

ESSAY

BA course year 3 no. 1

“Eschatology”

„Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell“, the Four Last Things. Perhaps this is what former generations understood about “Eschatology”. Is there a more positive exposition of Eschatology possible in the light of modern theology?”

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1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is mainly based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg im Breisgau, Heidelberg and Mannheim) – as I haven't had any access to the English books, which were advised in the B.A.-coursebooks. So it might happen that I had problems with the translation into English, then I used the German original word in brackets “()”. In most cases I've tried to translate it into English.

Before looking at eschatology in the light of the modern theology I'd like to give a short definition of “eschatology” and look at the eschatology of the Early Church.

2. Definition of “Eschatology”

“Eschatology” comes from the Greek word “eschata”, which means “the Last Things”. By definition it is the theological teaching from the Last Things. It's no anticipating reporting of “later” following occasions, but a necessary prospect for the human being in his own spiritual decision of freedom from his own salvation-historical situation, influenced by the factum of Jesus Christ, to the final fulfilment of his own, even eschatological defined situation of being.

3. Eschatology of the Early Church

There are a couple of differences between the definition and thinking of eschatology of theologians of the Early Church. But I'd like to take a closer look at the common things:

- a. Central, for instance, to the early Christian theological tradition is what has been called a “linear” view of history: the conviction that history has an origin and an end, both rooted in the plan and the power of God. So both the Gnostic contempt of the temporal world and Origen's apparent flirtation with the possibility of future cycles of salvation-history were sharply rejected by most Orthodox writers as making the gospel absurd. Sixth-century apologists contested, with equal fervour, Platonic theories on the eternity of the world. In order to be a history of salvation, time must have its limits and must move unrepeatably in a single direction.
- b. Equally central to Patristic eschatological thought is the insistence that the fulfilment of human history must include the resurrection of the body. From the tracts of the second-century apologists, through Methodius' critique of Origen, to the detailed speculations of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, Christian writers stressed the need to

take the biblical promise of resurrection literally, and went to extraordinary lengths to argue that such a hope is neither impossible nor unworthy of human dignity. Since the body is an integral part of ourselves, and an integral part of God's good creation, the body must share in whatever salvation is promised.

- c. Following the expectations of both the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament, early Christian writers also agreed on the prospect of God's universal judgment. The God who created the human person capable of self-determination stands also in judgment, for the whole Patristic tradition, over each of our histories and all history together; and it is Christ, God's Word made flesh, who will embody and execute that judgment by coming to be visibly present in the world again at the end of its history. It is this sense of ultimate accountability to a god who sees all things, Patristic apologists constantly remind their readers, that is the foundation of Christian moral earnestness.
- d. From the end of the second century (Tertullian), Patristic writers begin also to suggest the prospect of a judgment pronounced by God at the end of each individual's life. Even before this, the apologists seem to assume that our personal histories each come to final resolution at death, rather than at the end of the world; so they began to hint at the conception of what modern theology calls an "interim state" between death and resurrection, during which the dead in some way begin to experience the fate that will be theirs in fullness when all history reaches its goal. Some early writers, like Justin and Irenaeus, explicitly reject the Greek philosophical notion that the soul is, with all its powers, immortal by nature, and conceive of this interim as a shadowy existence in Hades, the realm of the dead; the Syriac tradition speaks of a "sleep of souls", in a kind of suspended animation, between death and the resurrection. From Tertullian on, however, most Greek and Latin Patristic authors confidently accept Platonic philosophical arguments that the soul, as the conscious and self-determining core of the human person, is indestructible, and so anticipates its eternal fate, through a preliminary personal judgment, from the moment of death.
- e. With judgment comes also retribution. Following the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, as reflected in the New Testament, early Christian writers almost universally assumed that the final state of human existence, after God's judgment, will be permanent and perfect happiness for the good, and permanent, all-consuming misery for the wicked. Apocalyptic imagery continued to dominate the conception of both these states throughout the Patristic period, especially in the portraits drawn of the suffering of the damned. But it became commonplace, by the fourth century, to emphasize that the heart of both beatitude and damnation is to be found in the relation of the human creature to God: made for union with God, we find our fulfilment only in a loving adherence to him, and are consumed by self-destructive agony if we choose decisively to turn away from

him. The pains of hell and the joys of heaven, in sensible terms, are more and more clearly presented, in later Patristic literature, as simply the effect on the body of one's fundamental relationship with God.

- f. Although few of them reflect much on it directly, early Christian theologians seem to share the general sense of their fellow believers that the dead are still involved in the life of the Church, both in praying for the living and in experiencing the benefit of their prayers. This sense of the "communion of saints" is most clearly expressed by Augustine, when he asserts that "the souls of the pious dead are not separated from the Church, which even now is the Kingdom of Christ" (De Civ. Dei 20,9). Gregory of Nyssa and later Greek writers drew on reports of ghosts to argue that souls, even when separated by death from their bodies, remain closely bound to the material world and its inhabitants. Salvation and the longing for it, though experienced distinctively by each human individual, are always seen as ecclesial, social and even cosmic events; before the final resolution of all history, every human person remains identified with the process of the world.

4. Eschatology in modern theology

In theology of the liberalism of the 19th century the eschatological character of Christianity was hardly realized. According to a famous word of Ernst Troeltsch it was certain: "The eschatological bureau is for the most part closed." (German: "Das eschatologische Bureau ist meist geschlossen.")

The change happened at the end of the 19th century, especially caused by the impressions of the catastrophes of the World War I, which have lead not only the optimistic believe of the enlightenment, but also the liberal theology and civil Christianity into a crisis. This tenor – influenced by Kant – did understand the Kingdom of God as a kingdom of the good, which has irresistibly to adjust to the moral .

Franz Overbeck, a friend of Nietzsche, did in contrast to this already point out the "different, unworldly and 'culture hostile' (German: "kulturfeindlich") appearance of Jesus", which was completely influenced by the "near end". In his view this expectation of the end could almost be seen as the centre of Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God. Every later attempt to impart the escape from the world and the formation of the world, the culture and the faith, might have already been a defection from the radical eschatology of Jesus. However this idea wasn't a motive for Overbeck to renew the theological eschatology. On the contrary he was convinced that Jesus was deceived, and he draw his own conclusions and dissociated himself from the Christian faith as a historic error (see "Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie", 1873).

Almost epoch-making for theology was the book of Johannes Weiß (1863 – 1914): “Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes” (= “Jesus’ sermon of the Kingdom of God”).

From then on the reflexion on Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God became the focus, the thesis of the near end and the delay of parousia became the major problems of theology.

Resulting from this questions a new basic conception of eschatology grew:

1. The consequent eschatology: Its representatives Johannes Weiß, Albert Schweitzer and Martin Werner proceed from the idea that Jesus did hope in an apocalyptic-futuristic expectation that the kingdom would come from very soon from above into the world. The early parish did preserve this expectation after the death of Jesus. Because of the delay of parousia (German: “Parusie-Verzögerung”) a kind of “de-eschatology” of the preaching of Kingdom of God followed, and subsequently this led to its transformation in a dogmatic and moral system under Hellenistic influence.

2. The realized eschatology (C.H. Dodd) sees the Kingdom of God fulfilled in the cross of Christ and his resurrection. Declaration on dates are irrelevant in his point of view. The futuristic dimension might only be the opening of a way to the unity with God at the end of time, which has now already begun in reality.

3. The transcendental-actualistic (German: “transzendental-aktualistisch”) eschatology of Karl Barth (in the early period dialectic theology) makes “the trombone of the judgement” sound over the liberal Culture-Christianity and the historical theology: “Christianity, which isn’t in every bit and completely eschatology, does not at all deal with Christ (“Der Römerbrief”, 1922). The eschatological hope of Christianity doesn’t apply <telelogisch> to the end of time and history at the parousia, but is an expression of the radical dialectic of time and eternity. It stands for the “always” and “now” of the divine right and gets to a crisis of the human being in the time. The human being doesn’t “travel” historically linear between the poles of the “already” and “not yet”. God’s eternity breaks as a flash into time and brings the human being radically into question. God’s word is at the same time border, crisis and orientation of the human in radical contrast to the religious way of the human being from himself towards God.

4. Rudolf Bultmann sees the temporal parousia and the concrete cosmic statements of the end of time as elements of an antiquated mythical world view. For sure we couldn’t leave them apart. But its real content could only be revealed by existential interpretation. Jesus’ message calls myself into decision and in this way into the originality of my existence. The meeting with Jesus places myself here and now in the end of world and self-being and at the same time in a new found being of decisiveness. In this way my “ability to exist” rises to freedom. Faith is therefore independent of oppositions or confirmations of an ideology and

science. Jesus Christ himself is the “eschatological occasion” (=> “Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung”, 1954).

5. Other modern views of “Judgement”, “Hell” etc.

The revolution in our understanding of the universe, of space and time and science and history, as well as enormous changes in culture, inevitably means that we think about the end of the world in a different way from the way the Jewish apocalyptists did. Nevertheless, this revolution in knowledge does not destroy the foundations of our belief that it is God's decision to “bring into his own infinite, divine and inner life the created world, when it comes to its end, together with humanity as its centre”.¹

a.) The end of the world:

Karl Rahner has said that because “the resurrection of the body means the termination and perfection of the whole man before God, the dead remain united with the fate of the world”.

Hans Urs von Balthasar interprets St. Paul (e.g. 1 Cor 15,17-23) in this way that the resurrection of Jesus was the pledge of the resurrection and transformation of the world as a whole, which means that we don't have to expect a new world breaking into the present world in a chronological continuation. For Balthasar the “end of the world” is a new dimension, which is incomparable with the present one.

Very important in the thinking of the eschatology is the new connection between the Last Things and the life of Christ. There are still theologians working on some ideas in this field, e.g.

- The idea that divine judgement is the visible manifestation of the judgment, which took place in the cross of Christ (see Gal. 3,13)
- The idea of the end of the world as the disclosure of God's acceptance of the world
- The idea of the appearance of Christ at the parousia as the final stage of the “one coming” of Christ, which began with the incarnation. So that the “return” of Christ might be the arrival of all things at their destination in Christ.

b.) Hell / eternal loss

For Hans Urs von Balthasar the sinner, who wants to be “damned” apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love who unfathomably in the period of nontime enters into solidarity with those damning themselves.

Karl Rahner says “that man is a being who in the course of his still ongoing history has to reckon absolutely and up to the very end with the possibility of reaching his end in an absolute rejection of God, and hence in the opposite of salvation. As someone who is still in the course of his individual and still open history of salvation and who is still exercising his freedom in the openness of two radically different possibilities, a person cannot say that absolute loss as the conclusion and outcome of his free guilt is not a possibility with which he has to reckon.” In his view we have to maintain the possibility of eternal loss for every individual in the doctrine of hell, because otherwise the seriousness of free history would be abolished. “But”, he states, “in Christianity this open possibility is not necessarily the doctrine of two parallel ways which lie before a person who stands at the crossroads. Rather the existence of the possibility that freedom will end in eternal loss stands alongside the doctrine that the world and the history of the world as a whole will in fact enter into eternal life with God.” This final sentence is very important in my point of view: Although one individual can choose the way of eternal loss, God is basically “for” the world and will lead it into eternal life. There’s a lot of hope in this message.

Edward Schillebeeckx thinks that it is possible for a human being to make a definitive choice for evil. But he does not think there is a hell in the same way as there is a heaven; like Rahner, he stresses that there is no symmetry. He says that in God’s sight nothing can be extinguished that has its origins in God’s creation, and these utterly isolated people do not cease to be human beings, they are not wholly identifiable with evil.

6. My own view

I personally can’t identify myself with the old view of the Four Last Things. My own opinion is a mixture of the new modern thinking – which was described above -, a thinking, which has grown over the years and especially in the last few months and weeks during this studying. I can’t live with such “terrifying” views of hell and judgment.

I think that our death is only a step into an other dimension, which we can’t see during life-time (this view might be influenced by my astrophysical hobby....). The so called purgatory is in my view the review of my life and the “suffering” through all my sins, all the moments I opposed against God’s love, – in the face of God – seeing His love I wake to all my faults, which heart my inner self, it might be like a burning fire...

In my opinion all human beings, even if they haven’t found their way to God in their lifetime, will have the chance to stand in the face of God and to decide, if they want to live with Him in eternity – irrespective from their sins.

¹ See: Hans Urs von Balthasar

On this personal level of eschatology I've already found some own views, but on the level of the general judgment, the Day of Judgment / Armageddon, I'm actually not sure...

I'm not sure, if the first coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection was the "mid of time" or already the beginning of the end. I still have to work it out for my own, how and whom I can follow of the theologians in this important subject.

7. Observations in my daily environment

In discussions with friends and colleagues – all of them "non-theologians" - I noticed that this old view of the Four Last Things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – is still rooted in the minds and hearts of the people. Most of them are still afraid of their own death, the great judgment and purgatory and hell. It's amazing that this view is not only living in the old population but also in the younger one.

One hint on this old view with its fear is also an insertion in the praying of the rosary, which is in German:

"Lieber Herr Jesus verzeih uns unsere Sünden, bewahre uns vor dem Feuer der Hölle und führe alle Seelen in den Himmel, besonders jene, die Deiner Barmherzigkeit am meisten bedürfen" (translated: Lord Jesus forgive us our sins, keep us from the fire of hell and lead all souls into heaven, especially those who need your mercy most).

What I found interesting was an article I've read a few weeks ago. In this article it was reported that Ronald Reagan had at that time as US-president called Christian and Jewish leaders to a meeting concerning the soon coming of the end and the new Jerusalem. All political situations (the independence of Israel, Jerusalem as capital, the "danger" from the north (which was in that time the Soviet Union)) pointed in his view on the eschatology, the soon coming of Christ. How interesting it is to see such great politicians influenced by this eschatological point of view.

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