The eclipse and rediscovery of eschatology

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ABSTRACT
The article traces the progressive change in the understanding of history and eschatology from the time of writing the Bible to the present. Augustine excluded the social dimension of eschatology from history, Joachim of Fiore re-introduced it, and the secular philosophers absorbed eschatology entirely into the saeculum. The challenge of the secular philosophers, the renewed awareness of human solidarity, and the rediscovery of apocalyptic eschatology seem to be the most important factors which led to the rediscovery of universal, cosmic eschatology during this century.

Without going into the problems involved in the use of the word "eschatology" (cf Carmignac 1971 and 1980), I refer to eschatology as the teaching about the second coming of Christ, the general resurrection, the judgment and the renewal of creation. In this paper I am concerned with universal, cosmic eschatology rather than with individual eschatology or the fate of the individual immediately after death. Individual eschatology has always remained rather important to Christians. With the stressing of individual eschatology, universal eschatology fell into decline. There seems to be a growing number of people, who, though they believe in God, do not believe in life after death (Kerkhofs 1979:2-4). On the other hand, ever since the middle of this century universal, cosmic eschatology has received considerable attention in systematic theology, after being an embarrassment to theologians in the first half of the century (Koch 1972:67). In this paper I will be dealing with this renaissance of eschatology in systematic theology, and not with the periodic surges of apocalyptic fervour throughout the history of the church, from the Montanist movement to the present (cf McGinn 1979).

In order to understand the rediscovery of eschatology in our time, it is important to see it in its historical perspective. We shall therefore look at the main stages of the history of eschatology. We shall first of all look at the prophetic and apocalyptic views of history and eschatology; secondly, we shall contrast them with the Greek view of history; thirdly, we shall look at Augustine's synthesis of Greek and Christian thought, since his view dominated theology in the Middle Ages and is still very influential today.

Fourthly, we shall pay attention to Joachim of Fiore (d 1202), who broke through the static, metaphysical approach of his time and saw history as a progressive movement. Joachim's vision has inspired many movements and philosophers. Therefore, in a fifth section, we shall consider his
influence. While Joachim inspired many religious movements, his influence on established theology was minimal. Philosophers of the Enlightenment received his inspiration and cast it in a secular form. And so it happened that universal eschatology inspired a whole string of philosophers, but was neglected by theologians.

In the sixth and final section we will see how, from about the middle of this century, theologians began to take up the challenge.

1 THE PROPHETIC AND APOCALYPTIC VIEWS OF HISTORY AND ESCHATOLOGY

It is common practice to contrast the linear view of history in the Bible with the "circular" view of Greek philosophy. In the Old Testament, history was seen as moving towards the fulfillment of God's promises. It was not an eternal cycle of the same events, like the seasons of nature, but a movement towards a goal. In this sense we can say that, in the Bible, history is dynamic and meaningful, while for the Greeks it is represented as static and ultimately meaningless. For the Greeks the study of history (mainly contemporary) enables us to grasp the laws which govern the cycles of history. Herodotus, for instance, pointed to the cosmic law of compensation, mainly through *nemesis* (Lowith 1949:7). In the Bible, history is the account of God's election, mercy, promises, threats, punishments, and forgiveness. History is the result of God's initiative and Israel's response. The prophetic view of history was formulated as the theology of history by the Deuteronomist: faithfulness to Yahweh leads to peace; disobedience leads to disaster and death. Later on this theology was felt to contradict experience, especially in its application to the lives of individuals. It was, therefore, fiercely challenged by works such as Job and Qohelet. These seem to call for an avowal of ignorance: we do not understand God's ways; we can only trust.

Apocalyptic eschatology takes up the questions in a context in which God's involvement in history is put on trial. His presence and involvement in history is questioned by the rationalism of Hellenistic culture and by the events of history, in which the faithful do not experience God's protection (particularly during the Seleucid persecution). The answer of apocalyptic eschatology is that God is faithful in spite of our immediate experience to the contrary. What we experience now is not the ultimate reality. In our present experience the wicked prosper while the righteous often suffer. However, the one who has genuine insight (provided by the apocalyptic writings) knows that this is only a temporary state of affairs. The moment of truth will come: the righteous will be vindicated in the sight of the wicked (WisSol 5:1ff). The present situation is temporary; the future situation will be lasting. The present is deceptive; the future will be true. In this way we can see the sense in which apocalyptic eschatology is pessimistic about the present era. We can also understand why the apocalyptists borrowed these pessimistic outlines of
history from the surrounding cultures (Collins 1977:37-43): it was in order to substantiate their insistence on the instability of the wicked in the present age, although they appear to be eternally secure. Is apocalyptic eschatology pessimistic about this age? It might be more correct to say that it is profoundly critical of the present age: things are not as they ought to be; this situation should not last, and of course, will not. It would be pessimistic if the apocalyptists believed that this age was simply to end in disaster. But it will be disastrous only for the wicked, not for the faithful. Is the apocalyptic view deterministic? This is suggested by the so-called apocalyptic time tables, the calculations about the end, and the impression that history is simply the result of God's will, and not of the interplay between God and man (Kasper 1980:185f). Indeed, an element of determinism has been introduced from the Hellenistic world (the time tables). However, the interplay between God and man is preserved in the call to faithfulness and perseverance, which are decisive for the future.

The New Testament saw the Christ event, and especially the resurrection, as the anticipated realisation of the apocalyptic hope: the demonstration of God's vindication of the faithful. Eschatological salvation is not limited to the person of Jesus, but is realised also in those who believe in him. Of course, it is realised in a hidden way; only the eyes of faith can recognise God's eschatological salvation already breaking into our time. That it is hidden does not mean, however, that it is something purely inward, affecting only the innermost being of the individual believers, and not their total being, including their social relationships. According to Luke, God's eschatological salvation expressed itself in the way the Jerusalem community was living together, and especially in their sharing of material goods (Ac 2:44f; 4:32-35; Decock 1978:159-160).

2 THE GREEK VIEW

The Greek approach to history was rational and sober:

And since the future exists only by anticipation, in the perspective and prospect of hope and fear, the question arises of whether man's living by expectation agrees with a sober view of the world and of man's condition in it.

The Greeks were suspicious of hope.

The Pandora myth, as told by Hesiod, suggests that hope is an evil.... The view most commonly held in antiquity was that hope is an illusion which helps man to endure life but which, in the last resort, is an ignis fatuus (Löwith 1949:204).

The classical attitude towards life is expressed in the Stoic maxim that human beings should neither be moved by hope nor by fear (nec spe, nec metu).

The Greeks saw history as an eternal cycle, in which man is caught up. History was understood according to the model of the cycles of nature; an eternal cycle of birth and death, summer and winter, day and night. Time was
experienced as a trap from which man had to be delivered; salvation could only be a removal from the world of time into the world of timelessness. We have to be delivered from history, not within history. For the Greeks salvation was therefore thought of in terms of the spatial categories of "earth below" and "heaven above". Salvation was not within history, but from history. Therefore, the temporal scheme of the Bible was foreign to Greeks. Salvation was seen as an escape from the eternal cycle in which we are trapped through our corporeality. While living in history man can escape to the higher realms, e.g. through knowledge. In the New Testament, however, individual salvation in the present is never separated from universal, future salvation, not even in John's Gospel (Van de Walle 1981:143-150). The Biblical view of salvation uses not only the temporal scheme of the present age and the future age, but also the spatial imagery of earth and heaven. In an apocalyptic perspective the spatial imagery enables the authors and the readers to visualise the real hope of the righteous, while still living in this wicked age: Lk 6:23; Col 3:3.

Who would be prepared to deny that the classical view is sober and wise, while the Hebrew and Christian faith, which erected hope into a moral virtue and a religious duty, seems to be as foolish as it is enthusiastic? (Löwith 1949:205).

3 AUGUSTINE AND THE METAPHYSICAL VIEW

The Christian doctrine from Augustine to Thomas had mastered history theologically by excluding the temporal relevance of the last things. This exclusion was achieved by transposition of the original expectation into a realm beyond historical existence (Löwith 1949:155).

The exclusion of the temporal relevance of eschatology can be seen first of all in the rejection of the early Jewish Christian's expectation of the millennium. Origin (d 254) was the first to reject it (Kelly 1977:465-469,473). For those who were grounded in the Greek metaphysical spirit, salvation was seen as belonging essentially to the supra-temporal realm. The New Testament opposition between this world and the world to come was radicalised by the opposing concepts of time and eternity: this world is subject to time; the world to come will be eternal. They could not conceive of history moving towards perfection; change was essentially something negative, the sign of finitude. Furthermore, history and time were by definition excluded from the state of salvation (i.e. eternity).

Augustine made a synthesis of the Christian and the Greek understanding of the world: he criticised the Greek view on several points: he affirmed that the cosmos had a beginning and will have an end. The movement of history is understood according to the classical view of cycle of life and death.

Besides the division (of history) into six epochs, and their analogy with six individual ages (infancy, childhood, youth, early manhood, later manhood, old age), there is also a division into three epochs according to the
spiritual progress of history: first, before the law (childhood); second, under the law (manhood); and the third, grace (old age or mundus senecens...) (Löwith 1949:171).

This world, or this saeculum appears to be a meaningless repetition, but even then nothing is left to chance, everything has a purpose (Löwith 1949:1970). Nevertheless, the saeculum will have no share in the glory. As Augustine said: The world is passing away, the world is losing its grip, the world is short of breath. Do not fear, Thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle (Sermo 81:8; quoted by Reeves 1976:2).

The world and its history are merely the stage on which the conflict between the civitas Dei and the civitas terrena is taking place. The only eschatological climax within history has already taken place, the incarnation.

The only redemption which is taking place within time is that of the individual souls, while the redeemed society belongs essentially to the state of eternity, after the end of the world (McGinn 1979:xv). The final salvation will be a state in which we will be freed from the endless repetition of history. Due to Augustine’s metaphysical view, salvation must be salvation from history. There is no place for a blessed age, a millennium, within history. Augustine probably understands the millennium as the total duration of the earthly Church (Kelly 1977:480). In the first two centuries of Christian theology it was possible to see the redeemed society being realised within history, while this was no longer possible when theology was dominated by the Greek way of thinking (Kelly 1977:465-469).

4 JOACHIM OF FIORE (1131-1202)

Joachim was very critical of his time and he felt compelled to announce impending judgment and to call for repentance. His message was based especially upon his interpretation of the Book of Revelation in terms of past, present and future history. Until the twelfth century the dominant tendency in the interpretation of Revelation since the time of Augustine was the individualising and moralising approach: John’s imagery was understood as the soul’s warfare against vice. In the twelfth century a new approach began to develop: the text was seen as a revelation about the meaning and future of history. Without entering into the special hermeneutics developed by Joachim (McGinn 1979:101), it will be sufficient to point out that he distinguishes three states in the history of the world:

These three states are complex, organic, progressive, and inter-locking in character. The first began with Adam and lasted to Christ. It was ascribed to the Father and was the time of the order, or way of life, of the married. The second started with King Josiah, began to bear fruit in Christ, and lasts until the present. It is ascribed to the Son and is the time of the order of clerics. The third status, the time of the monastic orders is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. It began with Saint Benedict and will bear fruit in the last times down until the end of the world (McGinn 1979:102).
Joachim thinks in terms of ever more perfect social institutions (in his case, religious orders) as the key to the progress of the church and society. Unlike Augustine, who focused his attention on the individual's progress, Joachim saw progress in terms of society. It looks as if the third state is already a kind of new creation, taking shape in history before the end of the world. According to the metaphysical outlook the Church is established in a precise way and will remain like that until the end of time, while for Joachim the church is subject to transformations.

As we can see, Joachim has shaken off a millennium of Greek metaphysical domination over Christian theology. It is difficult to explain why Joachim would suddenly break with this established approach (Reeves 1976:2-3).

5 THE INFLUENCE OF JOACHIM OF FIORE

Under the influence of Joachim's ideas a whole series of movements originated in the Church; they all had that sense that history was about to rise to a positive climax before the end, instead of simply dissolving into a failure. These movements, however, did not succeed in eliminating the metaphysical, a-historical approach in theology. A number of the members of these movements were suspected as heretics. Several religious orders or currents within these orders saw themselves as the viri spiritualis, who were about to usher in the new age: Franciscans and Fraticelli; Augustinians and Jesuits (Reeves 1976:28-58). The renaissance in Italy was understood by many in terms of the new age, which was now beginning. Savonarola was clearly drawing on the Joachimist vision, as this had developed by the fourteenth century. The Platonist Giovanni Nesi tried to blend platonism and christianity when he saw the Christian millennium as "...the ultimate enlightenment when man falls heir to the secrets of all religions and mysteries..." (Reeves 1976:90).

Prophecies about the angelic pope, the world emperor, and the antichrist remain popular during this period, even among the intelligentia. Reeves (1976:116-165) has traced the influence in both Catholicism and protestantism.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century became deeply interested in history. While the metaphysical approach was interested in that which remains unchanged, in that which God has established, the philosophers of the Enlightenment are focusing their attention on what man has made, on the civil society and its history.

Vico (d 1744) considered that the proper object of human knowledge was the factum. God's deeds are beyond our grasp, but human history lies open to our scrutiny. Vico does not see history as a progression towards a final goal, but as a balancing movement from corso to ricorso. The ups and downs of history are God's providential cure for man's corrupted nature (Löwith 1949:115-136). Voltaire (d 1778) rejected the idea of divine
providence. He was interested in the history of civilization, which he saw as "the progressive development of the sciences and skills, morals and laws, commerce and industry..." (Löwith 1949:107). The Christian hope is secularised into the expectation of an indefinite improvement of the world. Condorcet (d 1794) believed that the perfectibility of the world was absolutely indefinite and can never be retrogressive (Löwith 1949:93). He wanted to replace arbitrary prophecy by rational prognostication, and divine providence by human foresight. He saw himself as a secular, rational prophet. In this atmosphere of excitement about the imminent dawn of a new and even final era in human history (e.g. Comte, Hegel, etc., cf. Löwith 1949:52-59,67-91), the ideas of Joachim of Fiore appeared as particularly attractive. According to Löwith (1949:159)

the revolution which had been proclaimed within the framework of an eschatological faith and with reference to a perfect monastic life was taken over five centuries later by a philosophical priesthood, which interpreted the process of secularization in terms of a "spiritual" realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. As an attempt at realization the spiritual pattern of Lessing, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel could be transposed into the positivistic and materialistic schemes of Comte and Marx.

Löwith (1949:208-213) and Reeves (1976:166-175) have pointed to the influence of Joachim on such influential philosophers as Lessing, Comte, Schelling to Marx, can be seen as one of these secular prophets. Marx was profoundly critical of the present age and announced the imminent judgment (revolution), after which the perfect society would be established (Löwith 1949:44f and Schmithals 1975:237-248).

6 THE REDISCOVERY OF ESCHATOLOGY

While universal eschatology was, as it were, taken over by philosophers and interpreted in a secular sense, Christian eschatological thinking tended to become more and more individualistic and spiritualistic. From the fourteenth century onwards the dominant view was that eschatological salvation was a state which the individual soul attains at the moment of death. The traditional view, however, was that fullness of salvation could only be experienced at the end, on the day of resurrection (de Lubac 1961:49-62). In the eighteenth century, as a result of the rationalist movement, the resurrection of the body, which since the fourteenth century could be no more than an appendix, tended to be abandoned.

Thus in 1798, Kant scoffed at the idea that anyone could love his body so much as to carry it around in eternity rather than getting rid of it (Pannenberg 1984:126).

Finally, the pressure of the secularist movements against the otherworldliness of Christian eschatology resulted in the fact that a number of Christians no longer expected any life after death. This was now seen as an individualist escape. Such was the situation in the first half of this century,
and to a certain extent, it still continues. However, other factors were at work, which led to the rediscovery of the universal, cosmic eschatology.

6.1 Anti-individualism and solidarity with the human family and its history

Towards the middle of this century theology became increasingly interested in human society and its history. This interest in the social dimension was stimulated by the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century (Wilson 1984:10-11). Furthermore, the great sociologists of last century were moralists:

(T)hey were committed to values. They had a vision of what human life ought to be like, and it was this commitment to an anthropology that enabled them... to detect the alienating or dehumanizing aspects of society and look for social processes that promised to deliver people from their plight (Baum 1975:2).

In 1938 De Lubac published a book with the title: Catholicism. Christ and the common destiny of man, in which he tried to show that individualism is un-Christian. The enslavement and the misery of the poor working classes in the industrialised countries had shocked the Christian conscience and made some people aware of the inhumanity of society and of the need for a just and human social order. The situation had been brought about by man, it was therefore man's responsibility to do something about it. The social question was a challenge: What does the unity and common destiny of mankind mean in such a situation?

In this context several Catholic theologians, like De Lubac (1967) and Rahner (1965; 1966), warned against the dangers of supernaturalism, "which tended to turn the Church into a sect, living alongside society, but without any communication with it" (Kasper 1980:119).

For this reason they re-examined the relationship between nature and grace:

Any understanding of God and salvation which left out the world, necessarily leads to an understanding of the world which has no place for God or salvation (Kasper 1980:119).

It was the concern of these theologians to show how God and world, salvation and history, cannot be separated. This was also the concern of theologians like Pannenberg and Moltmann. Koch (1972:130) commented nearly twenty years ago:

(O)ne gets the impression that these are the first signs of the protest of a younger generation. Up to now Protestant theology, whether it set out to be Lutheran or pietistic, liberal, dialectical or personalist, has been all too concerned with the conscience and salvation of the individual soul, with the justification of the individual alone. A new generation of theologians... is not content with abstract worldliness, let alone detachment from the world; it presses for social responsibility...
Within this perspective Christian hope is no longer applied exclusively and primarily to the individual and spiritual realm, but it is restored to the realm of society and universal history.

6.2. The challenge of the secular philosophers of history
In as far as the secular philosophers expressed a hope for the future of our history and a concern for the needs and the suffering of humankind, they touched a chord which many Christians recognised as being akin to the Christian concerns. Is God not the God of our future, not just our individual future but that of the whole human family? Did God not say to Moses: "I have seen the affliction of my people... and have heard the cry..." (Ex 3:7 RSV)?

De Lubac accepted the challenge of Hamelin and agreed with him against Augustine, that salvation is not only individual but also communitarian, and that all that is social in the efforts of humanity is not just condemned to perish. However, since the secular philosophers and the trends which originated from them (liberalism, marxism, technocracy, pragmatism...) have eliminated God from the process of salvation and have rejected "eternal" salvation in order to replace it by a "worldly" salvation, Christian theology has to ask whether the homo emancipator and the Deus Salvator can be reconciled, or whether they are mutually exclusive. Several theologians have entered in dialogue (critical or not so critical) with these trends and have tried to understand anew what Christian salvation means for people for whom emancipation has become a question of great concern. In recent years several theologians have accepted the challenge of the Marxist tradition, particularly of Bloch: for instance, Moltmann (1967), Baum (1975) and Metz (1980).

In any case, the secular philosophers have raised again the question about the meaning of history, and different answers have been given. Theology too has to give an answer. Is history merely a constant up and down to which God will put a sudden end? Will the world simply go on for ever without ever reaching its fulfillment? Is history moving towards an ever greater perfection until it will one day reach its final stage? Is history a process of gradual degeneration? Are we heading for a catastrophe in which the world will be purified? Is God involved in our history or, does he stay out of it? Do our efforts in any way contribute to the Kingdom of God or, is it exclusively God's work?

Many theologians nowadays reject the dualism between our history and eschatological salvation (cf Schillebeeckx 1980:754). The question, of course, is, how to articulate the connection between the two.

Some theologians have tried to distinguish different perspectives or models of history. Cox (1968:37-46) distinguishes three perspectives: the apocalyptic, the teleological, and the prophetic. He calls for a recovery of the prophetic perspective; in this he is followed by several theologians: Kasper
Rediscovery of Eschatology (1980:183-189); Van de Walle (1981:192-194). Koch (1972:153) criticises Cox's biased understanding of apocalyptic. As we will see in the next section, a bias against apocalyptic often goes hand in hand with bias against universal, cosmic eschatology.

6.3 A renewed appreciation of apocalyptic literature
A third factor which helped to awaken interest in universal eschatology was the realisation that the New Testament was shaped to a large extent by apocalyptic thinking. This renewed appreciation of apocalyptic literature is usually connected with the names of Käsemann and Pannenberg (Koch 1972: 14f). However, the ground for this had been prepared by Hilgenfeld in the middle of last century, and by Weiss, Schweitzer, and Bousset around the turn of the century (Koch 1972:57-59). Bultmann was typical of those scholars who were fully aware of the presence of apocalyptic eschatology in the New Testament, but were unwilling to recognise its importance. In John's Gospel Bultmann discovered a "non-apocalyptic" eschatology, that is, an individual eschatology without the futurist aspect. Guided by this "non-apocalyptic" eschatology he saw himself justified in demythologising the New Testament eschatology, within an existentialist framework. In this way he could eliminate the universal, cosmic eschatology as a merely time-conditioned way of understanding reality. What remained was a purely individual, inward, spiritual eschatology. The theological currents at the time in Germany made it very difficult for them to appreciate the universal, cosmic eschatology.

All were at one in their ultimate conclusion that the Christian kerygma has nothing in common with history and that church and world, faith and knowledge, lie on two completely different planes (Koch 1972:63).

According to Bultmann we cannot understand the question about the meaning of history in the sense of the goal of history (1975:135,138). We can only ask about the essence of history. This brings us to the individual person as the real subject of history, or more precisely "to humanity within the individual human persons" (Bultmann 1975:143). History is concentrated in the individual. One has the impression that salvation is realised in man's attitude to the world, but not in the world and history (cf Bultmann 1975:153), that salvation affects the inward realm, and and not the outward (cf Bartsch 1972:20).

The renewed interest in apocalyptic literature among systematic theologians like Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz must be understood as part of their interest in society, history and universal eschatology. This in turn was a challenge for Biblical scholars to clarify what is really meant by apocalyptic literature, apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism. Much has been done, but much still remains to be done.
WORKS CONSULTED


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