

## 12. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND LIFE EVERLASTING

### WHERE WE ARE

Eschatology has traditionally been defined as the doctrine of "the last things." It appeared as the final chapter in the classic systems of dogmatics under the heading *de novissimis* in Latin and *ta eschata* in Greek texts. This dogmatic locus dealt with events that still belong to the future, such as death and resurrection, the last judgment and the end of the world, eternal damnation (hell) and eternal life (heaven). It covered the future destiny of each individual after death as well as the final consummation of the world.

In the period of Protestant scholasticism (seventeenth century), the treatment of eschatological topics became petrified in the last chapter of dogmatics. Karl Barth spoke ironically of this approach as "lulling us to sleep by adding at the conclusion of Christian Dogmatics a short and perfectly harmless chapter entitled—'Eschatology.'"<sup>1</sup> To a large extent the mainline churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, permitted the sects to claim the subject of eschatology as their specialty. Their literalistic preaching from the Bible about the end of the world has tended to inoculate the mainline bodies of Christianity against this virus of eschatology.<sup>2</sup> Despite this fact there has occurred a renaissance of eschatological thinking in twentieth-century theology unparalleled in the history of Christian thought.

Eschatology is no longer confined to the concluding chapter of dogmatics as teaching about the last things. The whole of Christian theology is penetrated by eschatology. Every theological statement is at the same time an eschatological statement in the sense that eschatology deals with what is ultimate, and to speak of God is to speak of our "ultimate concern" (Tillich). There is a consensus among the various schools of theology that the eschatological perspective is basic

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 500.

2. The most popular example of this type of literalism is Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

to the understanding of the Christian faith. At the beginning of his long theological career, Barth inaugurated the eschatological renaissance in Christian theology with this striking claim: "Christianity that is not entirely and altogether eschatology has entirely and altogether nothing to do with Christ."<sup>3</sup> Echoing this mandate a half century later, Jürgen Moltmann insisted: "The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such. . . . Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole church."<sup>4</sup>

There are several reasons for the emphasis on eschatology in today's theology. The first reason is the general philosophical discovery of the phenomenon of hope in human existence that generates questions pointing in the direction of eschatology.<sup>5</sup> The second reason is the historical rediscovery of the eschatological core of the message of Jesus and of biblical faith as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Leading philosophers and psychologists—Bloch, Marcel, Marcuse, Fromm, Polak, Ricoeur, Maslow, Menninger, and numerous others—have made noteworthy contributions to the phenomenology of hope in human existence. The meaningfulness of Christian eschatology depends on its structural correspondence to the factor of hope in human life. Eschatology promises fulfillment; hope presupposes something lacking. Human beings hope for what they lack. If we are in bondage, we hope for deliverance; if we sit in darkness, we hope for light. The lack may be described by such metaphors as illness, darkness, slavery, alienation, lostness, exile, even death. It is the mission of hope to respond to a situation of distress by sending out a signal for help.

Correlated with this existential phenomenology of hope is the renewal of biblical eschatology that began around the turn of the century with the studies of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. The renaissance of eschatology was brought about as a result of the application of the historical-scientific method to the study of the New Testament. The historical knowledge that the eschatological theme

3. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 314.

4. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 16.

5. See, e.g., Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959).

6. See Johannes Weiss's seminal work of 1892, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*.

lies at the heart of the Bible and determined the message of Jesus and early Christianity became all the more influential in theology by the fact that scholars like Weiss and Schweitzer had no theological interest in their own findings. They were not pro-eschatological; they looked upon the eschatological outlook of the Bible as antiquated. Their purely historical findings were not integrated into their own modern religious interpretation of faith and life.

The eschatological hypothesis in biblical interpretation produced a serious crisis in theology. If eschatology belongs to the essence of primitive Christianity but appears unintelligible to the modern mind, how is it possible to interpret what is essentially Christian in terms that make sense today? It could be that eschatological thought is a dead issue for modern people, including Christians among them. The relevance of eschatology cannot be established simply by showing how "biblical" it is. It took the crisis of modern culture to open the imagination to new ways of interpreting biblical eschatology. Since then theology has been productive of many types of eschatology, differentiated both by how they interpret the meaning of eschatology in the New Testament and how they understand its relevance for modern times.

### THE DOCTRINE IN ITS CLASSIC FORMULATION

#### **The Biblical Roots of Eschatology**

One of the chief problems of biblical interpretation has been that of finding the thread of continuity that ties the two testaments of the Bible together. Since the awakening of the eschatological perspective in theology, it has become evident that the people of God, from the days of Israel in the Old Testament to the period of the church in the New, have moved forward in history in expectation of future salvation, however much this expectation was always founded on historical events in which God had intervened in the past.

In the Old Testament the coming of eschatological salvation was announced in different terms, for example, the day of Yahweh, the day of judgment, the coming of the Messiah, the kingdom of God, and the new Jerusalem. The eschatology of Israel underwent a continual process of change and development. Originally Israel held a predominantly this-worldly eschatology; its vision of the promised

future belonged to this world of space and time. This is the case with early prophetic eschatology. The prophets expected a coming paradise *on earth*. The coming kingdom, which Yahweh was to establish for his people, enjoyed the same material reality as the promised land. It would be a land flowing with milk and honey. The faithful remnant of Israel would be drawn to the holy mountain as their dwelling place. There is no specific hope for heaven or life after death. Salvation will be something to see; the earth will be extremely fruitful, people will be inwardly renewed, society will become righteous, and the nations will be at peace. Israel, the least of the nations, will be exalted above all the others, provided the people remain faithful to the ancient covenant.

The Israelites began to have doubts that the prophetic vision of a future paradise would ever be translated into the world of here and now, or even that they would ever be delivered from exile and return to the homeland. Gradually, otherworldly eschatological traits were mingled with future hope as they came into contact with Iranian and Hellenistic influences. A process of transcending took place which shifted the focus of attention from this world to the next, a transition that would be mediated by an apocalyptic transformation of the present age into a spiritual realm beyond space and time.

Apocalyptic eschatology flourished especially during the period between the two testaments, although it had already made its breakthrough in the postexilic books of the Old Testament, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah. Apocalypticism, however, was not wholly discontinuous with earlier prophetic eschatology. Both kept the fires of hope burning for salvation and liberation during times of wretchedness and oppression. Both pictured the God of Israel as the God of history who will come to change the world, to put down what is evil and recreate what is good both for Israel and for the nations. Nevertheless, Jewish apocalypticism brought new dimensions into eschatological thought, preparing the stage for Jesus' message of the kingdom of God.

Apocalypticism sharpened the contrast between this age and the age to come. It depicted a complete break in time, prophesying calamity and chaos of cosmic proportions before the new age could dawn. The contrast between good and evil was drawn in black and white terms, painted against the backdrop of a dualism of opposing forces,

God and the devil. Demonology and angelology also entered in. The powers of God and the devil were mediated in human history and the world by good and evil spirits. Writings that claimed to hold the secret to the revealed mysteries concerning the end-time were published under pseudonyms borrowed from such famous Old Testament figures as Adam, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, and Daniel. These writings are called apocalyptic because "apocalypse" means "revelation." They contain esoteric revelations, expressed in numbers and symbols, of the whole course of world history and the plan of salvation from beginning to end. The apocalyptic trend thus moved away from earthly to heavenly expectations, from seeking a better future in history for Israel and the nations to a totally other destiny of humanity and the world above and beyond history.

The Christian revision of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology was determined by the modifications which Jesus of Nazareth himself effected through his preaching of the kingdom of God and the double ending of his life: his *death* on the cross and his *resurrection* to a new form of being. The central motif of Jesus' message was the coming kingdom of God. The eschatological rule of God which Jesus preached was the power determining both the content of his message and the activities of his ministry. However, there is no consensus among contemporary theologians on how to interpret Jesus' expectation of the kingdom of God. Did Jesus think of the kingdom of God as something otherworldly and future (traditional orthodoxy)? Or as something otherworldly and present (Karl Barth and dialectical theology)? Or as something this-worldly and present (Rudolf Bultmann and existentialist theology)? Or as something this-worldly and future (Christian Marxism and liberation theology)? Perhaps there is an element of truth in all these viewpoints, each forming one facet of a multidimensional vision of the kingdom of God.

A major debate among New Testament scholars is whether Jesus built on the foundations of apocalyptic eschatology current in his time or reached back to the earlier forms of prophetic eschatology. There has been a tendency among scholars to exempt Jesus from the apocalyptic world view. Ernst Käsemann has written, "His own preaching was not constitutively stamped by apocalyptic."<sup>7</sup> More plausible is the view of Ulrich Wilkens that although Jesus was not a

7. Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *Apocalypticism, Journal for Theology and the Church*, vol. 7 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 40.

typical apocalypticist, his message was delivered in the medium of apocalyptic thought forms.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus expected the coming of the kingdom in the immediate future. He made an urgent appeal to his hearers to repent and believe, for there was barely enough time to get ready for the advent of God's approaching rule. One of the most hotly debated issues among scholars has been whether Jesus expected the arrival of the kingdom in the very near future, or whether it was already being fulfilled at that moment. Do we have in Jesus' message the basis for a future-oriented eschatology or a present-oriented eschatology? The alternative is a false one. There are passages that point in both directions. The future reign of God is pictured as drawing so near as already to have a present impact through the person of Jesus. The kingdom is not yet fulfilled, but its initial force is already being felt in the words and works of Jesus' ministry.

After Easter and Pentecost the early church became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the bringer of eschatological salvation. Features of eschatological fulfillment due to Easter were etched into the apostolic picture of Jesus' earthly ministry. Coupled with its memory of the historical Jesus, the early church also looked forward in hope of future fulfillment coinciding with the return of Christ. In this way the eschatology of primitive Christianity became three-dimensional. The Revelation of John refers to the Christ "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4,8). It is significant that the present tense comes first. The early Christians believed that the risen Christ was really present among them according to the Spirit. This present dimension of experience is the basis of what scholars have called Christ-mysticism, most vividly represented in the writings of Paul and John. However, their witness to the eschatological Christ was never reduced to the single time-dimension of the present. The present Christ is identical with the one who was—the Jesus of history. The risen Lord is continuous with the crucified Jesus. And this Christ who is and who was will come again. The primitive Christian community looked forward to the glory of the coming of the Lord in the end-time. In this respect the New Testament continued the trend inaugurated by the Old Testament to portray the people of God as an

8. Ulrich Wilkens, "The Understanding of Revelation within the History of Primitive Christianity," in *Revelation as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, et al. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), pp. 57–121.

exodus community that lives by faith toward a fulfilling future embodied in the word of promise. All three dimensions of time—present, past and future—determine the structure of eschatological thought in the early church.

### **The Transformation of Eschatology in the Patristic Era**

The earliest Christians were convinced that the parousia was imminent, that Christ was coming soon, and that history was about to come to a smashing end. Gradually, however, the eschatological consciousness began to wane among second- and third-century Christians. They had to adjust to an indefinite postponement of the parousia and begin to cope with the exigencies of ongoing history. Eschatological intensity gave way to ecclesiastical developments. The original eschatological tension in Christianity was relaxed by this growing trend toward institutionalization which some New Testament scholars have called "early Catholicism." Occasionally a high-pitched eschatological hope would return, as in the case of Montanism, taking the form of a protest against the secularization of the church and a call to purity of moral and spiritual life.

In the patristic age the list of "last things" was divided between those that concern the individual person and those that relate to the world in general. Death became the focus of each individual's eschaton. The nearness of the parousia in early Christian eschatology was transformed into the idea of the suddenness of death. The offices and sacraments of the church were legitimized as means to prepare the individual to face death. Personal death was imminent, not so much the parousia. The "last things" of the world in general were postponed to a remote future. The last day, the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, and the end of the world—events that were expected in the *near* future in the New Testament—were still affirmed but now removed to the *distant* future. These were no longer objects of passionate expectation. Instead, fear of one's personal eschaton in death provided the occasion for the church to take control of the eternal destiny of each individual. In this atmosphere it was possible for the organized church to require obedience to its authority as the absolute condition of salvation.

The positive significance of eschatology in the age of the church fathers must be seen in terms of the church's intellectual encounter

with Hellenistic philosophy. The eschatological perspective equipped these early church thinkers to transform the categories of Greek philosophy in their theological interpretation of the cosmos and of human nature. It would be erroneous to fault them for having completely lost the eschatological horizon of early Christianity. What happened instead was that eschatology paid off in other terms, bearing on broader cultural and philosophical issues.

Eschatology opened history to the experience of novelty. The coming of God's kingdom in history radically changed the human situation. The historical events on which the salvation of humanity is based are unique, unrepeatable, and decisive. These events happened once for all and contribute something to the final meaning of all things. According to Greek philosophy, the cosmos was eternal. Everything that is coincides with what is necessary, and if necessary then eternal; so everything that exists had to exist from eternity. In this view there can be no real novelty, no future that is really innovative. The cosmos is revolutionary; it revolves, goes round and round. Everything is inextricably trapped in a cycle of endless repetition. At bottom everything remains always the same, the cosmos itself being caught in a system of eternal bondage to immutable and invariable laws, without beginning or end. At this point patristic thought broke away from the Hellenistic scheme and framed its picture of the world with the doctrines of creation and eschatology. The world was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*), and in the end there will be a consummation that represents advance, achievement, maturity, and novelty far surpassing in glory the beginning of things. The Hellenistic axiom "The end is always like the beginning" gave way to the dominical saying "Behold, I make all things new."

The church fathers also drew upon biblical eschatology to formulate a new doctrine of the nature and destiny of humankind. Belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead was a part of the Christian hope. Christians were ridiculed by Celsus, the pagan philosopher, for being philosophic (a body-loving people). Porphyry reported of Plotinus, another important philosopher, that he was ashamed of having a body. "The true philosopher is entirely concerned with the soul and not the body. He would like, as far as he can, to get away from the body."<sup>9</sup> Contrary to such a viewpoint the apostle Paul said, "Your

9. Quoted by D. R. G. Owen, *Body and Soul* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 39.



body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Cor. 6:19). The philosopher hoped to escape the dungeon of the body by means of the immortal life of the soul. The apostle looked for the glorification of life in the body by the resurrection of the dead. The difference is clear: salvation *from* the body or *with* the body.

Christian eschatology offered a way out of a dilemma posed by Greek philosophy. If there is hope for life after death, it is based on a separation of body and soul. The body is mortal, the soul immortal. This was the teaching of Plato. If, on the other hand, body and soul form an inseparable unity, as Aristotle taught, then nothing human—not even the soul—survives the grave. With Plato the church fathers affirmed life after death, and with Aristotle they held that an individual is a living unit composed of body and soul. The resurrection of the body was the key to effect a synthesis of the Platonic hope for life after death and the Aristotelian idea of the psychosomatic unity of human being. The idea of bodily resurrection overcame the spiritualism of Plato as well as the naturalism of Aristotle. These are examples of how elements of Christian eschatology contributed to a transformation of Greek thought-forms in the theology of the church fathers.

#### **The Place of Eschatology in the Scholastic Synthesis**

The tendency to view the Middle Ages as a static period of a thousand years is easily exploded by considering the various streams of eschatological thinking that developed during this period. Augustine identified the kingdom of God with the visible form of the hierarchical church. The millennium was equated with the period of the church running between the first and second coming of Christ. The millennial rule of Christ was now taking place in the offices and sacraments of the church. This conservative institutional interpretation of the kingdom governed the imperial church throughout the Middle Ages.

However, old millennial hopes surfaced time and again in popular piety and reform movements. Strange mixtures of apocalyptic and revolutionary eschatological ideas flourished in such heretical and sectarian movements as the Albigensians, the Waldensians, and the Joachimites. Vivid portrayals of heaven, hell, purgatory, the second coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the final judgment were

the major themes of popular eschatology. The work of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) merits special notice. Joachim's eschatology was not church-centered, as in Augustine. In fact, his eschatological scheme took a critical turn *against* the church. History was divided into three ages: the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the age of the Spirit. The third and final age of the Spirit was still to come. The center of gravity belonged to the future, when the Spirit would create a truly spiritual community utterly opposed to the imperial church. Joachim planted seeds of thought that were later to be secularized in the form of socialism.<sup>10</sup>

In the Middle Ages the topics of eschatology were also treated by the great scholastic thinkers. Peter Lombard incorporated eschatology into the total system of scholastic theology, and there it became frozen for centuries in a highly atomistic and conceptual schematization. By the end of the seventeenth century the doctrine of "the last things" reached its highest point of development in the voluminous systems of Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic scholasticism. The issues were academically treated by the use of Aristotelian methodology. The last things were literally discussed as events that will happen when the present world comes to an end. They are: death, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the end of the world, eternal damnation, and eternal life.<sup>11</sup> Controversial questions that divided Protestants and Catholics were subject to lengthy polemical treatment. The overall picture, however, is fairly simple.

Death in the scholastic systems was not viewed as a total annihilation of the person. Rather, death is merely the end of natural life, causing a separation of soul and body. The body ceases to exist, but the soul lives on with all its power. The immortality of the soul can be proved by reason and scripture. As soon as death occurs, the soul faces either a happy lot or an unhappy lot, either heaven or hell immediately. The Protestants rejected the idea of an intermediate state where souls linger as in a state of sleep. They also rejected the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory and the notion of limbo, a special place for the souls of unbaptized children and another for the souls of the patriarchs who died before the coming of Christ.

10. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 99ff.

11. See, e.g., Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, pp. 624-63.

The scholastics taught, further, that the time will come when the body will be resurrected and reunited with the soul. This will be the very same body as before, only now endowed with attributes appropriate to spiritual life beyond this earthly realm. The resurrected body will last forever, look glorious, enjoy perfection, and feel no need for food or sex.<sup>12</sup> This is a belief that reason cannot discover; it is revealed solely by scripture.

The final judgment immediately follows the resurrection of the dead. Some people will still be living when the world comes to an end. Their bodies will not need to be resurrected, only transformed according to the specifications of spiritual life. No one knows when the final judgment will take place, but there will be signs from which the approach of that day can be inferred. In general, these signs have to do with times getting worse, Satan becoming stronger, an increase of wickedness among people, and more suffering for the righteous. Then Christ will visibly appear in glory to judge all people, bringing consolation to the faithful and terror to the wicked, executing judgment upon the godly and the ungodly according to the standards revealed by the word of God.

Millennialism, otherwise known as chiliasm, was rejected by the theologians of Protestant orthodoxy. There will be no rule of Christ and his elect on earth for a thousand years, between his second advent and the final judgment. The rejection of chiliasm in orthodoxy is the root of its later antagonism to all utopian systems of thought. This means, in effect, that no future occurrence can displace the importance of the organized church between Pentecost and the parousia.

When the final judgment takes place, the world will come to an end. It will burn up in a ball of fire and come to naught. At the base of this scholastic eschatology there is a pessimism about this present world order. It is not evolving toward a glorious consummation; it is not being transformed by gradual progress in the direction of a new heaven and earth. Rather, what is to be expected is an absolute annihilation of the substance of the present world.

In the end there will be a complete separation of the righteous and the unrighteous, the former going to heaven and the latter to hell.

12. Ibid., p. 641.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND LIFE EVERLASTING

Hell means eternal damnation and death, a state of torment and misery of endless duration meted out according to what each person deserves to pay for earthly sins. Heaven means eternal life, perfect joy in the face of God forever, an everlasting reward for the saints.

This scholastic system of eschatological thought was placed in the last chapter of dogmatics. There it languished in a pitiable state and finally succumbed to the onslaughts of rationalistic criticism in the Enlightenment and new formulations with the rise of modern Protestant theology.

## CHALLENGES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

### The Transformation of Eschatology in the Post-Enlightenment Period

Beginning with the last part of the seventeenth century, traditional Christian eschatology took a plunge into a confusion of modern movements, generally labeled rationalism, naturalism, romanticism, idealism, and positivism. This is the age of the Enlightenment, born with the discovery of a new world view, derived in large part from the work of Isaac Newton. Here we can characterize the fate of the Christian idea of the kingdom of God in the period of the Enlightenment in a few broad strokes.

The Newtonian world view pictured God as a rational divine being who shaped the universe according to eternal laws. The system in nature is essentially rational, including both human nature and society with all its institutions. Everything is conceived to exist according to laws of nature that can be known by the operation of reason. The rational harmony that Newton discovered in the order of nature was transferred to the social order so that, as Adam Smith believed, there is an "invisible hand" at work in all social structures guided by a wonderful natural law of harmony. The thinkers of the Enlightenment believed that underlying the apparent disharmony, chaos, and misery there is a basically good natural order founded on eternal laws that God himself built into the world. If something is wrong, it is because human beings have not heeded the original laws written into the nature of things. Thus, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the father of romanticism, looked at the mess which history calls civilization and

pleaded for a return to the original state of humanity. This is a paradise in which people were naturally good and lived together like "noble savages" in a condition unspoiled by civilization—in liberty, equality, and fraternity. The cry here was to get back to the rational order, back to nature, back to the lost paradise. Eschatology thus suffers a reversal at the hands of the backward-looking myth of a golden age in the past. The earthly task of humankind is to retrieve the primitive state of nature, which lacks nothing in perfection.

The world view of the Enlightenment, whether along the lines of Newton, Adam Smith, or Rousseau, collapsed the biblical God of history into the laws of nature and the eschatological vision of Christianity into a harmonious social order. The old image of the kingdom of God became a workable social model to be realized by the ability of human reason to conform itself to the order of nature. Throughout the Enlightenment the eschatological kingdom of God was brought down to the size of *this world*, as something to be realized by human beings in history. Its focus was on the *human*: human society, human welfare, human happiness. Religion was reduced to what is natural and reasonable, striving for the highest possible elevation of humanity and society.

The setting for eschatology in the mind of the Enlightenment is very much in this world. However, the effect of translating eschatology into this-worldly expectations produced a revolutionary mentality. The end of the eighteenth century was a period of revolution. People were beginning to take fate into their own hands and to convert the eschatological kingdom of peace and righteousness into a society of equality and justice here on earth. The eschatological kingdom was becoming utopian socialism.<sup>13</sup>

Utopian socialists, followers of Saint-Simon, appeared in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The most famous disciple of this socialist movement was Auguste Comte, who was imbued with the sense that something new was happening in his time. Comte attempted to translate the chiliastic expectations of earlier times, such as we find in Thomas Müntzer in the sixteenth century, into a system of universal principles based on philosophy and science. Comte enthusiastically proclaimed his new positivistic science as a new religion, even a new church with its appropriate dogmatics.

13. *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

Comte saw history unfolding in three stages: the mythological stage of theology, where orthodox Christianity remains bogged down; the metaphysical stage of Western philosophy; and a final positivist scientific stage, which is the wave of the future. Comte's theory became enormously influential in the process of absorbing the contents of eschatology into the dialectics of progress in history, still perhaps the dominant myth of modern times.

Eschatology undergoes a further transformation in the dialectics of the historical process in the thought of Karl Marx. Marx transformed utopian socialism into a system of "scientific" revolutionary thought. In this system the eschatological factor becomes the negative principle of a dialectical process to bring about a new order in this world, leading from capitalism to communism. All that remains of eschatology within the historical process is the breach in time, the old time before the revolution and the new time after, as well as the dramatic reversal in the order of things, capitalism coming to an end and the miserable working class, the proletariat, taking control. The upper class is pushed down, the underclass enthroned, resulting in a workers' paradise on earth.

Although Marx rejected utopian socialism, there is no doubt that he transformed eschatological hopes into utopian ideals that appeal to the masses. The masses, deeply entrenched in misery, are given promises of a new order bound to materialize. There will be no more unemployment, slave labor, poverty, and oppression by the exploiting class of capitalists. Power will fall into the hands of the people, and the state will finally wither away. No more false authority, abuse of power, or misuse of law. There will emerge a new humanity in a new society, totally liberated and free for the reign of peace and justice here on earth. Like the paradisiacal state of Adam and Eve before the fall, Marx's vision of the end-state is of a classless society rising from the ashes of an apocalyptic-type struggle of good and evil forces. Here religious eschatology, mediated in its heretical chiliastic forms, becomes radically secularized.<sup>14</sup> The transcendent becomes immanent, the theological becomes teleological, the hereafter nothing but the postrevolutionary future.

14. Paul Tillich, "The Christian and the Marxist View of Man," unpublished (Tillich Archives, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass). This document was prepared as a study document for the "Universal Christian Council for Life and Work," December 1935.

Contemporary with the Marxist revolutionary transformation of eschatology was the nineteenth-century evolutionary myth of progress. The optimistic spirit prevailed in all branches of knowledge, including theology. Original sin could no longer be maintained, because it put the brakes on the indefinite march of progress. The wheels of progress appeared to be irresistible and unceasing. An inevitably better future was coming because of new science and technology. Before Marx spelled out his revolutionary vision of the future, Immanuel Kant had proposed an ethical interpretation of the kingdom of God on earth, the realization of which depended on the sum total of morally responsible actions performed by human beings. The kingdom of God which Jesus announced became very much something of and for this world, dependent not on the will of God but solely on human achievement. The establishment of the kingdom on earth was tied to the forward motion of progress.

Nineteenth-century Protestant theology incorporated the myth of progress into its own ethical concept of the kingdom of God. In liberal Protestantism the kingdom of God represented a new social order that will come about as a result of human activity and through moral progress in history. In this scheme, eschatology functions as a kind of teleological process in which the future goal of the kingdom is gradually being realized by the present ethical achievements of humanity. The "kingdom of God" thus became the watchword of the Social Gospel movement in America, under the leadership of Walter Rauschenbusch. It was expected that a better social order would be established through enlightened social policy and moral progress. Confidence in the potential of humanity to better its lot on earth weakened the eschatological images of traditional Christianity. The question was whether the realization of a blessed human future would come about through revolution or through evolution.

### **The Renewal of Eschatological Thought in the Twentieth Century**

In the nineteenth century, Christianity became increasingly a pale religious reflection of a progressively secularized culture. Jacob Taubes concluded his brilliant study of Western eschatology with a section on G. W. F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, and Marx, and for

him that was apparently the end of the subject.<sup>15</sup> This judgment parallels the verdict of Ernst Troeltsch, who said just before World War I, "The eschatological bureau is closed these days."<sup>16</sup> The original eschatology of Christianity could still be heard in the churches as a doctrine about personal salvation and life after death.

Albert Schweitzer's monumental book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), represented the rediscovery in the twentieth century of eschatology in the message of Jesus and of primitive Christianity. This came as a shock to Protestant theology, which was intent on conforming Christianity to modern trends and ideas. Eschatology had been dismissed as part of the primitive world view of New Testament times and thus bound up with the husk of the Christian faith, not the kernel. Schweitzer's study shows conclusively that for Jesus eschatology was at the core of his message and that apart from his belief in a speedy coming of the kingdom of God not even his ethical teachings make any sense. Jesus lived, preached, healed, suffered, and died in the power of his commitment to the coming of God's rule on earth, bringing life and salvation to all humanity and the world. Schweitzer's view is commonly called "consistent" or "thoroughgoing" eschatology because of his proposal to understand everything the Gospels say about Jesus in light of his eschatological hypothesis.

Building on Schweitzer's eschatological reading of the New Testament, Karl Barth announced that the message of the Bible stands in stark contrast to the cultured views of modern times. In Barth's "theology of crisis," eschatology became a doctrine revealing the unbridgeable gap between human history here and now and the totally other world of God in heaven and eternity. The eschatological event as the eternal now can only touch history at a tangent, but cannot itself have a history. Jesus Christ is the bare mathematical point where time and eternity meet. The resurrection of Christ is called an "eschatological" event and therefore not a "historical" event in the sense in which critical historiography uses the term. Traditional eschatological symbols—the parousia, the end of the world, the final judgment, the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and everlasting life—have nothing to do with real events which

15. Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947).

16. Quoted by F. L. Polak, *The Image of the Future* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1961), 2:43.



Christian hope expects will happen in the future. They are dimensions of a transcendental eschatological Word that descends vertically from the alpine heights of eternity, never taking shape incarnationally in the horizontal categories of history, past, present, and future.

Barth revised his interpretation of eschatology with each shift of emphasis in his theological development. He became aware of the inadequacy of an eschatology that relocates the future of hope from "ahead" to "above." He broke out of a starkly abstract dialectic of eternity and time to give expression to the Christian hope for a real future fulfillment. In the end, however, Barth never wrote the volume on eschatology, the "last things," for his *Church Dogmatics*. There was perhaps nothing new to say, for everything that could be said *Christianly* was already contained in the incarnational revelation. The future could only have noetic significance, bringing forth a fuller *knowledge* of the revelation in Christ. Barth's eschatology did not call for any new things still to happen, only for a final unveiling of the accomplished revelation of God in the incarnate Word.

Rudolf Bultmann, like Barth, agreed that New Testament Christianity is essentially eschatological. The word "eschatological" became fixed in the vocabulary of Bultmann's existentialist theology. He appropriated the existentialist categories of Martin Heidegger, author of the philosophical work *Being and Time*, to make the kerygma of primitive Christianity understandable to modern people. Thus the individual exists in radical openness to the future; bondage to sin is enslavement to the law of one's past; authentic existence is the openness of trust toward the future; faith is freedom from the past; salvation is an ever-coming occurrence out of the future, to be grasped through faith alone. The grace of God is the power to assure the meaning of each existential moment, in spite of the anticipation of death as one's own most certain destiny.

Bultmann's dependence on existentialist philosophy meant that the biblical symbol of God's coming kingdom was reduced to the element of bare futurity in the temporal structure of human existence. Eschatology became scarcely more than the factor of meaning in each existential moment. In the Bible the symbol of the kingdom of God and eternal life embraces not only hope for the individual person in the struggles of existence, but also hope for the future of all

things, for the wider human community of nations, and even for the whole cosmos of nature and history. In Bultmann's eschatology, limited as it was by existentialist hermeneutics, there was no way to prevent the future from being reduced to the ever-receding horizon of existential openness, without shape or content, without power or reality grounded in the nature and activity of God.

Paul Tillich made the greatest contribution to the interpretation of the kingdom of God among the theological leaders of the last generation. He defined the problem of eschatology as the question of the meaning and goal of history or as the quest for the kingdom of God. The symbol of the kingdom of God has two sides—an inner-historical side and a trans-historical side. The prophetic revolutionary aspect of Tillich's social thought drew its power from the dynamics of the kingdom of God in history. He saw history as a movement in which the new is created, in which unique and unrepeatable events occur, yet which runs toward a future goal. This means that the Christian faith looks ahead for the future transformation of all reality; it interprets the past and acts in the present in light of the future goal toward which history runs. The "new being" is expected predominantly in a horizontal direction rather than a vertical one. Christianity hopes for the realization of the kingdom of God, the divine rule of peace, love, and righteousness in a new heaven and a new earth.

### **The Role of Eschatology in Contemporary Theology**

The quest for an adequate eschatology has been continued beyond Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich by the present generation of systematic theologians. Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann in particular have criticized an eschatology in which the horizon of the future is swallowed up by the eternal blitzing in from above. Dialectical theology did not think of eschatological hope as having anything to do with the concrete future. Future tenses were as often as possible converted into talk about the presence of the kingdom of God here and now.

According to Pannenberg, theology must accept Jesus' message of the kingdom of God as the basic starting point for any Christology or doctrine of salvation. "This resounding motif of Jesus' message—the

imminent Kingdom of God—must be recovered as a key to the whole of Christian theology.”<sup>17</sup> The kingdom of God is the eschatological future which God himself brings about. This is to be thought of as the power of the future determining the destiny of everything that exists. It is possible to call God eternal, not in the timeless sense of Plato and Parmenides, but in the sense that he is the future both of our present and of every age that is past.

Moltmann also speaks of the future as a “new paradigm of transcendence.”<sup>18</sup> This future is not to be thought of as the progress of the world developing out of the present. There is no transcendence in that. Rather, the future can be a paradigm of transcendence only by bringing into the present something qualitatively new. If we blow up the present into the future, without radical change in the foundations of personal and social reality, the power of evil is magnified along with the good. Then our last state is no better than our first. The transcendent future is a power to attack the conditions of evil in the foundations of reality and to lead it forward through a process of revolutionary transformation. From within history and suffering the pain of its conflicts, it is possible to project a transcendent future of history, which is qualitatively other than just future history. A better future in history can be hoped for on the basis of the power emanating from the transcendent future of history, opening up new prospects and possibilities.

Liberation theology is also trying to come to terms with the contemporary eschatological reading of the biblical message. Liberation theologians, whether black, feminist, or Third World, have been influenced by the European discussions on the “theology of hope” and “political theology.” Liberation theology starts with an analysis of the concrete situation rather than with a summary of biblical truths which only need to be applied as a second step. Gustavo Gutiérrez’s definition of theology has become classic: Theology is critical reflection on historical praxis. Truth emerges in language that reflects a community’s engagement in the liberating transformation of the world. In such liberating praxis we can find clues to what God is doing in the world.

17. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, p. 53.

18. Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 177ff.

worldly and this-worldly hopes. The symbolic elements in the eschatological traditions of the Bible cover the entire spectrum of human hope. Hope may be described as an expectant looking toward the future for what is *new*. But how can one express new things that lie in the future if they have not already happened, if they are not simply already there? This can happen only through language that functions in terms of a dialectical reversal. The principle which seems to have guided hope in its formation of language is what Paul Tillich has called "the negation of the negative." The negativities in human experience are negated. The symbols we use to express our hope depend on our reading of the human condition.

2. In the Bible there is a progressive escalation of hope from prophetic to apocalyptic eschatology. Prophetic eschatology centers on the history of Israel amid the nations of the world and points to a future *in* history with promises of a better life. Apocalyptic eschatology looks beyond Israel to the cosmos, beyond the salvation of Israel to the final future of history itself, when the whole of creation will be ushered into the redemption in the last days. There was always the danger that apocalypticism would zoom off into a never-never land of fantasy and speculation, losing touch with the real life of people and nations in concrete history. Because much of traditional eschatology appears to have left the ground of real history and taken off into the clouds of another world of time and space, it is necessary to retrace the steps of Israel, as it were, and to start our eschatology like the prophets with the struggles of people in this life. Then it will be possible to escalate human hope, as the apocalyptists did, to enfold the totality of reality in a cosmic eschatology.

3. A real historical grounding of eschatology is needed today as a corrective to the church's tendency to relate gospel hopes to purely private concerns, thus ignoring the public issues of human life. The gospel is the good news of the advent of God's kingdom. The purely personal and interpersonal sphere cannot contain the full meaning of the kingdom, minus all social, political, economic, and cultural realities which determine the contexts and possibilities of human existence. The recovery of the full concept of the kingdom of God can help us overcome what Johannes B. Metz calls the "trend toward the private" and to sound the political and social notes of the Christian message.

The Christian hope drives us to seek ever more adequate actualization of God's kingdom in the open fields of public life, so that the vision of freedom, peace, and justice may achieve provisional embodiment in institutional structures that determine the conditions under which individuals exist in society. Without this political grounding, the Christian hope runs the risk of becoming a palliative, an opiate, an ideological servant of the status quo. The image of the kingdom of God represents hope for both personal and social fulfillment. The promised kingdom points to a situation in which bodily and spiritual ills are healed, in which shalom will reign among all creatures, and in which love will create harmony for the good of all.

4. Two strands have been woven together in the Christian tradition concerning life after death; one stems from the Greek myth of the immortality of the soul and the other from the New Testament message of the resurrection of the body. Immortality and resurrection both express hope for life beyond the eternal clutch of death. If the soul is understood as the innermost core of personal identity, the "true self," then the doctrine of the immortality of the soul expresses the hope that what is essentially human will survive death. If, however, the body is an integral part of the human personality, so that without my body I would be no-body at all, then it too must be integrated into the hope of eternal life. So the ancient Christian creeds affirm the resurrection of the body. Still, they do not literally mean the physical body. The apostle Paul made it clear that through resurrection the physical body is transformed into a spiritual body. This means that salvation, as distinct from the Hellenistic *soteria*, is not a matter of salvaging the soul from its dungeon in the body.

The Christian hope for eternal life ultimately accepts an integration of body and soul. The happiness of the soul is bound up with its somatic form of life and does not occur by loosening its links with the body, as in some metaphysical and mystical forms of spirituality. The incarnational thrust of the Christian gospel is too powerful to be lost in the end. What is at stake is the present ethical implications of an eschatological image of the psychosomatic unity of human being. What people hope for in the end legitimates what they practice in the present. If the body is good for nothing in the end, it cannot hold a high value in the present. But if the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, as Paul said, if each individual is a member of the body of

Christ, and if we share a foretaste of eternal life now by partaking of this eucharistic body, then we will hear an ethical imperative in Paul's saying: "You glorify God in your bodies!" This means that the power of eternal life is not something stored up elsewhere, to become real at some other time and place. Rather, impulses of life eternal are being released into the personal, social, and political body of this very life. This grants us the possibility of attempting new things, of engaging in a resurrection politics and a liberation practice ahead of the times. We do not have to wait until we are dead before we live at least in a partial way the new life which occurred in the history of Jesus Christ.

5. The question is still being debated among contemporary Christians whether the Christian hope is ultimately universal or particular in scope. A minority of theologians have taught a doctrine of universal salvation, the "return of all things." The majority of churches and theologians have resisted the teaching of universal salvation. Why? It seems that Christians have done what comes naturally—to hope chiefly for themselves, their own family and friends, and let the rest go to hell. This is most natural, but is it Christian? The question is whether our human solidarity with the whole cosmos will not expand the base of our hope beyond individual personal fulfillment in the end. Guided by the universal scope of divine love, Christian hope will rebel against every doctrinal restriction which sets limits to the vision of hope.

What will the final future of life in the kingdom of God look like? We can only speak about God and God's kingdom in language limited by the conditions of human finitude. But we do know that there is a drive toward infinite freedom within human beings which seeks a total unburdening from every limitation. Humans possess an unquenchable thirst for the infinite. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God, and this God may be defined as the term of pure and unlimited freedom. Human being is not satisfied to stand still within the confines of the finite. It belongs to human nature to go forward to new being and live from the unfettered source of freedom in God.

Is the final goal of the kingdom to be thought of as a static finale to the dynamic struggle for freedom? Is the world of nature and history now in motion only to stand still in the end? Is there a final resting

place—a mansion—to which everyone will retire from the struggles of life? Then the kingdom of God would resemble Nirvana, an eschaton of nothingness. It would be better to envision the kingdom of God as the power of the future which ceaselessly opens up new possibilities. The essence of God is the pure freedom which humanity is seeking when in search of the truth and reality of its own identity. God is pure freedom—the only being free to be on its own. The reality God enjoys is underived freedom as such. The freedom humanity seeks is derived from beyond itself, from the source of freedom in the being of God. The salvation humanity seeks—paradise, heaven, eternal life—is not the peace and quiet of a retirement center. It is the final ecstasy of life, a vital movement beyond every stasis. The symbol of the resurrection teaches us to hope for an ecstasy of life beyond the stasis of death. The final Christian hope, on the ground of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to be finally reconciled to God with all things and thus to share in life everlasting.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Altizer, Thomas J. J. *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage toward Authentic Christianity*. Louisville: Westminster, 1990.
- Alves, Rubem. *A Theology of Human Hope*. Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1969.
- Baillie, John. *And the Life Everlasting*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933.
- Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Benz, Ernst. *Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of the Future from the Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Braaten, Carl E. *Eschatology and Ethics*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974.
- Brunner, Emil. *Eternal Hope*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *History and Eschatology*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1957.
- Chilton, Bruce, editor. *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History. The Myth of Eternal Return*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1959.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *The God of Life*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.

- Hayes, Zachary. *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology*. Wilmington: M. Glazier, 1989.
- Heim, Karl. *The World: Its Creation and Consummation*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1952.
- Hick, John H. *Death and Eternal Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Küng, Hans. *Eternal Life? Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*. New York: Doubleday, 1984.
- Martin, James. *The Last Judgment in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963.
- Miner, Paul. *Christian Hope and the Second Coming*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*. Translated by James W. Leitsch. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- . *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Kingdom of God in America*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1937.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Theology and the Kingdom of God*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969.
- Robinson, J. A. T. *In the End God*. London: Collins, 1968.
- Rosenstock-Huussy, Eugen. *The Christian Future*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Rowley, H. H. *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1944.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. 3d edition. London: A. & C. Black, 1954.
- Suchocki, Marjorie. *End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3.
- Weiss, Johannes. *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. Translated by Richard H. Hiers and D. Larrimore Holland. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.