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ESCHATOLOGY: TAKING BETS
ON THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING FUTURE

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY ST2003

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INTRODUCTION

In some way, eschatology – the vision of an end to this world, and the ushering in by God of a new one, the kingdom of heaven – is essential to Christianity. Lutheran theologian Ted Peters reflects the common understanding when he says “we cannot explicate the gospel without thinking eschatologically.”¹ Yet some Christian theologians minimize or radically redefine traditional eschatology – witness Bultmann’s existential interpretation, shorn of its cosmic and historical character.² I initially approached the subject of eschatology with the assumption that such treatment could hardly be commensurate with the grandness of the eschatological claim. But what I found was that eschatology is in fact a radically flexible realm – there are many creative alternatives for conceiving the apocalyptic horizon. This is fortunate, because I believe that there is a great benefit in stretching the idea far away from the well-worn image of an end-of-the-world apocalypse.

There are many items in the complex called Christian eschatology, including resurrection of the dead, life after death, heaven, hell, purgatory, the second advent of Christ, and final judgement.³ I think that what is fundamentally important here is the image of the coming kingdom of God: this *is* the promise of what comes after. Most essentially, eschatology is about apocalyptic change from this world to the everlasting kingdom of God – an end which is also a beginning. In this paper, I will examine apocalyptic thinking, then raise a series of questions whose answers, I believe, shift the understanding of last things in a useful direction – away from a fantastical vision of an imminent, wholesale end to this world, and towards a world where real transformation occurs, as human beings work for love, justice, right relations, and ecological sustenance. I will ask, what happens to us when we die? Was the original apocalyptic idea all a big mistake? Why would God have found it necessary to create this world, only to replace it in

the fullness of time? During this questioning, I hope to show the possibilities inherent in the original symbols of apocalypse expanding and opening up. I will then suggest that we live in a world situation that demands something far more constructive from the symbols of apocalypse than the old way of envisioning it can offer. Finally, I will lay out one such constructive vision. My conviction is that one can in this way build a truer foundation for the basic Christian commitments.

WHAT IS THE APOCALYPSE?

What I find most striking most about theory of “last things” is that, regardless of what eschatological tradition one examines, Christian or otherwise – one finds that the “end” is never really the end at all, it’s always really a new beginning. It’s not as if all of reality just disappears into the void – there’s *always* something more that follows the end, generally something better. Such visions of transformation may take cyclical or linear form; the Christian tradition is clearly linear. But a line may have many points on it; what really distinguishes the Christian eschatology is that it’s a line from creation to kingdom with only one point in between: the eschatological transformation stands at some end-point of world history as a *one-time-only* occurrence.

For the sake of context, it is useful to review the origins and historical threads of apocalyptic thinking.⁴ Narratives of world destruction have a long history. The story of the flood, conceived as a divine decision to reconstitute humankind, goes back to ancient Sumeria (c. 3000 B.C.E.). The subsequent Hebrew account introduces a strong element of divine retribution: God elects to “blot out man who I have created from the face of the ground...for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen. 6:7), saving only righteous Noah and his family. Later, the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel draws on imagery of natural disaster and war – God declares that “he that is in

the field dies by the sword; and him that is in the city famine and pestilence devour” (Ezek. 6:15). This disaster is cast as divine punishment directed to Israel, the “sinful nation” (Is. 1:4), for its failures to live up to its covenant: God says “I...will judge you [Israel] according to your ways; and I will punish you for all your abominations” (Ezek. 6:7), for “you...played the harlot” (Ezek. 16:15). Destruction is also meted out widely to Israel’s enemies: in typical fashion, “Because the Philistines acted revengefully...I will execute great vengeance upon them” (Ezek. 25:15-17). But these actions are ultimately in the service of a renewed covenant, for “Zion shall be redeemed by justice” (Is. 1:27): “He has cast his lot for them” (Is. 34:17).

The book of Daniel further sharpens the separations to come between good and evil, chosen and damned, presenting history as unfolding towards the destruction of menacing imperial powers and the arrival of messianic rule by “one like a son of man”: “And to him was given...an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away” (Dan. 7:13-14). Daniel also foreshadows an eschatological element of Christian thinking: resurrection of the dead. “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

Finally, arising out of these roots, apocalyptic vision comes to full flower in the Christian book of Revelation, in which a final battle will wipe away heaven and earth, and evil and mortality will be banished: “Death and Hades gave up their dead...and all were judged by what they had done....Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I heard a voice saying ‘death shall be no more’” (Rev. 20:13-21:4).

In Revelation, then, there is a new focus on overcoming human immortality through general resurrection, in the context of cosmic re-creation. So God intends a kind of fulfillment for creation as a whole, and, at the same time, the attainment of true humanity, that is, the

perfection of *all* humans, dead and alive, as *imago dei*, undistorted by sin and worldly failings. And this states what I think is a crucial linkage, or duality, in eschatology: it is inseparably about two different endings – the end of the world, and the death of the individual. I think that the fact that the death of individuals is an ongoing and essential feature of earthly life, while the day of judgement comes only once in the history of the cosmos, accounts for a great deal of confusion and invention concerning the way-stations of the afterlife. Both the personal-salvation and the world-transformation sides of eschatology will play roles in what follows; the general thrust is that by bringing world-transformation *into* the existing, ongoing creation, the personal aspect of eschatology becomes less fixated on salvation and more on the role that self-transformation can play in supporting world-transformation.

RECASTING THE APOCALYPTIC COMMITMENT

Christian eschatology, it seems, is (ever) ripe for reinterpretation; we should not be afraid to set aside those aspects that do not resonate with our own sense of truth. I begin with an examination of *personal resurrection*, beginning with a high-tech solution provided by John Polkinghorne, continuing with a radically untraditional vision offered by Rosemary Radford Ruether, and finally challenging the usefulness of the common fixation on securing an ever-enduring identity. Next I consider how secure the *apocalyptic intuition* itself is, with the help of Marcus Borg's challenging view that there was a mistake built into it from the very beginning. I propose that at very least, his kind of thinking must open the door to any number of other interpretations. Finally, I consider what *cosmic transformation* means and why it is considered necessary, employing suggestions offered by John Polkinghorne. I view these thinkers together

as Christian athletic trainers, challenging us to stretch our theological muscles and hopefully exercise them.

Like many others before me, I cannot resist wondering how the technical aspects of resurrection would work. We have moved somewhere beyond the image first propounded by Augustine, of God re-assembling the once-decayed bits of our flesh around our old dry bones. John Polkinghorne offers intriguing speculations on this matter, made in the language of contemporary information theory. He supposes that the soul is an “an almost infinitely complex, dynamic, information-bearing pattern,” carried throughout life by the body. Together the body-soul constitutes our psychosomatic unity, and while this prize dissolves at death, he finds it coherent to believe that “the pattern that is me will be remembered by God and its instantiation will be recreated by him when he reconstitutes me in a new environment of his choosing.”⁵ For Polkinghorne, then, all of the richness of the human being, including its relationship to the divine ground of reality, is expressible as patterned information. I am not sure what to think of his proposal, but it shows how a powerful idea can withstand re-forming in very different epochs.

Rosemary Radford Ruether has a radically different image of salvation/resurrection, informed by her conception of eschatology, which situates the inbreaking kingdom within the continuation of this world. For Ruether, creation is “rooted in mortality and renewal through disintegration” and spiritually is fundamentally relational, so eschatological “escape” breaks our (and God’s?) relationality with the world.⁶ Ruether’s central commitment to the relationality of earthly life is well expressed in an anecdote reported by Robert John Russell. He asked her what her vision of salvation was, and her reply was “lying in my grave, being eaten by worms.”⁷

Lest the reader suppose that Ruether replaces “escape” with a morbid fascination with death and decay, I would affirm her recognition that life itself depends on the cycle of death and

regeneration (a fact which must also make us reassess the Christian identification of death as punishment for sin). I wish to go beyond this observation, though, and note that I, for one, am not sure I feel so attached to my own personal identity in this life that I would want to hold onto it for all of eternity! I would like to think that, yes, existence for me will, in some sense, stretch on forever; but must this never-ending me-ishness be essentially this same guy who lived on earth approximately from 1968 to 2048? I raise the thought to ponder, if one were to fulfill an everlasting series of missions without a sense of continuous, unitary identity, would that be such a bad thing?

We turn now to the beginnings of the Christian apocalyptic, remembering the point I made at the outset, with a restatement by George Forrell: “Without its particular eschatology the Christian faith would not be Christian at all.”⁸ Is that particular eschatology secure in its very foundations? A challenging point is made by Marcus Borg, among others. He has describes his surprise at being taught in seminary that, to the extent that Jesus was an “eschatological prophet,” who “proclaimed the end of the present world and the coming of the Kingdom of God *in the very near future...he was...wrong*” (italics mine).⁹ What Jesus was in fact saying has had to be substantially reinterpreted during the course of this century. Borg has further noted that the earliest Christians expected the second coming of Christ *very soon*, probably in their own lifetimes, and they too were wrong. That it didn’t happen ought to give us pause. Were they simply wrong about the timing? Or (as Borg asserts) were there they wrong about the whole idea of a visible return of Jesus in all his glory?¹⁰

There are alternatives. For example, we can redefine the problem and say that the early believers were right in a metaphorical way, as with C.H. Dodd’s characterization of the kingdom as something that is already “eternal and present,” having arrived in Jesus’ life.¹¹ Whatever we

conclude, Borg's point highlights the fact that Christianity has already gone beyond the belief that it's possible to take the original source at face value; one must bring some value of one's own to it. I think the door is open to subtler readings, to finding endings and beginnings in the world in which we live.

I would like now to expand our scope further still, and consider what cosmic transformation means. I have often wondered, with John Polkinghorne, "if the natural laws of the new creation are such as to permit...a redemption of embodied existence [without death, mourning and pain], why were they not the basis for the first creation?" The answer he provides is that, while the existing world was created by God *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and is a world characterized by the freedom to exist and evolve "on its own," the coming world is to be created *ex vetere*, out of the old world, as a divine redemption of it. For Polkinghorne, the transforming universe "enters freely into a new and closer relationship with its Creator, so that it becomes a totally sacramental world, suffused with divine presence." As such, it is "the fitting fulfillment of what has gone before, not its arbitrary abolition." This fact "invests the present created order with a most profound significance, for it is the raw material from which the new will come." P168 There is a commendable elasticity in that conception: new creation could in fact be going on all around us, emerging even in the midst of the old. The participatory element is also appealing, but, if we cast our eye back on the profoundly anthropocentric history of the eschatological idea, it is baffling to imagine how the entire universe gets involved in the free choice to return to the divine fold.¹²

The story of world transformation, then, can be as difficult to believe as it is attractive. I have tried to establish that it is legitimate to extract the symbols of apocalypse from the original narrative and use them differently. What follows this extraction is an invitation to re-tell the tale

in a way that people *can* believe. If we are to assert that the symbols are meaningful and alive, then we are challenged to spin the symbols into a good story, a new story if necessary, in all its vivid detail. People ought to be able to walk away from the telling of the story saying to themselves, “I can believe that *could* happen.” The criteria we bring to this re-telling must accord with its biblical basis, but they can and should reflect our time and our concerns. In the final section of this paper, I will tell a story based on the search for a world graced with love, justice, right relations, and ecological sustenance.

To close this section, I would note that eschatology arose in an era when it was meaningful to talk about such things as the end of time itself in reference to spans like *one thousand years*. I would assert, by contrast, that our contemporary vision of a universe that will span more than *30 billion years* demands that Christians seriously rethink eschatology. For example, when we consider the destiny of the human species, I believe that we cannot just walk away from the challenge to develop a vision of another 100, or 1,000, or even 10,000 more years on this planet. To the extent that eschatology refutes the obvious truth that human life, earthly life, stretches on from the point it is at today into the indefinite, radically open future, I question how well it serves our purposes as caretakers of a fragile realm. I suggest that we must embrace such a vision. In this light, I am encouraged by the thought that our species can continue to evolve and emerge towards an ever-greater capacity to express morality, love, and justice as real properties of the world. But such a vision is profoundly under threat.

AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

The myth of “last things” is a vision of God’s control. In this myth, we humans may play a key part, but essentially we are in very special position to benefit from our unique, covenantal

relationship with God, the controller of all things, who will do away with this world and provide something better. But there is another myth today which has a very powerful hold on our civic life and our private imaginations: a myth of human control. I call it “the myth of progress through technological control.” This myth starts with the message that, through the power of applied science and technology, we can manipulate and alter *this* world in extremely potent, practical, hands-on ways. It is the myth, for example, of biotechnology and of environmental remediation. But this myth does not stop at telling us that we are capable of these manipulations; we already know that. The key message of the myth is that we have a bright future ahead of us because, through the application of our technology, *we* will make it so.

Let us look closely for a moment into current events to see how this technological faith is expected to deliver the common good. The context here is provided by the World Trade Organization, arguably the most powerful adjudicating body in the world today, able to overturn, at the stroke of a pen, any of the national laws of 130 countries which come under its jurisdiction. Under this regime, for example, a U.S. law protecting _____ was recently overturned by the WTO because it was judged a trade barrier to _____. The criterion for the WTO’s decisions is meant to be that the law in question is founded on objective science, and protection of _____ is considered faulty science. The controlling ethos that is purported to lead to a better future through the means of the WTO’s adjudicating power is, simply and exclusively, free trade. Through the invisible hand of the markets, all of us will in time have a better life. Free trade is the very definition of right relations. Note that no moral input is necessary.

I would suggest that, in the face of this particular myth of human control, which puts humans very much in the driver’s seat, and which without question rules the world, the prior myth of God’s control – the apocalyptic vision – is, on its own, incapable of securing a bright

future in this world. Further, I would suggest that, as the technologists understand well but the eschatologists perhaps do not, we are really in need of such a powerful tool to secure a sound future. We can find in the biblical tradition other guidance that can support real progress. Along these lines, elaborating on a suggestion made by Rosemary Radford Ruether, I propose another biblical tradition, one that could contribute to a new, as yet unrealized myth of *human moral engagement* that can provide the balance that the myth of progress through technological control desperately needs.¹³

The tradition is Jubilee. In the sabbatical legislation of Leviticus, Jubilee is proclaimed every fiftieth year, and during this year, debts are erased and slaves set free (Leviticus 25:10).

MORE

Recently I have been volunteering for an organization which has sought to revive the Jubilee idea in a contemporary context: *Jubilee 2000* is agitating for the cancellation of the crushing national debts of the poorest countries of the world. The case for debt cancellation comes down to the fact that hundreds of millions of people are living in a state of indentured servitude, working hard, year after year, to export their nations' best available commodities even as their health and education budgets are systematically slashed. To say that these common people did nothing to inherit the debt and never gained from it to put it mildly: millions of them in the past fifteen years have simply been born into this degraded state.

Some people say that Jubilee would lead to "moral hazard": if you give somebody a break, you thereby encourage them to take advantage of it; and, in so doing, you encourage bad habits. I would suggest, though, that it is our morals themselves that are at hazard. Our love is controlled by our fear, and the end result is extraordinary human suffering.

The idea of Jubilee is poignantly wise about human nature in a way that the myth of progress through technological control is not: it is a law that captures with great clarity our own pathetic limitations. While calling for a clean slate occasionally, the Jubilee law acknowledges plainly that we are totally incapable of living in a continuous state of moral perfection. In the face of this acknowledgement of our weaknesses, it is a collective commitment to try to clean up our act occasionally. In our civil society today there is simply nothing that impels us to do any such thing. The myth of progress through technological control, on the contrary, tells us that we can live like kings, polluting and degrading with impunity, because a priestly caste with special powers – the technologists – will save us, or save our progeny – someday.

For 2,500 years or more, the hope for an immanently-approaching end to things has been disappointed. The point I want to make is not that such thinking is escapist, but simply that it does not, on its own, provide a powerful enough impetus for us to change the world for the good – not in the face of a powerful myth that soothingly whispers in our ears that the problem has already been taken care of, that our leaders will fix everything through the exercise of reason and technology. Eschatological hopes or not, we cannot drop the ball for future generations.

CONCLUSION

At the outset I proposed that there are many creative alternatives for conceiving the apocalyptic horizon. I have offered just one, grounded in biblical tradition, with the aim of spurring a sense that world-transformation can and does occur right here, and indeed that we can and should participate fully in this potential that is built into our world. With respect to Jubilee, I suggest that the debts be cancelled immediately: a fitting start to the new millennium (a moment which should itself serve to remind us of the elasticity of the apocalyptic horizon), and a

powerful incentive for all nations never to allow this systemic immiseration to happen again.

And in this same vein, let us free our imaginations to see how we can bring about or engage in at least some meager reflection of the coming kingdom *now*, for we know that the kingdom has its roots here.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Ted Peters, *GOD – The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 308.
- ² Alister McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Malden, Mass.: 1993), 162.
- ³ George Forell, *The Protestant Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975 ed.), 229 and Peters, 306.
- ⁴ For the abruptly telescoped account that follows, I acknowledge a considerable debt to Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 61-71.
- ⁵ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 163.
- ⁶ Ruether, 83.
- ⁷ Anecdote reported to me by Robert John Russell, Nov., 1999.
- ⁸ Forell, 229.
- ⁹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 12.
- ¹⁰ Borg, Forum at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, Nov. 14, 1999.
- ¹¹ McGrath, 162.
- ¹² Polkinghorne, 166-169.
- ¹³ Ruether, 212-213.