

# Eschatology

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Eschatology, perhaps more immediately and starkly than any other theological field, reflects the state and role of the Christian church in the world at any particular time. For Christians of the first to third centuries, as for their Jewish forebears, political oppression and persecution found their correlate in vivid apocalyptic visions of liberation, triumph, and a messianic kingdom of peace. During periods of secular church government, much theological effort and imagination were invested in intricate maps of the next world, detailing eternal rewards or punishments for moral and civic obedience or subversion. This is not to suggest that eschatological beliefs have merely been a product of social and political circumstances; indeed, they have often contributed to such circumstances. Still, it is undeniable that eschatology often projects onto the screen of eternity the concerns, priorities, fears and hopes of the present.

In the eighteenth century, the rationalist ethics of Leibniz and Kant pointed to the eschaton as the *telos* of a philosophically necessary trajectory, fulfilling the ‘order of ends’ of practical reason. In the long nineteenth century, the mingled fear and excitement of political and industrial revolutions, imperial expansion, and innovations in epistemology, legal theory, and natural science all elicited and were then in turn fuelled by new configurations of eschatology, many of which have since been buried under the crises of the twentieth century, but some of which still furnish the foundations of twentieth- and twenty-first-century eschatology. Within the traditional doctrinal purview of eschatology, two characteristics of the nineteenth century that traverse social, political and theological camps were a radical questioning of the eternity of hell and a vigorous turn (especially among European, British and American evangelicals) towards pre-millennialism, an expectation of the imminent return of Christ to commence a thousand-year reign on earth.

But perhaps the more remarkable developments in eschatology were not within its traditional doctrinal scope at all, but away from it. In the course of the nineteenth century, traditional eschatology, in the scholastic form of the doctrine of the four last things, experienced a profound crisis in Protestant (but not in Roman Catholic) academic theology. Developments in epistemology, ethics, and science – including the erosion of any implicit confidence in the reliability of revelation – progressively made dogmatic pronouncements about human reward and punishment after death implausible or ethically unpalatable. Instead, eschatology became a way of seeing the shape and direction of historical, epistemological and/or ethical progress as a whole, confirming and fuelling the nineteenth century’s intense desire for continuing change and progress – ethical, intellectual, and political – even beyond the present age.

It was part of the scholarly orthodoxy of the twentieth century to regard the nineteenth century as a period of eschatological slumber, from which theology roused itself only in the face of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crisis of the West. But this is, to some extent, merely an occluding shadow, cast by a stance that twentieth-century eschatology adopted in explicit opposition to the nineteenth century. Wolfhart

Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Robert Jenson all insist on eschatology as a principle of epistemological rupture: as delineating the existential *limits* of (Christian) knowledge set by the unpredictable yet decisive initiative of God. This principle of rupture – sounded by New Testament scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and elaborated theologically by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, and philosophically by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin – was motivated by a pervasive sense of crisis, radically repudiating the ‘drowsy’ confidence of the nineteenth century in a natural or achievable continuity between the present and the eschatological future.

At the same time, this reversal was only made possible by the nineteenth-century reconfiguration of eschatology as a whole from a set of doctrines to a structural or methodological principle. That the crisis of Western civilization in the early twentieth century should have gone hand in hand with the rejection of eschatological optimism in favour of an emphasis on eschatological hope as standing over and against human aspiration is no surprise; but in both, eschatology functions not as a determinate set of beliefs, but as a delineation of the shape and limits of human knowledge, including knowledge of revelation.

## Doctrinal Developments

Within the traditional domain of eschatology – the doctrines of death, judgement, heaven, and hell –, nineteenth-century Protestant theology decisively broke with older orthodoxy on two contested issues: apocatastasis (the eventual restitution of all human beings to eternal life with God) and millennialism (the belief, based on Revelation 20, that a thousand-year messianic reign on earth would precede the creation of a new heaven and earth). Although individual theologians of all Christian eras wrote in favour of these doctrines, the founding documents of Protestantism uniformly rejected the ‘heresies’ both of millennialism and of apocatastasis. These anathemas were largely upheld by Lutheran and Reformed scholasticism as well as mainstream Anglicanism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The nineteenth century, by contrast, saw an upsurge, across the whole spectrum of Protestant churches, of fierce criticism of the doctrine of an eternal hell, as well as (conjointly or independently) a renewed interest in millennialism, particularly in its pre-millennial form. Roman Catholicism was the only major Western denomination largely exempt from these developments, largely because of the insulating effect of their traditional belief in purgatory and in a-millennialism (that is, the idea that the millennium is already underway).

### Apocatastasis

The idea that the punishments of hell will come to an end, and that all creatures – perhaps including the fallen angels, extending even to the devil – will be reconciled to God, is traditionally called *apocatastasis* (from the Greek for ‘restitution’ or ‘restoration’). The belief has a very weak foothold in Biblical material dealing explicitly with hell, but might claim a basis in general Christian principles and in a few subject-specific New Testament passages, including Acts 3.21. Attributed to Origen, the belief was anathematized along with other Origenist ideas by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553.

The fathers of the Reformation uniformly upheld this anathema: the 1530 Augsburg Confession (corroborated on this point by the Roman Catholic *confutatio*), the 1562 Second Helvetic Confession, and Cranmer's 1553 version of the Anglican Articles uniformly condemn those 'who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils'. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, isolated voices from within Pietism (especially P.J. Spener [see Wallmann 1986], J.A. Bengel and Christoph Oetinger), Quakerism, and other revival movements put forward apocatastatic ideas. In the nineteenth century, however, open doubt about the eternity of hell became widespread within all camps of Protestant theology, both in continental Europe and in the English-speaking world.

The characteristic shape and energy of this scepticism emerge only with Schleiermacher, but Kant's is an interesting liminal example that highlights the metaphysical stakes of the debate. In his 1794 article 'The End of All Things', which aims to reel eschatological speculation back within the confines of reason, Kant frames eschatology as a matter not of science or speculation but of practical reason: 'The idea of an end of all things', he writes, 'takes its origin from reasoning not about the physical but rather about the moral course of things in the world'. The images of final judgement in the New Testament are merely 'a way of making sensible' the idea of an ultimate moral judgement and its consequences, and are not themselves grounds of eschatological belief (Kant 2001[1794], 222).

Although speculative reason cannot conceptualize a state beyond space and time, he continues, practical reason must nevertheless project such a final state, because it perceives value in any duration of the world only insofar as 'rational creatures are in it according to the final purpose [*Endzweck*] of their existence; if that final purpose is not achievable, then creation itself seems...without purpose, like a play without an end or discernible intention' (Kant 2001, 224). Whether in that final state all will be blessed (perhaps after a period of purification), or whether some will be saved and some damned, is impossible to say with certainty. On the one hand, the postulate of eternal damnation threatens to overwhelm the good of created freedom: 'for what purpose, one might ask, were even the few, even a single one, created, if they/he should exist only to be eternally damned, which is, after all, worse than not existing at all?' (Kant 2001, 223). On the other hand, prudence counsels the affirmation at least of the possibility of such damnation. It is, after all, more likely that the 'principles of our conduct that were dominant during life (whether good or evil) will continue to be so after death': there is no good reason to hope for change once we have passed into a state beyond time. 'We should therefore anticipate for eternity the appropriate consequences of this merit or that guilt under the rule of the good or evil principle; in light of which, it is wise to act as if the moral state in which we end the present life, along with its consequences, is unalterable in the other life' (Kant 2001, 224). Kant admits, however, that this argument is not sufficiently strong to raise the dual-outcome model to dogmatic status over against a single-outcome, apocatastatic model (Kant 2001, 223). The question must remain open.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose tracts on eschatology in *The Christian Faith* (1821/22, revised 1830/31) decisively shaped the nineteenth-century debate, echoes Kant's cautious support for the possibility of apocatastasis, but directly challenges Kant's basic assumptions regarding the relation of the present to the future life. Similarly to

Kant, Schleiermacher regards the resurrection of the body as a pictorial ‘representation’ of the continuation of individual personality, the Last Judgement as a representation of the separation of the church from all damaging external influences, and Christ’s Return as ‘one single picture’ holding all these elements together (Schleiermacher 1999[1831], 321). Doctrine, as for Kant, is not rooted in these images, but in something more immediate. For Kant, this was practical reason; for Schleiermacher, it is Christian self-consciousness.

This identification of Christian self-consciousness as the source of doctrine is decisive for Schleiermacher’s eschatology in contradistinction to Kant’s. On the one hand, unlike Kant, Schleiermacher is happy to accept specifically *Christian* justifications for wide-ranging existential claims such as the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, also unlike Kant, he is unwilling to posit a radical discontinuity of the future with the present state. Where Kant was willing to postulate a state (though it be impervious to rational conception) in which the ordinary determinations of human knowledge and existence would be suspended, Schleiermacher refuses this step: in his proto-phenomenological account, relationships, development, and common work or goals are basic criteria of anything we might call ‘life’, and must be posited of the eschatological state as well (Schleiermacher 1999, 334).

This middle approach – defending the distinctive nature of Christian consciousness, but marginalizing the role of positive divine intervention – is illustrated by Schleiermacher’s arguments regarding the immortality of the soul. Schleiermacher rejects philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul as inconclusive (Schleiermacher 1999, 315); rather, expectation of ‘the eternal continuation of human personality’ is entailed in the Christian belief in ‘the eternal continuation of the union of divine essence and human nature in the person of the Redeemer’ (Schleiermacher 1995[1822], 314–15). In other words, the doctrine is grounded in specifically Christian rather than in purely rational arguments. However, for Schleiermacher this means not that Christ raises the human soul to immortality, but that the fact that Christ is capable of effecting an eternal union of human and divine implies that the human soul must always have been immortal; put differently, God’s decision to perfect and redeem human nature through this union demonstrates that human individuals must from the beginning have borne the same immortality in themselves, without which the need for a redeemer would not have arisen (Schleiermacher 1995, 318). It is noteworthy that Christians cannot with certainty affirm anything about this immortal life, other than the continued communion of the believer with the Redeemer (Schleiermacher 1995, 318).

This complex argument illustrates both the specificity and the universality of Christian claims: on the one hand, Christian belief simply reveals what has always been true of humanity; on the other, it postulates positive divine acts such as the incarnation of God in Christ. The tension within this duality becomes acute when considering the eschatological state: Are the general resurrection, the final judgement, and eternal beatitude to be seen as ‘determined by the divine power of Christ’ or as ‘cosmic occurrence[s] to which the general order of the world is directed’ (Schleiermacher 1995, 328–30)? Schleiermacher thinks they must be both. But this (together with his argument about the necessary continuity of earthly and heavenly life) problematizes Christian claims about election and damnation.

If beatification is a supernatural intervention, then it could presumably have happened much earlier and on a larger scale, and so would have made redemption unnecessary. It is more plausible (as Origen suggests) that beatification comes from the recognition or knowledge of Christ that the believer experiences upon seeing him at his Return. But even this doesn't quite fit the bill, because unbelievers, too, must recognize him at least somewhat (and so partake of the beatification); also, there must be a gradation of recognition even among believers, which would gainsay the inclusion/exclusion model of the New Testament and suggest a gradual development of beatitude in the post-mortem life. In §179, Schleiermacher advocates such development explicitly; but he also notes that progress and development are only possible 'through external relations, ... conditions of development, and obstacles', which would obliterate the categorical difference between the militant church here and the perfected church above (Schleiermacher 1995, 333). These problematizations of a categorical distinction between saved and damned, and between militant and glorious Church, are intensified by the fact that we could not have pure bliss while seeing a large part of humanity suffer eternal damnation; pity would be too great (Schleiermacher 1995, 335).

The Biblical evidence for eternal damnation of humans, Schleiermacher notes, is ambiguous: it is not impossible that hell may be intended only for the devil and his angels (Schleiermacher 1995, 336). In the absence of unambiguous testimony, and in the face of the problems he has raised, Schleiermacher concludes that the idea of 'an eventual restitution of all human souls' – apocatastasis – must be accorded 'the same right' as the dominant view of the threat of damnation (Schleiermacher 1995, 337).

Mediation theologians, including August Isaak Dorner (1809-1884), attempt to mediate some of the dilemmas raised by Kant, Schleiermacher, and others, particularly the concern that apocatastasis might violate human free will, while damnation would defeat God's good purposes. They therefore tend to posit damnation as a *possibility*, but one that is likely to remain hypothetical (see e.g. Nitzsch 1851, 411–417; Martensen 1856, 455; Dorner 1880, vol. 2, pp. 968–971).

A more radical version of Schleiermacher's apocatastatic immanentism is G.W.F. Hegel's endeavour to recall the eschaton from the transcendent realm altogether and re-integrate it within history as that history's natural *telos*. For Hegel, unlike for Kant, the eschatological state is not a vindication of practical reason, but a reconciliation of everything, including the 'absolute negation' of death. This dialectic is thus apocatastatic in a more radical sense than rationalist or romantic eschatology: not only are individuals restored from perdition, but perdition itself is sublated into the eschatological synthesis. Hegel here betrays none of the embarrassment with which Schleiermacher notes the implausibility of the more traditional view. Differently motivated 'millenarian' versions of apocatastasis are embraced by confessional Protestants such as J.C. Blumhardt and his son Christoph, who inherit a belief in apocatastasis from Bengel and the Württemberg Pietists (Groth 1984, 259).

Besides philosophical considerations, shifting perspectives in legal theory contributed to the nineteenth-century re-evaluation of hell, particularly in the English-speaking world. Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (Italian 1764, English translation 1767), which prompted a reform of penal practice on the principles of deterrence and

reformation (rather than retribution) and proportionality of punishment to crime, inevitably influenced people's thoughts about hell as archetypal punishment. British theologians, in particular, increasingly revolted against the perceived disproportion between finite sin and eternal punishment, especially one that could have no possible reformative outcome (see Rowell 1974, 13–14).

In fictional form, apocatastatic ideas were presented, for example, in the Scottish theologian-author George MacDonald's *Lilith*. Several histories of Christian doctrine, including those of Hosea Ballou (1829), Thomas Whittemore (1830), John Wesley Hanson (1899) and George T. Knight (1911), tried to establish a Patristic precedent for a finite hell by documenting universalist ideas in early authors such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, and others.

In the most general terms, the wide-spread scepticism regarding hell arose from what H.R. Murray calls the 'meliorist ethical bias of the age' (Murray 1955, 801): the widely shared confidence that human life, both individual and collective, could and should be progressively improved through education and work. For some intellectual, political and social movements, this vision of education and improvement displaced Christianity, whose promises of future reward seemed, from this perspective, a misunderstanding or surrogate for worldly progress. For the most part, however, the nineteenth century assimilated Christianity and meliorism. A majority of thinkers, represented and influenced by Kant and Schleiermacher, traced a trajectory of ethical existence beyond this life, many going so far as to argue that repentance, conversion, and moral progress remained possible after death. This made an eternal hell increasingly unpalatable.

Cardinal John Henry Newman's much-discussed turn to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory (most explicitly in *The Dream of Gerontius*) was thus a high-profile, but by no means a unique move within nineteenth-century academic theology. Many others – from liberal Protestants such as Kant and Schleiermacher to Pietists such as the Blumhardts – introduced versions of 'purgatory' as a post-mortem but not unending process of purgation into Protestant theology. As noted above, it may have been a contributing factor to the relative stagnation of Roman Catholic eschatology in the nineteenth century that the pressure toward change exerted by the felt implausibility or offensiveness of an eternal hell was relieved by an established doctrine of purgatory.

### **Adventism and Millennialism**

Confidence in a basic continuity between the present and the eschatological state, and in their shared characterization by continued activity and improvement, also shaped the nineteenth-century reception of another traditional domain of eschatological thought: adventism.

Adventism – belief in the absolute or relative imminence of the Return of Christ promised in the New Testament – has been a persistent strain of Christian belief and spirituality throughout Christianity's history. Often entertained mainly at the margins of the Christian community, adventism has surged across all denominations and social strata at times when social, political and intellectual securities have been in crisis, cultivating an existential and epistemological exceptionalism designed to insure its adherents against the surrounding uncertainties and instabilities by proffering a privileged and secure vantage

point from a divinely orchestrated ‘end of history’. In such times of crisis, adventism has promised not only that the upheavals of the present betoken an imminent, radical transformation, but also that these upheavals, and their (political, religious and intellectual) leaders, can be authoritatively interpreted and engaged by reference to Biblical prophecy, imposing supernatural order on transitional chaos. In the nineteenth century, this adventist hermeneutic was practiced in Germany and Russia amid the Napoleonic Wars, parsing Napoleon’s ever-expanding rule as the reign of Antichrist (see e.g. McGinn 1994, 242–245; Pesenson 2006; Vondung 2000); in England among Southcottians and similar sects confronting the cataclysmic changes in industrial practice (see e.g. Lockley 2012); and in North America by Shakers, Millerites, Christadelphians, and other adventist groups expecting the imminent return of Christ (see e.g. Sandeen 2008; Harrison 2013).

One dominant form that this consciousness of crisis took in nineteenth-century Europe and North America was the form of adventism now particularly associated with that century, namely pre-millennialism. Millennialism – also called millenarianism (from the Latin for ‘thousand’) or chiliasm (from its Greek equivalent) – denotes the belief, based on Revelation 20.1-6, that a thousand-year messianic kingdom on earth will precede the general resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and earth. Pre-millennialism, a main variant of millennialism, specifies that Christ himself (rather than, as for post-millennialism, a divinely appointed human leader) will inaugurate this messianic kingdom, i.e. that Christ’s return will precede rather than post-date the millennium.

Because of its explosive social and political potential, millennialism in all its variants has captivated the imagination of religio-political groups throughout Christian history, although – mainly due again to its slim and ambiguous Biblical attestation – it has consistently been excluded or rejected by the teaching documents of the established churches. In particular, millennialism has been an ambivalent but persistent part of the Protestant legacy from its beginning. In the sixteenth century, radical reformers such as Thomas Müntzer and Melchior Hoffman harnessed the millenarian energy of Luther’s largely pessimistic Adventism; in the seventeenth century, a millennial vision was kept alive (against the scholastic consensus) by Jakob Böhme, and in the eighteenth by Pietists such as J.A. Bengel, F.C. Oetinger, and Gottfried Menken. During the Enlightenment, anti-rationalists like J.K. Lavater and J.H. Jung-Stilling constructed colourful, theosophist-influenced Biblical images of a millenarian future. Nineteenth-century Protestantism inherited all these impulses.

Theologically, millennialism shifts the focus of theological history from the past to the future, implying that the work of salvation, though perhaps formally complete in Jesus’ death and resurrection, has not yet achieved its practical purpose: the biblical promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is neither fulfilled already nor to be attained only in a distant heaven or new creation, but is yet to be realized on earth. This future-orientedness captured the imagination of nineteenth-century visionaries, who were already inclined to envision the future state as in some way continuous with the present life. In 1827, Scotsman Edward Irving propagated a translation of an 1810 prophetic work by Chilean Jesuit Manuel Lacunza, who was writing under the pseudonym Rabbi Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra: *The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty*. Irving gained a large

following, including Henry Drummond, who hosted a series of interdenominational prophetic conferences at his Guildford estate, Albury House, from 1826 to 1830. These conferences were instrumental in the inception of the Catholic Apostolic Church, but also influenced the Anglican mainstream: its delegates and those whom they influenced established prophetic journals – among them the *The Morning Watch* (1829-33) and the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* (1848-73) –, preached, and shaped the Church Missionary Society and other organizations. In 1854, Samuel Waldegrave delivered the Bampton Lectures in Oxford on New Testament Millenarianism; a review in *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* noted, perhaps tendentiously, that the Tractarians were ‘favourably inclined’ towards pre-millennialism, and that ‘probably the majority’ of evangelical clergy in the Church of England adhered to it (1855, 697-710). In America, pre-millennial doctrines were propagated particularly by J.N. Darby and his followers, and later codified in the influential Scofield Reference Bible. At or just outside the fringes of Christianity, Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses also gathered around versions of pre-millennialist belief.

Though pre-millennial beliefs took many competing forms, they shared a characteristically nineteenth-century commitment to millennial life as continuous in kind with earthly life: an emphasis on the physical nature of millennial life, and on the continuation of discovery, growth, and work. Even the most pessimistic hymns of the millennialist hymn writer Horatius Bonar, author of ‘I heard the voice of Jesus say’ and editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, envision redemption not as the abandonment but as the regeneration of this ‘vain’ or ‘blighted’ world:

Come, Lord, and wipe away  
The curse, the sin, the stain,  
And make this blighted world of ours  
Thine own fair world again. (Bonar, ‘The Church Has Waited Long’, 1845)

Come, and make all things new,  
Build up this ruined earth;  
Restore our faded Paradise,  
Creation’s second birth. (Bonar, ‘Come, Lord, and Tarry Not’, 1846)

These pre-millennial visions are explicit or implicit repudiations of the otherworldly eschatology that tended to characterize non-adventist nineteenth-century revival movements, expressed in hymns such as ‘Farewell vain world, I’m going home’, re-issued in many iterations throughout the nineteenth century.

As announced in the pre-millennial journal *Christian Herald* in 1830, ‘when Christ return[s] to earth, then this earth will be all that we are used to fancy heaven would be’ (159). Even F.D. Maurice, whose restitutional views were grounded in very different principles, perceived this progressive potential of pre-millennialism: ‘I think that the Millenarians are right...when they bid us think more of Christ’s victory over the earth and redemption of it to its true purposes, than of any new condition into which we may be brought when we go out of the earth’ (quoted in Spence 2009, 355).

A word of caution. The theological study of nineteenth-century pre-millennialism, and of chiliasm in general, has been spurred but also to some extent misdirected by the



surfeit of historical and sociological scholarship on the subject since the 1950's, when Norman Cohn's agenda-setting *Pursuit of the Millennium* (Cohn 2004[1957]) demonstrated the similarities between medieval millenarian sects and modern totalitarian regimes. To do so, Cohn deliberately emphasised millennialism's structural elements of cataclysmic reversal and utopian commonwealth, and marginalized its adventist element of a divine irruption from without. This interpretive lens on millennialism – justified in its limited sphere – has come to dominate not merely sociology, but also the historical study of Christianity, which since Cohn tends to parse millennialism primarily in sociological terms, as a radical utopianism. One of the symptoms of this distortion is the over-confident (and often contradictory) specification of the socio-political profile of nineteenth-century pre-millennialists, whether as radical pessimists or radical optimists; another is the fact that nineteenth-century adventist beliefs which were not millenarian but merely catastrophic in nature, such as that of William Miller and his followers, are semantically and functionally subsumed under millennialism (as e.g. in Harrison 2013; Numbers and Butler 1993). Theologians and religious historians must be careful to maintain a more rigorous and theologically nuanced terminology.

## Structural Developments

### Immanentizing the Eschaton

Millennial ideas also exercise a more surprising but no less powerful influence on nineteenth-century philosophy. Among important philosophical elites in France and, more pervasively, in Germany, the Enlightenment re-orientation from the past of divine revelation towards the future of human perfectibility takes the form of a secularized 'millennialism' indebted – often more so than properly dogmatic chiliasm is – to the textual tradition of Christian millennialism.

The most significant text for this philosophical project of appropriation is Joachim of Fiore's *Expositio in Apocalipsim* and its introduction (1194-99), which, at the turn of the thirteenth century, proposed a tripartite periodization of history into the age of the Father (the Old Testament era), the age of the Son (the era of the New Testament and the Church), and the imminent, culminating age of the Spirit, in which the prophecies of Joel 2.28 and Acts 2.17 will be fulfilled and the Spirit of God poured out on all flesh. The subversive tendencies of this periodization, which demoted the authority of the Church to a preliminary role that would give way to a universal, egalitarian spiritual society, were not lost on the Church, and Joachimite ideas were condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

Influential on medieval Franciscan thought and on the Anabaptists, Joachim's vision of a third and 'eternal evangel' is decisively appropriated for the Enlightenment project by G.E. Lessing, though his knowledge of Joachim's text remains second-hand. In his *Education of Humankind* (1780), Lessing promises that 'it will surely come, the age of a new, eternal evangel, which is promised to us even in the primers of the new covenant':

Perhaps certain enthusiasts of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries caught a ray of this new, eternal evangel, and only erred in believing it so imminent. Perhaps their 'three ages' were no empty whim, [but] always the same economy of the same God; always – to let them speak my language – the same [divine] plan of the education

of all humankind. (Lessing 1881[1780], §§86–88. Lessing’s source is Mosheim’s *Institutionum Historiae Ecclesiae Antiquae et Recentioris* IV (1755), which remains uncertain about Joachim’s historical existence.)

For Lessing and his students, Joachim’s third age represents the spiritual freedom of educated humanity. That it should be the age of the Holy Spirit is no mere metaphor to them: the immanentization of the Holy Spirit as world-animating *Geist* is integral to the Romantic project. Novalis (1929[1799]), Hölderlin (1990[1800]), Schiller (1902[1801], no. 27), Schlegel (see de Lubac 1981, 352), and Schelling (Schelling 2000[1810]; Schelling 1856b) all evoke an immanent Spirit leading the peoples, under the guidance of Germany, to intellectual/spiritual plenitude (see also Wolfe 2014, ch. 4).

J.G. Fichte is among the most explicitly eschatological in framing the coming reign of reason as the true, this-worldly kingdom of heaven: it is the German vocation, he insists in his *Addresses to the German Nation*, ‘to found the kingdom of Spirit and reason as such’ after the physical and spiritual devastation of the Napoleonic Wars (Fichte 2008[1808], 194; see also Fichte 1845[1813], 497–600). This is an explicitly eschatological task: To the Germans, Fichte declares, it is given ‘to pass Last Judgement’ on the question whether man is called to ‘rise up to higher worlds’ or to ‘continue to slumber in a mere animal or plant-life’ (Fichte 2008, 195). Even F.W.J. Schelling, who emphasizes that the aspiration for an ideal state within history must end in ‘apocalyptic *Schwärmerei* [enthusiasm/fanaticism]’ (Schelling 1856a, vol. 11, p. 552), is nevertheless assured of the ‘historical destiny of the Germans’ to realize a ‘true theocracy’ beyond hierocracy, founded on the ‘reign of the known divine Spirit itself’ (Schelling 1856a, vol. 11, p. 546).

The great systematician of this neo-Joachimite chiliasm was G.W.F. Hegel. In his early theological writings, Hegel sharply criticizes institutional Christianity, whose eschatology denigrates earthly life to a mere ‘preparatory school for the future [life]’ without intrinsic significance or value, instilling only fear and terror of the judgement to come (Hegel 1907, 46). The root problem, for Hegel, is that traditional Christianity projects onto an irrupting supernatural order a teleology that in fact inheres in history itself (see Schwöbel 2005, 220). Hegel’s conceptual breakthrough, accordingly, takes the form of a renewed eschatology, in which the eschatological absolute is immanentized in history.

That G.W.F. Hegel was influenced by Christian eschatology – particularly Joachim of Fiore and Jakob Böhme – is well-documented both historically and morphologically (e.g. Berthold-Bond 1989; Löwith 1964; O’Regan 1994, 263ff; Taylor 1977, 211). Hegel’s structural imitation of Joachim’s three-part periodization of Christianity in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Hegel 1990[1832], vol. 3) is only a marker of a deeper and more wide-reaching affinity, which makes an eschatological plenitude the final cause of both being and knowledge.

For Hegel, history is the dialectical self-realization of Spirit. Self-realization always includes self-knowledge, particularly knowledge of one’s freedom. Harking back to Kant, Hegel’s history is therefore a ‘progress in the consciousness of freedom’ (Hegel 1890, 107; cf. Hegel 1942[1820], §§354–60; Hegel 1971[1830], §482). This also means that history can only be understood from its end, which brings fullness of knowledge (both abstract and concrete). While Luther sees revelation as having occurred once for all in

(and of) Christ, in a way that remains opposed to rational, worldly knowledge, and requires faith and self-abnegation, Hegel – with Joachim – regards revelation as continuous and progressive, culminating in the outpouring of the Spirit in the eschatological third age.

God, here, is not beyond history so as to irrupt into it and bring disclosure, but is himself constituted in and through history. ‘World History’, as Hegel references Schiller, ‘is the Last Judgement’ (Hegel 2012[1817/18], §164). The Last Judgement, in other words, becomes not an eschatological but a history-immanent event, just as history itself, that is, ‘the process of development and realization of spirit, is the true theodicy, the justification of God *in history*’ (Hegel 1890, 477). Hotly contested by Søren Kierkegaard, who was later appropriated for the existential eschatologies of Barth and Heidegger (see Wolfe 2013, ch. 5–6), Hegel’s dialectical theology of glory has remained one of the most influential interlocutors for Christian and secular eschatology throughout the last centuries.

### **Eschatology and Ethics**

If the meliorism of the nineteenth century drew the eschaton into the present life, it also projected the present life into the eschaton. The most common criticism of nineteenth-century eschatology by twentieth-century theologians was its so-called reduction of eschatology to ethics. From the perspective of nineteenth-century authors, this seemed by no means a reduction.

Kant established the connection between ethics and eschatology by describing practical reason – the human faculty that guides (moral) action in conformity to universal moral norms – not as a merely nomological but as a teleological power. It is a guiding intuition of practical reason that not virtue alone, but ‘virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the *summum bonum* [the highest good] in a person, and the distribution of happiness in exact proportion to morality (which is the worth of the person, and his worthiness to be happy) constitute the *summum bonum* of a possible world’ (Kant 1997[1788], 77).

Because it is plain that this correlation of goodness and happiness is not achievable in the present life, Kant posits as postulates of practical reason, first, the immortality of the soul, and secondly, the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God. Without these postulates to ensure the achievement of the *summum bonum* after death, practical reason would be fragmented, and could not be a reliable guide to action. Kant’s argument does not erect God as a guarantor of rational laws, but rather points to the harmony of natural reason and the existence of God. Eschatology, here, is the articulation or reification of the end point of a teleology inherent in rational human existence.

For Kant, Christianity is superior to any human legal system because it instils love of Christ and his preaching as the motive force of moral behaviour. Christ’s threat of punishment, in turn, is not capricious, but reflects the status of the (rational) law as an ‘unchangeable order inherent in the nature of things, not the result of an arbitrary will of the Creator to direct its consequences thus or otherwise’ (Kant 2001, 231). Biblical eschatology and rational order, for Kant, are one and the same.

Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) attempted to integrate Kant's idea of the eschatological *summum bonum* with the sharp *Jenseitskritik* and rigorous Biblical scholarship of D.F. Strauss (see below). He revised Kant's *summum bonum* in two ways: first, as primarily communal rather than primarily individual; secondly, as immanent rather than transcendent. The final purpose (*Endzweck*) of the world, Ritschl declared, is the Kingdom of God (Ritschl 1972[1875], 226). This Kingdom is 'the *summum bonum* only because it is at the same time the ethical ideal for whose realization the members of the church come together in particular forms of mutual conduct' (Ritschl 2007, 75–76).

Like Kant, Ritschl identified teleology as a distinctive characteristic of free will – specifically, the free (or loving) submission to the law of God. For Ritschl, however, such free purpose-directedness was always both individual and communal, and (à la Schelling and Richard Rothe [e.g. 1845, vol. 2]) would lead to a history-immanent rather than a post-mortem 'final purpose', namely the Kingdom of God, which is both possible and near. In modelling loving submission to God, the Christian community's task is to lead society's maturation towards moral perfection. As Ritschl's student Adolf von Harnack put it, 'the kingdom of God comes by coming to the individual, by entering into his soul and laying hold of it'. This ethical kingdom, for Ritschl and his students, entirely displaced any expectation of an otherworldly kingdom. Again according to Harnack, in Jesus' parables, 'everything that is dramatic in the historical and external sense has vanished; and gone, too, are all the external hopes for the future' (Harnack 1902, 56; see also Troeltsch 1910). The Kingdom of God is the imminent goal of ethical Western Society.

### **Eschatological Rupture**

One of the great theological reversals of the nineteenth century was the overthrow of this theological consensus on the sublation of this-worldly effort into eschatological plenitude. In the face of late nineteenth-century discoveries in New Testament Studies, and of the rupture of bourgeois progressivism in the First World War, this optimistic consensus seemed to fall short both of the realities of human weakness and of the radicalness of divine promise. Twentieth-century eschatology would be concerned to sentinel the boundaries between earthly poverty and eschatological fullness rather than break them down.

Within constructive theology, this process, escalated in the early twentieth-century by the work of Karl Barth and his circle, was prepared in the late nineteenth century by one of Barth's acknowledged influences, Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919), a Pietist theologian and minister in the Württemberg renewal movement, and later an active Socialist. Albrecht Ritschl first encountered 'Blumhardt's Pietism' in 1880 while reviewing a book on the Holy Spirit. 'All premises in common with the Irvingites', he wrote dismissively to his student Wilhelm Herrmann; 'only the conclusion is different: the postulate of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the foundation of a new epoch of the church. *Saeculum spiritus = evangelium aeternum*' (Ritschl and Herrmann 2013, 239).

Like Ritschl and the millennialists, Blumhardt described the object of eschatological hope as 'the kingdom of God', which would be realized not in heaven but 'on earth', in historical time. However, progress towards this kingdom is not, for Blumhardt, coextensive with the progress of history. On the contrary, unlike Ritschl's

Kingdom, it is to be characterized by the wholly supernatural promises of the New Testament, fulfilled by the free initiative of the (fully personal) Holy Spirit, obediently followed by Christian believers. Within this striving for the kingdom, all institutions – everything that encodes the past or weighs down the future with the present – are ‘in opposition’ to the Kingdom, including the church (Blumhardt 1992, 194). Not even mission is necessarily conducive to this kingdom: even the early church had been in danger of ‘placing more weight on the outer spreading of the Gospel than on the construction of a Zion that would bear in itself the victory over all the powers of the world, and which the Lord himself would govern through his Spirit’ (Blumhardt 1992, 171). Christianity, he warned, was always dogged by its ‘tribal character’ (*Volkscharakter*), its ‘national historical achievements’, which should not necessarily be imposed on other peoples, ‘by Germanizing, Anglicizing or Gallicizing them, instead of leading them to the free truth in Christ’ (Blumhardt 1992, 171).

Despite the insistence that God’s Kingdom was to be established on earth, not in heaven, then, Blumhardt’s outlook for ordinary human history, both collective and individual, was largely pessimistic: like Eduard Thurneysen after him, he believed not merely sanctification but also justification to be an eschatological rather than a present reality (see Zahl 2012, 80-1). Even after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit, ‘for the most part, everything is still the same as it always was: sin, need, and death have remained the same in this world...salvation has not yet arrived’ (Blumhardt 1925, vol. 2, 227; cf. Blumhardt 1888, vol. 3, pp. 19–20; Blumhardt 1888, vol. 8, p. 8; Blumhardt 1992, 54). In the final fulfilment of the kingdom alone ‘lies the salvation of the world’ (Blumhardt 1888, vol. 8, p. 19). Human agency in bringing about this kingdom is mostly limited to willing its own annihilation (see Zahl 2012, 82).

Eschatology here sharply limits what we can know and be; we can only enact the dynamism of radical future-orientation without knowing where it will lead, without resting in any institution or system of knowledge: *enacting* the eschatological dynamic, not (like Hegel) comprehending it. Although Blumhardt is has not yet been widely recognized as a source for this approach, it was to become a dominant paradigm of twentieth-century eschatology.

### **The Recovery of Biblical Eschatology**

A very different challenge to the nineteenth-century consensus came from within Biblical scholarship, where D.F. Strauss’s mid-century, epoch-making Hegelian reading of New Testament eschatology was challenged by the so-called rediscovery of New Testament eschatology in the last quarter of the long nineteenth century.

In 1834, D.F. Strauss (1808-1874) published his *Life of Jesus*, which – in its debunking of Biblical supernaturalism and immanentization of eschatological and other spiritual themes – became paradigmatic of mid-nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship. A philosopher by training and Hegelian by affinity, Strauss endeavoured a rigorously scientific reading of the New Testament, including its eschatology. His Hegelianism made him reject all *Jenseitshoffnung* as naïve escapism. Strauss mocked the ‘flight to the beyond’ (Strauss 1864, dedication), and called the future ‘beyond’ the last ‘enemy of the speculative critique’ (Strauss 1841, §§106–7). ‘The dogmas of the destruction and renewal of the world’, he insisted,

if they are to mean anything, are to be pulled back from an otherworldly future to the here and now. To the spirit that has inwardly risen and woken to true life, the old world of finitude, this confused aggregate of phenomena and events..., has passed away, and a new, transfigured world has arisen in its place, which enables him to recognize the one in the many, and to sense, desire and find the pure and highest good in individual goods and ills. (Strauss 1841, §104)

The resurrection body, which some say will have additional senses, is in fact nothing other than our current body, equipped with the ‘sixth sense’ of ‘rational thought’ (Strauss 1841, §104; cf. Marheineke 1827, §608ff).

As historical-critical New Testament scholarship continued to develop, however, it became increasingly clear how much this rationalist eschatology jarred with the convictions and priorities of Jesus and the Early Church themselves. Johannes Weiss, Hermann Gunkel, and Wilhelm Bousset – all associated with the History of Religion School – recognized early Christian apocalyptic material as defining for the shape and direction of early Christian belief, and pursued a tradition-historical interpretation of it (see Bousset 1895; Bousset 1903; Bousset 1906; Gunkel 1895; Weiss 1892). Albert Schweitzer sharpened the polemical edge of Weiss’s work, proclaiming imminent eschatological expectation as the decisive mark of Jesus’ preaching and of earliest Christianity (Schweitzer 1910[1906]). Schweitzer drew a sharp distinction between early Christian eschatological fervour and the subsequent development of institutionalised liturgical forms, ethical teaching, and theology. In his view, these religious sensibilities were not merely different, but fundamentally incompatible: the second could only arise out of the failure of the first.

Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), who strongly influenced Barth, anticipated Weiss and Schweitzer’s historical thesis, and gave it a radical constructive twist. His most influential work, *How Christian is our Present-Day Theology?* (1873, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1903) established the world-denying expectation of the end as the primary feature of the early church. Overbeck posited an absolute contrast between the ascetic apocalypticism of the earliest Christians, which represented a radical rejection of any hope of salvation within world and time, and the subsequent secularisation and historicization of Christianity, effected by the development of a Christian theology and (political) establishment. Any such development, in Overbeck’s view, could only be fundamentally misguided, because it assumes the possibility of explaining or grounding faith intellectually, and of achieving within history what can only be attained by its End (Overbeck 2005[1903]). In other words, while to Weiss and Schweitzer, the eschatological orientation of the earliest church did not imply an imperative for contemporary Christianity (but was rather an aberration to be left behind), to Overbeck, it constituted the paradigm of ‘authentic’ Christian experience, and as such formed the basis of a radical critique of all modern theology.

Faced with the catastrophe of the First World War and its immense aftermath, twentieth-century theologians turned to Blumhardt and Overbeck’s eschatologies of rupture, not Kant, Ritschl and Strauss’s eschatologies of continuity, for orientation within a fractured world.

## Coda: Unresolved Tensions

Nineteenth-century thinkers trying to make eschatology fruitful not only for dogmatics and worship, but also for philosophical thought more generally, uncovered some explosive tensions within the subject matter that sent tremors through their systems, but erupted into philosophical revolutions only during the following century. One of the most significant was the tension between trajectories and endpoints, which quietly dominated both Kant's and Hegel's eschatologies.

Kant admitted that it was a scandal to the imagination that there should be a state without change (Kant 2001, 227). 'For a being which can become conscious of its existence and the magnitude of this existence (as duration) only in time, such a life – if it can even be called a life – appears equivalent to annihilation' (Kant 2001, 227). And yet the final purpose of existence, the *summum bonum*, can only be imagined as a static end, not as an infinite progress (because every stage of such a progress would be deficient by comparison to the next, and therefore could not warrant contentment) (Kant 2001, 228). We cannot get away from positing this static end point, even though we also cannot imagine it without imagining it as the annihilation of life itself. The idea of a dissolution of individuality into a divine All is no adequate solution for Kant: it is only a *Schwärmerei* ('enthusiasm' or 'fanaticism') of reason faced with the inability to imagine a state of changeless existence (Kant 2001, 228).

Hegel, too, recognizes the ideational importance of consummation or an end point: thus, he criticizes Fichte's epistemology for positing 'a constant progression...which never reaches an end' in the engagement of subject and object (Hegel 1892, vol. 3, p. 492). He himself seeks to 'resolve [this] infinite progress into the End' (Hegel 2010, §242), and posits a 'final concord' (Hegel 2010, §24 addendum) of subject and object, a 'consummation of the infinite End' of knowledge and the world (Hegel 2010, §212 addendum). This is why Hegel speaks of the 'absolute End of history' (e.g. Hegel 1890, 163; Hegel 1892, vol. 1, p. 35), where Spirit, as Daniel Berthold puts it, 'has fulfilled its eschatological design, the realization of its freedom and the attainment of its complete knowledge of itself' (Berthold-Bond 1988, 15). But this identification of philosophical knowledge with *wholeness* – with 'comprehending nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of the truth of spirit' (Hegel 1977[1807], para. 89) – is in profound tension with Hegel's other commitment, namely to 'both knowledge and being as in their very essence dialectical and teleological processes of becoming' (Berthold-Bond 1988, 16), whose vitality lies precisely in their dynamic of growth, and for which stasis would spell death. Many commentators note this. Stanley Rosen writes that 'if we achieve the Hegelian science of totality, we must cease to become human' (Rosen 1974, 279; see also Kojeve 1980, 158–60, n.6). Karl Löwith (Löwith 1964, 38–39), Robert Solomon (Solomon 1983, 14ff), and Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse 1955, 224–5) try to avoid this problem by interpreting Hegel epochally, i.e. as positing no final end but only a non-finite dialectical succession of epochs (as suggested e.g. in (Hegel 1990, §343).

Both Kant and Hegel thus require hypothetical end points to sustain their systems, but these end points cannot be part of their systems themselves; in Kant's case, the immortality of the soul and the existence of a good God are postulates of practical

reason, not conceptualizable; in Hegel's case, the final epoch of absolute Spirit is both a necessary projected end point and an impossibility. Both remind us of Schleiermacher's concern about the apparently unresolvable ambiguity in Christian teaching between eschatology as the natural end point of a worldly system and eschatology as supernatural imposition.

This tension, more intractable than Kant's antinomies of reason, becomes decisive for the philosophical turns proposed by Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger (see Wolfe 2013), and Jacques Derrida. The significance of nineteenth-century eschatology for European philosophy in the twentieth century is a field of study rich for harvest.

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