Editors' Introduction

CHALAMET, Christophe, et al.

Abstract
Introduction to the Volume "Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology"

Reference

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This book gathers most of the papers which were presented at an international theological conference held at the University of Geneva (October 22–24, 2015). The conference was organized by the University of Geneva’s Faculty of Theology, jointly with the Institut romand de systématique et d’ethique (IRSE), which belongs to this Faculty.

The project of organizing a conference on the topic of eschatology emerged during a daylong conference on the thought of Jacques Ellul, as several members of Geneva’s Theological Faculty began discussing the question of the traditional Christian representations of “the end,” and especially its relationship to recent developments within the natural sciences on the end of the universe. The general public hears from the natural sciences that the universe will eventually die. Journalists who cover the natural sciences ask not whether the universe will die, but how that will happen.¹ How should Christian theology consider the narrative(s) of the natural sciences concerning the final cataclysm towards which the universe as a whole appears to headed? Needless to day, with its vision of an ultimate judgment and redemption, in which God will wipe “every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21:4), in which God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), Christian theology makes very different claims about the eschaton, i.e. the “end” of all things. Hence the (somewhat catchy but theologically questionable) title of the Geneva conference and of this book: “Game Over – good news or bad news?” Should we set out to reconcile the rather “bad” news which seems to be conveyed by science with the “good” news which is proclaimed by the New Testament witness? Should we consider, as John Zizioulas suggests in a forthcoming work,² the claims made by the natural sciences as the confirmation of the Church Fathers’ insights into the creatureliness, and hence intrinsic finitude, of the created order? This suggestion is enticing, but it risks leading us either into a somewhat schizophrenic existence: Christians ought to place their trust in a certain vision of the “end,” but as women and men of the 21st century they might find it difficult to articulate this trust with the picture modern science presents to us. Or perhaps schizophrenia can be avoided, but in such a way that, in the Christian view, modern science only gives us one part of the equation (the finitude of the created

² Cf. John Zizioulas, Remembering the Future. An Eschatological Ontology (Bloomsbury T&T Clark).

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order), whereas the Christian faith adds something crucial, namely: the world will indeed end, but God, as creator of the world, will renew it through God’s resurrection power.

As the table of content of the present volume indicates, some of the papers do touch on the relationship between theology and the natural sciences, but we did not wish to exclusively focus on this difficult, perhaps intractable, question. Our aim was to gather together exegetes, historians of ideas, philosophers of religion, scholars of theology and literature, ethicists, and systematic theologians. We hoped to foster a conversation across several disciplines, even if our central goal was to enrich the current theological reflection.

The “rebirth” of eschatology within theology can be traced back to a 67 pages pamphlet published by the New Testament scholar Johannes Weiss in 1892: *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).³ As is well-known, in this work Weiss questioned the modern, including Albrecht Ritschl’s, interpretation of Jesus’ message concerning God’s Kingdom. As a thinker influenced by Kant and Schleiermacher, Ritschl stressed the ethical significance of the Kingdom. In his view, “Kant [...] was the first to perceive the supreme importance for ethics of the ‘Kingdom of God’ as an association of men [sic] bound together by laws of virtue.”⁴ For Jesus himself, the Kingdom of God was “the moral end of the religious fellowship He had to found.” Jesus did not understand by it “the common exercise of worship, but the organization of humanity through action inspired by love.”⁵ And so, to Ritschl, who had to defend himself against critics who perceived Pelagian overtones in his thought, the Kingdom was both “our task to realize,” as well as “the highest good which God destines for us as our supramundane goal.”⁶ The Kingdom may be what we are called to fulfill, but this doesn’t mean the Kingdom has lost its transcendental dimension.⁷ It is both a promise and a task.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 12.
⁶ Ibid., 205–6.
⁷ “It is an essential characteristic of the Kingdom of God that, as the final end which is being realised in the world and as the supreme good of created spirits, it transcends the world, just as God Himself is supramundane.” Ibid., 281.
Four years after Albrecht Ritschl’s death in 1889, Johannes Weiss, who happened to be Ritschl’s son-in-law, argued that Jesus’s message about the Kingdom was essentially eschatological, rather than ethical:

It is evident from a great number of passages that Jesus thinks the establishment of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ will be mediated solely by God’s supernatural intervention. Any human activity in connection with it thus is ruled out completely. [...] even he [Jesus] cannot intervene in the development of the Kingdom of God. He has to wait, just as the people have to wait, until God once again definitively takes up the rule. 9

Such claims, to which some of us have become accustomed in recent Christian theology, were, then, quite revolutionary. Its impact was profound and lasting. Indeed, Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, i.e. two of the greatest interpreters of Jesus’s life and message in the 20th century, cannot be understood if we omit the prior scholarship of Johannes Weiss. The same is true of Karl Barth’s early dialectical theology, which also placed eschatology at the center of biblical and theological interpretation, even if, in Barth’s case, the influence of the two Pietist pastors Johann Christoph Blumhardt and his son Christoph, and especially their eschatological realism, is clear. “Jesus ist Sieger” (“Jesus is victor!”) was the battlecry of the two Blumhardts, and Barth remained impressed by their faith. The Blumhardts found an echo not just in Barth, but also in significant theologians of the last half-century such as Jürgen Moltmann and Gerhard Sauter. Still other thinkers, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Robert W. Jenson, on the basis of other insights, made eschatology into a crucial theological theme.

What should we make, today, of eschatology in our exegetical, theological and ethical reflection? The papers gathered here offer many possible answers to this question. But all of them, it seems to us, make clear or presuppose, in one way or another, that thinking and speaking about the “end” can and should never be disconnected from the past and from our present, in all of its dimen-

8 It “is promised only as the ground of blessedness, while at the same time it is the task to which Christians are called.” Ibid., 35.

9 Johannes Weiss, Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, 82–83. Or, elsewhere in the book (91; see also 102–103, 113 and 129–133): “So long as the time of the end can somehow be calculated, the establishment of the Kingdom remains a human work. But for Jesus it is unqualifiedly the work of God, and therefore to be left to God in every respect.” “[...] as Jesus conceived of it, the Kingdom of God is a radically superworldly entity which stands in diametric opposition to this world. This is to say that there can be no talk of an innerworldly development of the Kingdom of God in the mind of Jesus! On the basis of this finding, it seems to follow that the dogmatic religious-ethical application of this idea in more recent theology, an application which has completely stripped away the original eschatological-apocalyptic meaning of the idea, is unjustified.” (114).
sions. This is one of the basic groundrules of any eschatological discourse. The point of eschatology is not simply to consider what comes “at the end,” even less what comes “at the end” “for me,” but rather how thinking about the end, how hoping for a certain end, impacts our present understanding of life, socially, and individually. Speculations about an “ultimate state” without consideration of what that state may actually mean for us or for our world, indeed for creation as a whole, is of limited interest. Whether we consider the endpoint or, more broadly, the future as that towards which we are headed through a strictly immanent, temporal continuum (futurum), or as a transcendent reality which is headed toward us (adventus), to borrow Jürgen Moltmann’s insightful distinction, such discourse does not abstract from our (or the world’s) present situation or from our past. Karl Marx’s critique of religion can be discerned behind the revised understanding of eschatology as a discourse which concerns our present situation. Liberation theologies and other forms of contextual theologies have especially taken such revisions to heart. As James Cone put it in Black Theology and Black Power:

The most corrupting influence among the black churches was their adoption of the ‘white lie’ that Christianity is primarily concerned with an otherworldly reality. White missionaries persuaded most black religious people that life on earth was insignificant because obedient servants of God could expect a ‘reward’ in heaven after death.¹⁰

This “white lie,” in Cone’s view, needs to be eradicated and replaced by an eschatology which “comes to mean joining the world and making it what it ought to be. It means that the Christian man [sic] looks to the future not for a reward or possible punishment of evildoers, but as a means of making him dissatisfied with the present.”¹¹

One of the many things a discourse about the end (an eschatology) should do is remind us that we are not yet at the end, but on our way to it (or, again, that the end is on its way to us). This claim may, at first sight, appear rather innocuous. Not so! If we are not at the end, that means we are still searching for truth in its ultimate, full and final manifestation. All we may attain is a glimpse – a furtive, fragmented, glimpse of truth. The New Testament is filled with reminders of this fragmentariness, for instance when the apostle Paul writes, in 1 Cor 13:12, that we “know only in part”: rather than knowing “face to face,” “for now we see in a mirror, dimly” (δὲ ἐκὸπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι; per speculum in ænigmate, Vulgate). If we are people still in via, then we should be wary of any claims of “own-

¹¹ Ibid., 126.
ership” or “possession” of the truth. Theologians call the emphasis on the “not yet” “eschatological reservation.” This is a key theological motif.

It is, however, not just a matter of “knowing” or “understanding”. It is also a matter of conformity – or rather the tragic lack thereof – between our world and what our world is called to be or to become. If the “end” is a Kingdom of justice, then this Kingdom compels us not just to pray “your Kingdom come!,” but also to live and act in ways through which this world may reach, ever so slightly – and without the pretense to be “building” the Kingdom – a greater conformity with regard to its destination.

But the “not yet” should not eclipse the “already.” Our knowledge of the “last things” (de novissimis) is fragmentary, but historians of theology and philosophy, exegetes and systematic theologians, when they study the Scriptures and their interpretation throughout history, encounter claims to a certain knowledge, claims which express the trust that something has already been unveiled about “the end.” Jesus put it clearly, and centrally, in his proclamation: “The Kingdom of God has become near” (Mark 1:15 par; ἡ γεννημένη ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ). This is the pivot of his entire message, according to the synoptic gospels – most New Testament scholars and theologians agree on this point. Everything, indeed, flows from it. Jesus’s message was eschatological through and through.

But it was also apocalyptic, and here the matter suddenly becomes more complex. Especially in the anglophone world, debates among New Testament scholars between the “apocalyptic” interpretation of certain texts have been going on for several decades. Only recently have they begun to permeate systematic theology and philosophy. “Apocalyptic” should not be confused with “eschatological.” The two are not synonyms. Rather, we suggest that any apocalyptic discourse touches on eschatology, but eschatological discourses or theories may, or may not, be apocalyptic.¹² The two, thus, resemble two concentric circles, with eschatology as the larger circle which includes the other one (apocalypticism).

Jesus’s message was thoroughly eschatological, but it also was thoroughly apocalyptic: God’s sovereign rule is at hand, the final manifestation or disclosure

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¹² One of the foremost scholars of the ancient apocalyptic writings offers the following definition: “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” John J. Collins, “Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre”, Semeia 14 (1979), 9. See also John J. Collins, “Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World”, in The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.
of God’s will is about to take place in these last days. The urgency of the good news suffuses much of the New Testament canon, and especially Paul’s epistles (see e.g. 1 Cor 7:29a: “I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short”), all the way until Romans. Interestingly, this urgency, already by the end of the 1st century CE, led to some questions. It became necessary to interpret these claims, as 2 Pet 3:3–4 confirms.¹³

What are we to make, today, of the apocalyptic imagery which we encounter here and there in Scripture and in other ancient texts? There is no circumventing the necessity, the inescapability of interpreting these texts. We are convinced that Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing program was an important attempt at thinking through the ways in which the New Testament must be interpreted in the cultures of our present time, i.e. in cultures which are vastly different from the cultural and theological presuppositions of the biblical (and other ancient) authors. Otherwise, as Bultmann saw it correctly, we risk replacing the true scandal, i.e. the scandal of a suffering Messiah, with false scandals which arise from the clash of radically different cosmologies and world-views (Weltbilder). We remain convinced of the necessity of interpreting Scripture through Scripture, which presupposes the (communal) call to discern and distinguish expressions of the Good News from cultural accretions which always accompany these expressions. This does not need to entail the casting out of this or that canonical book, or of particular figures or metaphors. Eschatology, as we indicated above, urges us to resist all “definitive” or “final” conclusions.

In Christian theology, the “end” is not a return to the “beginning” – Augustine was not at his most inspired when he stated, in a sermon: “Then we shall return to the beginning.”¹⁴ For what is envisioned is a heavenly city (Rev 21:2.10 – 27; 22:1–3), not a garden. And yet the end is not without relation to the “beginning.” The telos of God’s creative act is inscribed right from the beginning, to the point where, as John Zizioulas puts it in his signal contribution, the beginning makes sense only in light of the eschaton (infra, 259). As Augustine

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¹³ First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging in their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’” (2 Pet 3:3–4). The author adds: “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” (2 Pet 3:8–9).

put it, this time in a way which, to us, is profoundly true: “fecisti nos ad te” – “you made us for yourself.”¹⁵ The telos (ad te) is already present in the original and ongoing creative act (fecisti). And, as Thomas Aquinas saw it, if the telos were to disappear, or if it did not exist, then what would there be left for us to desire?¹⁶ “Although the end be last in the order of execution, yet it is first in the order of the agent’s intention. And it is this way that it is a cause.”¹⁷ The endpoint, or telos, is intrinsically connected with the starting point, with the cause, orienting it in a particular direction.

The end is not a return to the origins, and it is also not a salvation or redemption in the sense of an escape from this world. Here too, the metaphor of the city, which *descends* from the heavens, is significant and helps us frame the “end” not as an “extraction” (or as a “rapture”) away from the material world, but rather as a new entrance into the world. The modern critique of Christianity as a religion centered on an other-worldly “illusion” was warranted. It still needs to be heard today.

In conclusion, and returning one last time to the bishop of Hippo, it may be that we wish to follow Paulinus of Nola who, when asked by Augustine for his opinion on “what the activity of the blessed will be in the next age, after the resurrection of the flesh,” replied “that he is more interested to receive Augustine’s advice on how to live in the present world.”¹⁸ Our claim, following in James Cone’s (and many others) footsteps, is that the two, i.e. the reflection about what is to come and the burning questions concerning *this* life and *this* world, ought not to be disconnected, but rather articulated.

The Christian Churches, in the West, are in a deep crisis, which began a long time ago, in the course of the modern era (17th–18th centuries). Chances are that those who are not facing this crisis will eventually (and sooner rather than later) join the others and experience the difficulty of transmitting the Gospel to the new generations. Thinking about eschatology, as well as apocalypticism, helps us see why the crisis is so profound, to the point where ready-made solutions are similar to a small bandage being placed on a large, bleeding wound. Christians themselves are confused as to what they may hope. Are they supposed to

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¹⁵ *Confessions* I,1.
¹⁶ *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae, q. 1, a. 4.
¹⁷ Ibid., q. 1, a. 1.
¹⁸ Epist. 45,4 (letter from 408), quoted in Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, op. cit., 159. Paulinus of Nola did add, however (in Brian Daley’s words), “like Augustine, that the norm for conceiving the state of the blessed in heaven must be the risen Christ, and that their activity will be to praise God, in harmony with each other and with the angels, using the tongues of their transformed bodies as well as their minds.”
believe in the glorious return of Jesus Christ, or is it “optional,” i.e. reserved for deeply religious and convinced believers? If this optional, why is that the case? If it isn’t, what exactly does the discourse about such a “return” mean? These questions, among others, reveal the predicament Christian theology is and has found itself in, for quite some time. The present volume does not pretend solving these issues and releasing us out of this predicament. It is, rather, an attempt at thinking, on the grounds of a rigorous study of Scripture and other texts as well as on the grounds of the Christian faith, about what we may hope.

We attempt to do this through four main avenues, i.e. the four main parts of the book which, in turn, focus on biblical interpretation and reception (I), modern science and transhumanism (II), the political, literature, and ethics (III), and a final part dedicated to constructing theological and philosophical perspectives (IV). Readers who wish to read summaries of each contribution may consult them at the end of the volume (427–436). The four parts of the book, and the wealth of insights each contains, are a testimony to the plurality of perspectives through which the topic of eschatology can be considered.

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