



The End as Beginning¹

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Whether or not this world has an end is a typical apocalyptic question. Some speak of the “end of the world,” others of the “end of history.” But why ask about the end at all? Is it that we can no longer endure the present condition of things? Have we had enough of this world? Or are we worried that things dear and precious to us may not endure? Are things only well that end well? Or is an end with terror better than terror without end?

Thinking about “the end” is ambiguous. It can fascinate us, but it can also frighten us. Christian theology treats questions about the end as the final questions in the area of eschatology (teachings about the “last things”—*ta eschata*). At last: the final divine resolution of all unresolved problems, in personal life, in human history, in the cosmos. Apocalyptic fantasy has always painted God’s judgment of the world on the last day with fiery passion: the righteous go to heaven, the wicked go to hell, and the world is destroyed in a great conflagration. We are all familiar with apocalyptic images of the final battle between God and Satan, Christ and the Antichrist, the righteous and the wicked in the “Valley of Armageddon.”

Such ideas and images are indeed apocalyptic, but are they Christian?

¹This article is a translation of Jürgen Moltmann, “Das Ende als Anfang,” *Zeitzeichen* 2/12 (December 2001) 40-43 (translated by Frederick J. Gaiser* and printed with permission).

Wealthy nations see the future as the continuation of business-as-usual, a progression and consummation of history—a perspective that can give rise to arrogance and oppression. The poor hope for an end to history-as-usual, and an alternative future—a perspective that can give rise to apocalyptic terror. The world needs a new kind of globalization, based not in the arrogance of power but in compassion for the suffering peoples of the earth.

Authentic Christian expectations of the future have nothing at all to do with such final solutions. Their focus is not the end of life, the end of history, or the end of the world, but the beginning of true life, the kingdom of God, and the transformation of all things into their permanent form. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led to his execution in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, his departing words to his fellow prisoners were, “This is the end—for me the beginning of life.”² One is reminded of T. S. Eliot: “In my end is my beginning.”³

Notions of the end of history can be distinguished by whether they deal with the goal (*telos*) of history or its end (*finis*). If world history has a predetermined goal, then that goal is its consummation. History proceeds in stages toward the goal. According to biblical traditions, one such goal of world history is the reign of the son of man (Dan 7), another the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev 20). For antiquity, it was, according to Virgil, the “Golden Age,” which would replace the present “Iron Age.” In the hopes of the modern world, the goal is the reign of “freedom” and “eternal peace.” After the fall of the Soviet empire, Francis Fukuyama, who at one time served in the State Department in Washington, saw “the end of history” in capitalism and liberal democracy, that is, the modern Western world.⁴ We term such notions of the end “chilastic” or, if they begin to dominate the present, “millenarian” and “messianic.”

If, on the other hand, world history ends only because the world itself ends, then history is broken off in mid-course by catastrophic events. Biblical traditions speak of the “end of the world,” classical antiquity of a final world conflagration. Moderns fear nuclear annihilation of the world, ecological catastrophe, or terrorist destruction. In recent usage, we have called such notions of the end “apocalyptic.” This kind of end does not divide world history into progressive stages but instead robs every stage of history of any meaning at all. World history becomes nothing other than a senseless tale of woe, and its end is the best thing about it.

Modern faith in progress and postmodern globalization are secularized forms of a religious millenarianism (the end of salvation history). Modern anxiety over the end of the world and nightmares about the world’s annihilation are, on the other hand, secularized forms of ancient religious apocalyptic.

HISTORY IS A STRUGGLE FOR POWER

As we know, history has always been a struggle for power. The powerful are interested in the advancement of their history and the globalization of their power. They see the future merely as a continuation of the present. The powerless and the oppressed, those disparaged and the wronged, have no interest in the continuation of their history of suffering, but only in its quick end and in an alternative future.

²Translator’s note: See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al., ed. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 830.

³Translator’s note: This is the final line of “East Coker” in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*.

⁴Translator’s note: See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

We must confront different notions of the goal or end of history with the functional question, “Whom do they benefit (Latin: *cui bono*)?”

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No hope has so fascinated humanity and done so much harm as the idea of a “thousand-year reign,” according to which history reaches its consummation within history. Christians looked for the peaceful reign of Christ, Romans the “Golden Age,” and moderns the “end of history” in an ahistorical condition free of alternatives and conflict.

For Christianity, this hope found its first fulfillment in the surprising “Constantinian turn,” which made of the persecuted church first a permitted religion in the Roman Empire and then, under the emperors Theodosius and Justinian, the dominant religion of the realm. The Apostle Paul had promised, “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12). And now the Constantinian political transition was seen in millenarian perspective as the turn from martyrdom to millennium. The now “Holy” Roman Empire was praised as the thousand-year reign in which Christ would rule with his own and judge the nations. The Christian emperors understood themselves as apostolic majesties and fulfilled their religious duty in the subjugation and conversion of pagan peoples. There is but one Pantocrator, Christ in heaven, and his image on earth is the one Christian emperor with his undivided and universal monarchy. The political theology behind this idea of universal Christian monarchy comes from an application of Daniel’s vision to the era of Christian domination. In Dan 7, four beasts, representing four violent kingdoms, rise up out of chaos, one after another. Finally, however, the human reign of the divine son of man comes down from heaven to bring everlasting peace and justice to the nations. The fourth violent kingdom was seen to be the Roman Empire, which followed those of Babylon, Persia, and Greece. Now, according to this interpretation, with the conversion of the Roman Empire the eschatological reign of Christ has begun. It will extend to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. This political messianism has left its imprint on the Christian world and its mission and has been secularized to apply to the Western world and its “civilizing” mission.

A different form of the fulfillment of this hope is found in the epochal consciousness of the modern era. Modernity is seen as humanity’s third age, following antiquity and the Middle Ages. The twelfth-century Italian visionary Joachim of Fiore prophesied such a “third era,” the kingdom of the Holy Spirit, which would come after the era of the Father and the era of the Son.⁵ The philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century related this to their own present. The “new

⁵Translator’s note: The era of the Father was seen by Fiore to be that of the Old Testament, the era of the Son that of the New Testament and the Catholic Church. In the era of the Holy Spirit, a time of liberty and love, there would be no more need for hierarchical institutions. See, for example, Margaret Reeves, “Joachim of Fiore,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 8:95-96.

age” is always also the end time, because only the end of time can follow the new age. Modern notions of a messianic epoch led to the idea that European world dominance was the consummation of world history.

THE ROLE OF THE USA

For millions of immigrants America has been and still is the “new world,” offering freedom for all. There are messianic elements in the “American dream” and consequently also in American politics. The seal of the United States and every one-dollar bill carry the promise, “*Novus Ordo Seclorum*,” which means to proclaim not only *a* but *the* “new world order.” Just as the European notion of the “new age” claimed to be the new age for all of humanity, so also the new world order is seen as an order for the whole human race.

What role could America play in the world today? Henry Luce rightly called the twentieth century “the American century.” By its intervention, the USA decided the two world wars, and it has been, since 1989, the world’s only superpower. But more is going on than that. Whereas the Soviet experiment, to create out of many peoples a “new Soviet man,” has failed, the “American experiment” is still going on and is doing very well. The USA is a land of immigrants from all nations. Whether or not it is a “melting pot,” new waves of immigrants continue to arrive. Thus, the “American experiment” is in fact an experiment of the whole human race and not only of the Americans. The nations of the world await the fulfillment of the authentic American promise for the world. Such a “new world order” cannot be American imperialism, but only the universal realization of the foundation of the American Declaration of Independence, that “all men”—not only Americans—“are created equal” and “ought to be free.” This is the vision of an order for world peace, based in human rights and natural rights, that is defined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Magna Charta.⁶

APOCALYPSE NOW?

The fear of a catastrophic end of the world is merely the reverse side of the hope of a glorious consummation of its history. When that hope fails, only the fear remains.

Alongside the prophetic hopes, the biblical traditions contain also apocalyptic predictions. We speak of apocalypses when the prophetic hopes extend beyond the history of Israel and its future and take on worldwide or cosmic dimensions. This is the “new age” for humanity or the re-creation of all things. According to Dan 7, the worldwide reign of the divine son of man will replace the well-known violent kingdoms of this world. According to *1 Enoch* 1:7, “the earth shall be wholly rent in sunder, and all that is upon the earth shall perish, and there shall be a judge-

⁶Translator’s note: “The Earth Magna Charta,” by John McConnell, founder of Earth Day, can be seen online at <http://www.earthsite.org/charta.htm> (cited 2 May 2002). The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is available at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (cited 2 May 2002).

ment upon all (men)” (Charles translation). Then the throne of God will be visible, the Son of Man will come, and heaven and earth will be created anew.

Biblical apocalyptic announcements of a threatening end of the world refer back to the story of the flood of Noah (Gen 6-9), in which God destroys the earth and its inhabitants because of the wickedness of the mighty and the evil in human hearts in order to make a new covenant with Noah (who was alone righteous) and his family, who, together with the animals, have been saved in the ark (Gen 9:11). But behind the biblical notion of an end of the world stands an even deeper anxiety: that God might fully and finally regret having created humans on the earth and take back his decision to come down on the side of creation. A God who judges the world’s evil is interested in the world, but a God who completely turns away from the world will let it sink into chaos and nothingness.

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In contrast to the apocalyptic traditions of the Bible, present references to an “Apocalypse Now” refer to the wrongdoings of humanity, i.e., nuclear, ecological, and terroristic “apocalypses.” To call these apocalypses is completely wrongheaded, however, since that usage accuses God of things for which humans are responsible. There is no such thing as a “nuclear Armageddon.” Human beings are themselves responsible for crimes against humanity and against nature. The biblical apocalypses are filled with hope, while humanity’s self-destruction and the destruction of its own earthly habitat is an exercise in pure extermination and nothing but practical nihilism.

It is no wonder that today a new form of apocalyptic terrorism arises out of the apocalyptic portrayal of the threatening wrongdoings of humanity itself. It is not far from a passive expectation of the end of this world to taking an active part in its termination.

SUICIDE AS WORSHIP

One might become an assassin either for money or out of conviction, but only conviction can produce a suicide assassin. The new terrorists are neither sick nor confused, but a demonic kind of radical Islamists. They regard themselves as martyrs for their faith and are honored as such by others of their kind. What conviction motivates them? For decades fanatical masses in the streets of Islamic states have accused the USA of being the “great Satan” and condemned the West as a corrupt world of infidels because of its secularization of religion, materialism, pornography, dissolution of the family, drug dependency, and women’s liberation movement. The “great Satan” is none other than the apocalyptic “enemy of God.” Whoever weakens and humiliates this enemy is on the side of God and worthy of paradise.

The idea that one fights along with God in an apocalyptic final battle against God's own enemies obviously removes every normal inhibition against killing; it heightens the ecstasy of power and transforms suicide, including mass murder, into a form of worship. The Islamist suicide-assassins feel like God, destroying the godless. Since they see themselves as executioners they require no other justification for their mass murders. The sense of such terrorism is terror, nothing else. This particular new form of terrorism is not produced by oppression and hunger. The terrorists do not come from the slums of Latin America but are well educated men from good families in the Arab world.⁷ Their motivation for mass murder and suicide has to stem from a previously scarcely known form of Islamist apocalyptic as well as from the Islamic assassination tradition of the tenth century.

What happened on September 11 in New York and Washington changed the human situation because it revealed the vulnerability of human societies. The more modern and the more complex these societies, the more vulnerable they are. Life amid the conflicts of history is life that is threatened and insecure. It is illusory to think otherwise. The political realm encroaches into the personal, and there is no personal life without political responsibility. Religion is no longer a private matter; it is either terror or faith. Every retreat into the private surrenders public life to the demons. The generations that have grown up in the West after the Second World War have experienced only a peaceful world; they have been able to concentrate on their personal careers and private happiness and to forget politics. Some have called the 1980s the "me decade," finding a "culture of narcissism" in the well-to-do classes of the Western world. A "fun society" [*Spaßgesellschaft*] arose in Germany, in which young people were heard to say, "I want to have fun, and that is the meaning of my life." All of that is now over. There is no personal life without danger and without some measure of anxiety. There is no meaning to a personal life without political engagement—against terror and for justice throughout the world.

Christian hope provides the strength to begin life anew. It is obviously important to stand up and begin again after failure and disappointment, but it is even harder to lift oneself up and begin anew after success. The development of the Western world and then the modern world is a success story of the modern, scientific-technical spirit. The globalization of this story after 1989, making "one world," has also been successful—but only for us, not for all peoples. The vile ditch between the first and third worlds has deepened (though since 1989 no one likes to talk any more about a "third world"). Millions of homeless and out-of-work people wander around knocking on the doors of the rich nations. The losers in the modern process of globalization cry out for their right to life and their freedom. We must begin a new and different kind of globalization, this time a global action to overcome hunger, illness, and infant mortality, to win freedom from oppression and marginalization, and to provide global respect to other cultural identities. This

⁷Translator's note: Moltmann wrote this article before the recent rash of Palestinian suicide bombers, whose origins, in part at least, are no doubt different from those which the author describes here.

new and different globalization can happen only without the arrogance of power and only with compassion for the wounded and suffering peoples of this earth.

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The dialogue between the world religions is certainly necessary, but it is not the immediate problem. A “clash of civilizations” (Samuel Huntington) is not the challenge that now faces us.⁸ What has come over us since September 11 is the terrorist reaction of a radical wing of Islamic fundamentalism against the basic assumptions of the modern world, against the peaceful coexistence of differing religious groups in a common civil society.

Religious communities in the modern world must respect three conditions: the separation of church and state (or of religious community and civil community), the recognition of individual religious freedom, and the recognition of the dignity and human rights of women. Modern Islam, the Islam of modern societies, has accepted these conditions, thereby relinquishing its demand for a confessional state with a single common religion. In doing so, it has abandoned the introduction of Sharia (Islamic law) and the proclamation of violent jihad, remaining nevertheless a true form of Islam. Conversely, Islamic fundamentalism represents a violent reaction against these three basic conditions of the modern world. It wants a Muslim state that excludes non-Muslims and subdues women, just as we have seen, until recently, in Afghanistan. It revitalizes the medieval Sharia and proclaims “holy war” against the modern states of the Western and Arab world.

The modern world is an open society, open to postmodern culture and the green (ecological) revolution. But it can guarantee peace among the various religious communities only under the three conditions named above. Ultimately, these were the prerequisite that allowed Europe in the seventeenth century to overcome its religious wars and construct the modern world. They are, therefore, essentials for the modernization of the world in other cultures. Today, Christianity, whose confessional wars were overcome by the modern world, must defend these three basic conditions against every form of fundamentalism. ⊕

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⁸Translator’s note: See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).