the 666 does not imply the United States as a whole is essentially evil, or that a cosmic divine wrath is in store for the human race, or, least of all, that the capitalist system should be overthrown.

Considering that God's love is the main teaching of the Bible, it is more likely that the truth of the 666 should foreshadow, not apocalyptic collapse, but the possibility of divine forgiveness and transformation.

As we move into an era where America is the sole superpower and the Earth is groaning under the weight of humanity, modern society has cut itself off, to a large extent, from God and from nature.

This failure to provide any ground for our being means we lack a systematic understanding of the place of humanity in the universe, integrating the scientific worldview and the spiritual needs of humanity.

The identification of the United States as the 666, within an otherwise generally sceptical framework, is advanced here as a cogent foundation for such a rational understanding of our place, giving grounds to see the Bible as a source of elemental wisdom about the moral structure of the world, and as the channel for the eternal God for Whom all times are equally present.

Christ as Cosmic Visionary

Jesus Christ called all people to a life of love, truth, justice and faith. He summed up these values in the teachings to love God and to treat others as we would have them treat us. In the dangerous and unstable times we now live in, a return to these teachings

of Jesus Christ would help humanity to live together peacefully in a sustainable global community.

A major problem, however, is that essential Christian ethics, such as simplicity, humility and generosity, are largely foreign to the corporate and military mind supported by the U.S. economy.

The miraculous stories of the Bible point to a remarkable connection between the historical person Jesus and an eternal truth about the place of humanity in the universe. The power of this connection to the eternal is the essence of the holiness of Jesus Christ and the source of the miraculous energy attested by the Gospels.

Perhaps the crowning miracle of this eternal vision is the truth of the 666, which of course is presented as the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1,2). The 666 could be the divine revelation, providing the essential point of contact between human spirituality and our universe, bringing our human systems to account before God.

Now that technology has outstripped our social evolution, creating nuclear, greenhouse and other dangers to our future, we should be open to the possibility that God provided a message that would enable us to stop and consider our path, so our social and political capacity could catch up with our scientific and economic abilities.

The only way such a social vision could penetrate our congealed power systems would be for humanity to be given a divine revelation of the structure of history. The promise of the Bible is that the divine nature will be revealed to us, that God will provide us with the key to enable a connection between humanity and eternal truth.

The suggestion here, that the Bible offers such a key by predicting U.S. dominance, implies that God has intervened prophetically in human history through Jesus Christ and the Bible for our salvation.

Humanity and Truth

The murder of Jesus Christ shows, more than any other event in history, the gulf between humanity and truth. The cross is a symbol of how Jesus Christ, the person who most fully embodied divine truth, was too much for his society to handle, because they preferred their illusions to the harsh honesty of self-recognition. Such denial of the universal and eternal values of God should lead to destruction, but the promise of resurrection is that God will intervene to save us.

The blood of the cross may yet prove redemptive, but only through the understanding it gives of the human situation, through the knowledge that the personal and structural sins of our world are caused by denial of truth and failure to love.

Jesus Christ was given up to be killed by the Roman State America is the modern heir of Roman imperialism. The emblematic instrument of Western rule, the United States dollar, is the new cross, the power which supporters of love and truth must transform. The message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that the evil of imperialism will be conquered by the truth of God, when the meek, the peacemakers and the poor in spirit will inherit the Earth.

This essay has discussed the correspondence of the 666 with REAGAN and the dollar, the continuity between the United States' world position and that of the empire which

crucified Jesus Christ, and the extent to which our time shows the signs of transition between ages.

In light of these factors, if the prophecy of the United States as 666 is true, we have an intellectually coherent and elegant basis for Christianity as the foundation for reform and evolution of human society.

By prompting a return to a humble honesty before God, before the Earth and before each other, this message can enable a renewing openness to central themes in our civilization, such as truth, justice and reconciliation, and can provide the foundation for humanity to move into a truly global order.

The notion of the United States as 666 could therefore be the key to a new interpretation of world history and a first premise for a new systematic Christian theology. Naming the United States as 666 could be the essential first step to forestall the main threats to human existence, and an essential basis for peaceful evolution of human life on Earth, within a stable political framework, away from unsustainable practices and towards an ethical world community.

No single nation-state should lead the process of globalization, which requires a new level of humility and cooperation before God. The question of what should follow the current period of U.S. dominance is of course the big issue raised by this argument.

My view is that a steady consultative increase in the integration between national systems, through new world institutions, is inevitable and to be welcomed. It may even be that these institutions must be wrested away from their old world locations, and re-founded in neutral places to emphasize the need for all to be treated with justice.