



1. Then, now and tomorrow: Ethical relevance of biblical eschatology

Entonces, ahora y mañana: relevancia ética de la escatología bíblica

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Abstract

Biblical eschatology is a coin where two inextricable sides concur and interact: the circumstances contemporaneous to the prophet and those envisioned for the future while proleptically mirrored in the former. Ethical relevance and an implicit stewardship of power shine in both as a seamless flux linking past, present and future, and stressing the inescapable option either for good or for evil within the all-encompassing historical scenario of the controversy between God and Satan

Keywords

Eschatology – Ethics – Revelation – Prophecy

Resumen

La escatología bíblica es una moneda en que dos caras inextricables concurren e interactúan: las circunstancias contemporáneas del profeta y las previstas para el futuro reflejadas anticipadamente en las primeras. La relevancia ética y una mayordomía implícita del poder brillan en ambas como flujo perfecto que enlaza el pasado, el presente y el futuro, y subraya la opción ineludible, ya sea por el bien o el mal, dentro del escenario histórico universal del conflicto entre Dios y Satanás.

Palabras claves

Escatología – Ética – Revelación – Profecía

The Apocalypse, a book for the present day. The publication of this Commentary has been delayed in manifold ways by the War. But these delays have only served to adjourn its publication to the fittest year in which it could see the light, that is, the year that has witnessed the overthrow of



the greatest conspiracy of might against right that has occurred in the history of the world... But even though the powers of darkness have been vanquished in the open field, there remains a still more grievous strife to wage, a warfare from which there can be no discharge either for individuals or States. This... is emphatically the teaching of our author. John the Seer insists not only that the individual follower of Christ should fashion his principles and conduct by the teaching of Christ, but that all governments should model their policies by the same Christian norm. He proclaims that there can be no divergence between the moral laws binding on the individual and those incumbent on the State. None can be exempt from these obligations, and such as exempt themselves, however well being their professions, cannot fail to go over with all their gifts, whether great or mean, to the kingdom of outer darkness. In any case, no matter how many individuals, societies, kingdoms or races may rebel against such obligations, the warfare against sin and darkness must go on, and go on inexorably, till the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of God and of His Christ.¹

When Charles wrote that preface to his book (1920), he did not imagine that his words would become even more relevant just two decades later, during another world war in which “the conspiracy of might against right”, and its aftermath, would once again surpass any historical precedent, even that of the First World War.

Eschatology and its ethical relevance

The permanent reserve of ethical relevance of biblical eschatology,² a tutorial role so clearly perceived by Charles, was lost of sight or ignored

¹ R. H. Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), I: xv, xvi.

² On this, see Victor Massuh, *Sentido y fin de la historia en el pensamiento religioso actual* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1963), especially chapter 7, where he comments on the thought of the German philosopher of history Josef Pieper: “La profecía es un modo de conocimiento no sólo ligado al futuro. Está entretrejida en todo presente histórico. Pueden percibirse los rasgos de la profecía en los hechos históricos actuales [...] captar hondamente el sentido de las situaciones y figuras históricas del presente [...] el Apocalipsis refleja la imagen de nuestro tiempo. Su espejo nos devuelve nuestra realidad” (90-91).

in general by the classical European hermeneutics, which built its theological reflection, its discourse about the last things, from a historical, cultural, social and economic perspective not only proper and particular, but also deeply conditioning.

While developing its discourse inevitably from its cultural scope, neither from unfeasible asepis, nor from a horizon other than its own, Europe shaped an interpretative tradition characterized, among other things, by deactivation of the acutely ethical stance of biblical eschatology, by a conciliatory re-reading of its prompts and imperatives, and by circumscribing the biblical message to an exclusive point in time and scenario, one that was to a great extent irrelevant to the present, to the spot in history it was on.

To say it in the words of two South-American theologians:

El lugar desde donde se hace teología proporciona perspectivas y hace hablar a las fuentes. ¿Desde qué lugar utiliza, interpreta y lee las fuentes la teología europea? ¿En qué lugar se sitúa el teólogo...? En estas preguntas va implícito un grave problema hermenéutico: la relación de la Palabra pronunciada en el pasado y su actualización en cada presente [...]. La tarea teológica y sus exigencias [son, pues]: actualizar el mensaje revelado desde las situaciones históricas concretas de la comunidad cristiana, para dar respuesta adecuada a las inquietudes y necesidades de la comunidad. La teología europea ha descuidado el lugar teológico desde el cual el pensador hace teología [...]. Apenas ha habido conciencia de la repercusión de esta situación en la reflexión teológica. El teólogo europeo ha creído hacer teología con pretensión de universalidad. La universalidad genera una cierta neutralidad. La neutralidad conduce al rechazo intencionado de cualquier lugar teológico concreto como perspectiva hermenéutica para hacer teología. Todo texto leído es un texto releído e interpretado desde la situación hermenéutica del lector. Sucede así consciente o inconscientemente. Por eso la teología europea tiene un cierto sabor a exégesis—interpretación de la Palabra en su contexto original. Le falta la proyección concreta, actualizadora y vivencial de la Palabra.³

This explains the fact that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, when Europe and the United States charted the world far and near by blood and sword to make true their neocolonial expansionist

³ Felicísimo Martínez Díez y Benjamín García F. *La teología latinoamericana* (Caracas: Ediciones Paulinas, 1989), 60-61; see also Caleb Rosado, *What is God like?* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1990), 7-13.

dreams, the vanguard of theology was involved, for instance, in an academic speculation on the purportedly several compositional strata of the Pentateuch and the assumed mythic near eastern roots of Revelation.

From a static temporal perspective, heyday hermeneutics anchored the divine interaction with history in a so distant past or future that any proposal of social renovation or reform was regarded as puerile at best or even foreign to religion.

And while it is true that biblical eschatology sees God's kingdom as realized or consummated in the future by the supernatural intervention of a supra human, transcendent Being, the theological insistence in the far away (or never)—leaving out the here and now—, plus the stress on the divine to the detriment of any human involvement, paralyzed the socio-historic commitment of Christianity as the salt of the earth, replaced the transhistorical relevance of eschatology for a historical indifference, and turned it into a pretext for evasion, leaving the hope without a practical articulation.⁴

From such a perspective...

... la teología europea se ha vuelto acrítica frente a opciones y compromisos históricos concretos: acrítica frente al pragmatismo consumista... Diluye así la fuerza transformadora y liberadora del mensaje y la praxis cristianos. El hecho de que ninguna mejora social sea absoluta y definitiva no significa que no deban emprenderse reformas sociales, o que todas valgan lo mismo. Hay mejoras y proyectos [...] que van en la dirección del reino. Hay proyectos que no van en la dirección del reino de Dios.⁵

Speaking about this neutralizing lack of updating affecting the person and message of Christ, the Prophet par excellence, another theologian alludes to the softening and the chronological anchoring of the biblical Christ and of his radically ethical message, prophetic *per se*, in these terms:

Hemos sustituido la incómoda ética del maestro de Galilea por una encantadora metafísica. Hemos desarrollado una religión alrededor de Jesús [...] que ha llegado a ser tan radicalmente diferente de su religión, que el Jesús histórico tendría

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

hoy que dejar bien sentado que él mismo no es cristiano [...]. Cuando un agitador espiritual, una figura recia y profética no ha podido ser aniquilado por la oposición directa, el mundo siempre ha encontrado otros medios de hacerlo a un lado. Se le convierte en ídolo, se le cubre de ropaje metafísico o teológico; se le nega en un credo; se escapa de su mirada penetrante y acusadora detrás de una nube de incienso; se le encastilla detrás de un elevado altar, y así se acaba con el molesto profeta [...]. Jesús ha compartido el destino de todos los profetas. A estos se los toma primero en serio y luego se los condena. Después de pasado largo tiempo se los reverencia, se los diviniza y ya no se los toma más en serio”⁶

The origin of that uncompromised, deactivating, and non-critic approach to biblical prophetism in general and to eschatology in particular should be looked for in what has been called the Constantinian settlement of the Christian Church during the decline of the Western Roman Empire, when Christianity, an originally transforming faith, was absorbed into the imperialist ideology and the social structure of the IV century Roman Empire, a culture and a society originally antithetic regarding Christianity. Thus, the church now allied to power served to sanctify and perpetuate the classical culture’s hierarchical society and worldview.⁷

That was the starting point of the agreement, so to say, between the church and the institutionalized evil in the person of the then-declining Roman Empire, an agreement as a result of which the church paid too high a price: the loss of its prophetic identity and consciousness, of its social role as an acutely ethical point of reference, and of its credibility in front of a then future world that would request relentlessly from it a consistency between its profession or theoretical discourse and its praxis.

⁶ Jorge Howard, *Rivales del cristianismo* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora), 109-111; Rosado, *ibid.*, 15-22; see also John H. Yoder, *The politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). Perhaps an instance of this uncommitted spiritualization of Jesus’ message is the preference many have shown for the Matthean version—although not deeply rooted in exegesis—of the Blessings over the Lukan. “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” (Matt 5,3) is less disturbing and conflictive than “blessed be you, poor: for yours is the kingdom of God [...]. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you that weep now: for you shall laugh [...]. But woe unto you that are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For you shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For you shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets!” (Luke 6,20-26).

⁷ On this, see, for instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The radical kingdom: The Western experience of messianic hope*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 2-3.

The church chose the power or, which is the same, the preservation of its recently acquired institutional status and privileges. It made itself the source of moral legitimacy for the secular power, but lost its identity, its singular nature and its deeply transforming message in the process.

God, time, and reality

The biblical revelation points out that the conflict between good and evil is not *a*-historic, *para*-historic or *supra*-historic, but *intra*-historic, namely temporal and spatial. This conflict cannot be solved in a dimension outside of the human realm, but *into* the world (Rev 12).

In line with this, the God of the Bible is committed to reality and history to the point of becoming a human *be-ing*, one who subjects himself and makes himself vulnerable to space and time, who reveals himself and enters the time-made human frame of history.

“But when the appropriate *time* had come, God sent out his Son, *born* of a woman, born under the law”, says Paul (Gal 4,4, emphasis supplied).⁸ “I am with you always, to the end of the age”, assured the Kurios, the divine Lord and glorified Jristos, the divine-human Messiah, to his disciples who were worried about the when of his return (Matt 28,20, emphasis supplied). “He will appear a second time, not to bear sin but to bring salvation” (Heb 9,28, emphasis supplied).

The God of the Bible does not fear time. He is neither supra-temporal nor time-bound, but omni-temporal. He does not avoid the ongoing flow of time and life but becomes a historical subject by his incarnation. He is not Aristotle’s motionless motor, but the history mover par excellence, the yeast of upward change by antonomasia.⁹

He is not the immaterial *logos* which abhors the degraded physical sphere, but the *Logos* who makes himself flesh and dwells amid his creatures as one of them (Exod 25,8; 29,45; John 1,14.18; Phil 2,5-7; Heb 2,14).

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all the Bible quotations are from the New English Translation.

⁹ On the inherent critical and transforming potential of the Christian message for history and the social structures, see, for instance, Roy Branson, “Social reform as a sacrament of the Second Coming”, *Spectrum* 21, 3 (May 1991), 49-59.

In short, the God of the Bible accompanies history from within it, sharing ontologically and experientially in human existence. He is the One who was in the past (Gal 4,4), who is in the present (Exod 3,14; Rev 1,4.8; 16,5), and who will be in the far and near future (Matt 28,20), a God who takes part in every episode of the struggle between good and evil from within the very conflict (Dan 3), who inter-venes (from the Lat-in *inter venire*: lit. “to come into”) into everything to make good finally prevail over evil: “And we know that God *interven*es in all things for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8,28, Biblia de Jerusalén; my translation, emphasis supplied).

Eschatology and engagement in reality

Besides the church’s acritical stand after its new status close to power, another element—as foreign to the Bible as the imperial doctrine of might—pushed its way into the Christian movement from as early as the mid-second century:¹⁰ dichotomy, which split reality between matter and a mutually exclusive parallel realm conceived as ideal and supra-human.¹¹

The fruit of such a drastic and neat split starting with philosophy soon spread to every area of Christian thought: anthropology¹² (soul versus body; monasticism; inherent sinfulness of sexuality; celibacy); ecclesiology (clergy versus laity); Christology (Docetism: Jesus as only divine, as human only in appearance); soteriology (faith as opposite to works); sacred history versus secular history; theory versus praxis; past and present versus eschatological future; etc.¹³

¹⁰ See, for instance, Daniel 2,20.21; John 19,10.11; Acts 5,29; etc.

¹¹ See Enrique Dussel, *Ética comunitaria* (Buenos Aires, AR: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986), especially 72, 73.

¹² On this, see, for instance, Enrique Dussel, *El humanismo semita* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1969); *El dualismo en la antropología de la cristiandad* (Buenos Aires, AR: Editorial Guadalupe, 1974); Hans Walter Wolf, *Antropología do Antigo Testamento* (São Paulo, BR: Edições Loyola, 1983), 2d. ed.; etc.

¹³ See Víctor Codina, *Ser cristiano en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Latinoamérica Libros S.R.L., 1986), 44-46.

In this way, a whole epistemology strange to the biblical heritage—both Hebrew and early Christian—broke through into it and reshaped the way Christians henceforth articulated reality:

A la hora de estudiar la relación entre teoría y praxis en teología, debe tenerse en cuenta la existencia de dos concepciones de la verdad: la helénica y la bíblica. La verdad griega está cercana a la contemplación teórica de las cosas, implica una visión estática, ahistórica e impersonal de la realidad. La verdad bíblica está más cercana a una transformación praxica de las cosas, implica una visión más dinámica de las cosas, más histórica, más personal. La verdad helénica está en el mundo ideal del conocimiento. La verdad bíblica se mueve en el proceso histórico de salvación. Aquélla se contempla; ésta se traduce en fidelidad personal [...]. Teoría y praxis son inseparables [...]. A los que pedían signos del cielo, Jesús les contestaba con signos de la tierra [...]. La esperanza es virtud cristiana activa.¹⁴

Once dichotomy was in the very marrow of the Christian worldview, part of the intelligentsia of the church took cover from any social-historical conflict or tension behind a *fuga mundi* attitude.¹⁵ “What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world”, said the mid-second century apologist who penned the Letter to Diognetus,¹⁶ perhaps in part to guarantee the state the innocuousness of the church to the material interests of the empire.

It was precisely to such a deactivation of the permanent ethical relevance of eschatology—first by splitting reality¹⁷ and later through compromise with power—, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed to, here in the words of the theologian Julio de Santa Ana:

Lo que Dios ha hecho por el hombre no ha sido cosa fácil para él. Por eso mismo el hombre no puede tomar con ligereza su vida cristiana. Así como para Dios lo hecho en Jesucristo en favor del hombre ha sido de un costo inapreciable, de la misma manera la vida cristiana que desarrollen los hombres debe ser fiel

¹⁴ F. Martínez Díez y B. García F., *ibid.*, 73-74, 76.

¹⁵ See Dussel, *ibid.*, 21-24.

¹⁶ Letter to Diognetus 6.1. Text from Michael W. Holmes ed., *The apostolic fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 541.

¹⁷ Nazism, as other previous and subsequent totalitarian ideologies, managed to perceive and take advantage of this Christian split or dichotomization when it labeled as “State affairs” its genocidal policies, its pan-Germanist expansionism, etcetera. See in this respect, for instance, Tim Stafford, “Hitler and the failure of the church”, *Signs of the Times*, August 1991, 7-11.

reflejo de dicha ‘gracia costosa’. Así como en Cristo dicha gracia lleva a la encarnación, del mismo modo no cabe una vida cristiana separada del mundo, sino en medio de él. El gran significado de la obra de Lutero fue romper definitivamente con el convento, dejar todo ámbito propicio para la existencia de la fe, porque en realidad la vivencia de ésta no puede existir sino en medio del mundo, que le es hostil. Cuando la fe cristiana insiste en querer preservarse libre de toda mancha, y para ello se abstiene de participar en las luchas y problemas humanos, deja de ser una fiel respuesta a su Señor. La “gracia costosa” implica seguir a Jesús: abandono de privilegios, de respetabilidades, de posiciones adquiridas, y disposición a ser presencia de Jesucristo en medio de los problemas y vicisitudes humanas. Esto tiene que dar como resultado una acción cristiana plena de significado en medio de lo que está ocurriendo. Sin embargo, la presencia cristiana en el mundo actual está demasiado lejos de llegar a ello. Es el resultado del “abaratamiento de la gracia”, de no haber tomado en serio lo hecho por Dios en Jesucristo. Se vive un cristianismo inauténtico cuando todas las miras del supuesto cristiano están puestas en actividades y reflexiones que tienden a separar netamente la esfera de lo cristiano de la esfera de lo temporal. De este modo, se pierde el verdadero significado de la encarnación; el mundo y la historia dejan de ser el escenario donde se despliega la acción de Dios, al mismo tiempo que los llamados cristianos se abrogan el derecho de limitar dicha acción de Dios únicamente a la esfera de la institución eclesial. Para que ello no ocurra, la fe debe vivir recurriendo a una disciplina constante por medio de la cual el creyente, abandonando toda posible seguridad y superioridad espiritual, se lanza a servir a los hombres tal como Cristo lo hizo. Cuando ello ocurre, la “gracia costosa” ya no es sólo aquella que se mostró en la existencia de Jesús, sino la misma vida de la comunidad cristiana y de quienes la integran. Cuando la comunidad cristiana vive en el reconocimiento de la “gracia costosa”, deja de ser un grupo de hombres que viven únicamente en actitud de concentración. Y se transforma en presencia de amor servicial “en-el-mundo”. Dicho de otro modo, la iglesia reunida se transforma en iglesia dispersa, el Evangelio no va dirigido principalmente a los que ya creen en él, sino al mundo.¹⁸

The purposes of eschatology

While the general purpose of biblical eschatology is to show in advance the development of the great controversy between good and evil and its outcome: God’s final triumph, it has also some other related aims.

1. To highlight God’s sovereignty over history despite the appearances and his leading in the crucial events based on the distinctive

¹⁸ Julio de Santa Ana, *Protestantismo, cultura y sociedad* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1970), 98-100.

traits of his character (love, justice, respect for human free will, etc.) and in cooperation with those committed to good and justice for the divine restoration of all things (see Isa 44,24-46; 55,10.11; etc.).

2. To unmask (one of the nuances of ἀποκάλυψις) the human and supernatural entities making evil operative along history, mostly close to the *eschaton* and in the sphere of power (Dan 10,20.21; 11,1; John 2,23-25; 1 Cor 12,10; Eph 2,2; 6,12; 1 John 4,1; Rev 13,2.4; 16,13.14.16; etc.), which makes every institution, policy and pronouncement a concrete manifestation of God's kingdom or of the kingdom of evil.
3. To affirm the faith of those who believe after fulfilment (see John 13,19; 14,29).
4. To reveal and highlight Christ's nature (divine and human), character (loving and just), and mission (redemptive and judicial) within the controversy between good and evil (e.g., Dan 7,9-14; Luke 24,27; John 5,39; Rev 19,10). Thus, biblical prophecy in general, and eschatology in particular, is Christ-centric par excellence.
5. The struggle between good and evil is as concrete, spatial and temporal as God's ordinary *modus operandi* *in* and *through* history (time), *in* and *through* the world (matter). It is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, divine and mediated by humankind. Thus, one of the aims of biblical eschatology is to stress the unescapable human option—by act or omission—either for good and justice or for evil and injustice, the impossibility of being neutral in the context of the cosmic controversy between God and Satan. Therefore, Bible prophecies on the last things confront each person with his/her eternal destiny and urge him/her to choose life and justice (e.g., Dan 2,34.35.44.45; cf. Matt 21,43.44) since, as Charles pointed to in his book's preface, there is no such a thing as mere passive expectation nor neutrality in the battlefield of ethics. As Jesus said: "He who is not with me is against me", Matt 12,30; cf. John 3,16-21.

Therefore, it is not just a question of finding out what side of the conflict lies behind every idea and institution. The commitment includes the daily exercise of being “light” (illumination) and “salt” (preservation) “*in the world*” (see Matt 5,13-16; John 17,15.20-23) as a conscious and consistent instrument of good against evil, as a retaining wall and a dependable point of ethical reference for those who are in pursuit of truth and justice: “Those who have guided the people in the true path shall be like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12,3).

Eschatology and power

Biblical eschatology is not just an ethical discourse in general, but one on power. There is a theology of power, a stewardship of power, and an ethics of power implied in it.

It could not be otherwise, because everything in the conflict between good and evil—both in heaven and on earth, along it and at its peak—has to do with power (Gen 3; Isa 14; Ezek 28; Dan 3; 10; Luke 4,5-7; Rev 12,7-12; 13; 16; 20).¹⁹

As certainly as time is the raw matter of history, and this is the raw matter of prophecy, power is the raw matter of the conflict between good and evil.

After all, what is the conflict if not a power struggle? A legitimate and benevolent power challenged and usurped by a vicious another; and a struggle between the former to recover what was lost and the usurper to retain, consolidate and extend it.

The most meaningful about this discourse is that it has a transient, supra-human, and divine origin (Rev 22,10.16.20). It is God who decides

¹⁹ The Scriptures present themselves as a seamless chronicle of the struggle between good and evil, both incarnate in duets of opposed elements which confront each other in every historical epoch, environment and situation: God and Lucifer; Eve's seed and the serpent's offspring; Abel and Cain; etc., and by the paradigmatic manifestations of the institutionalized, corporative evil opposed to God's people: Babel, Sodom, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, etc. Interestingly, these historical incarnations of evil are typologically evoked in Revelation, the epitome of biblical eschatology, as symbolic prefigurations of the powers in which evil would be embodied in the final stage of the conflict (see Rev 11: Sodom and Egypt; Rev 16, 17 and 18: Babylon; Rev 2,18-22; 16: Ahab and Jezebel; etc.).

that his eschatological revelation has to do preponderantly with power. He is the one who points humanity's attention to such a focus and epicenter besides worship as a naturally derivative topic (Isa 14; Mark 4,8,9 and parallels; Rev 13).

And that's the reason why biblical eschatology is the joyful anticipation of the final and definitive victory of good over evil, of God over all his enemies, and this has to do with power (Ps 110.1; Mark 12.36 and par.; Acts 2.35; Heb 1.13; 10.13; Rev 5.13).

The book of Revelation—the most outstanding exponent of biblical eschatology— is no other thing than God's open and frontal declaration of war against the institutionalized and corporative evil masked behind the structures of power serving the kingdom of darkness.

The radical stance of eschatology

The ethical radicality of biblical eschatology (especially that of Revelation), becomes even more evident when projected against the background of the Roman imperial cult of the first centuries of the Christian era.

In such a context, nothing could be as defiant as the eschatological prophetism of the book of Revelation.

Let's imagine the reaction of a political system as that of Rome—which held absolute power and required from its subjects a total submission based on religious assumptions—, together with those instigating the empire against the early church, to affirmations like these:

1. "Jesus Christ [...] the ruler over the kings of the earth" (Rev 1,5).
2. "To him be the glory and the power forever and ever!" (Rev 1,6).
3. "He is returning with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him..." (Rev 1,7).
4. "I am the first and the last" (Rev 1,17).
5. "I hold the keys of death and of Hades!" (Rev 1,18).

6. “The devil²⁰ is about to have some of you thrown into prison” (Rev 2,10).
7. “To the one who conquers and who continues in my deeds until the end, I will give him authority over the nations—he will rule them with an iron rod and like clay jars he will break them to pieces, just as I have received the right to rule from my Father” (Rev 2,26.27).
8. “This is the solemn pronouncement of the Holy One [Christ], the True One, who holds the key of David, who opens doors no one can shut, and shuts doors no one can open” (Rev 3,7).
9. “[Referring to Christ] the originator of God’s creation” (Rev 3,14; cf. Phil 2,5.6; Col 1,15.16; John 1,1-3; Heb 1,1-3).
10. “I will grant the one who conquers permission to sit with me on my throne, just as I too conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev 3,21).
11. “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the All-Powerful, Who was and who is, and who is still to come!” (Rev 4,8).
12. “And whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders throw themselves to the ground before the one who sits on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever, and they offer their crowns before his throne, saying: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, since you created all things, and because of your will they existed and were created!’” (Rev 4,9-11).

²⁰ Here it is an unmistakable and obvious identification between the devil and its political vehicles: Roman backed up local authorities and later on Rome itself—often instigated by some fringes of Judaism—in the first centuries. How would “the Devil” be able to do that (to imprison the faithful Christians), but making use of individual and corporative agents, by incarnating himself—so to say—in historically concrete instruments? That radically ethic identification has implications and derivations very disturbing to many: the stewardship of human power—be this political, military, economic, religious, or of any other nature—inevitably falls according to this scheme in one of two categories: either divine or devilish.

13. “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered...’” (Rev 5,5).
14. “Then I saw standing in the middle of the throne [...] a Lamb that appeared to have been killed. He had seven horns [i.e. all the power, namely omnipotence] and seven eyes [i.e. all the knowledge, namely omniscience]” (Rev 5,6).
15. “And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders threw themselves to the ground before the Lamb [...] They were singing a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were killed, and at the cost of your own blood you have purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation. You have appointed them [the proscribed and persecuted Christians] as a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth’” (Rev 5,8-10).
16. “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels [...] all of whom were singing in a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the lamb who was killed to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and praise!’. Then I heard every creature—in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea, and all that is in them— singing: ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be praise, honor, glory, and ruling power forever and ever!’ [...] and the elders threw themselves to the ground and worshiped” (Rev 5,11-14).
17. “Then the kings of the earth, the very important people, the generals, the rich, the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb’” (Rev 6,15.16).
18. “‘Salvation belongs to our God, to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev 7,10).

19. “[The Christians martyred for their loyalty to Christ] are before the throne of God and and they serve him day and night in his temple” (Rev 7,15).
20. “A male child [Christ], who is going to rule all the nations with an iron rod” (Rev 12,5).
21. “The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the ruling authority of his Christ, have now come” (Rev 12,10).
22. “They will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev 17,14).
23. “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the All-Powerful, reigns!” (Rev 19,6).
24. “Then I saw heaven opened and here came a white horse! The one riding it was called ‘Faithful’ and ‘True’, and with justice he judges and goes to war [...] The armies that are in heaven [...] were following him [...]. From his mouth extends a sharp sword, so that with it he can strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod [...], and he stomps the winepress of the furious wrath of God, the All-Powerful. He has a name written on his clothing and on his thigh: ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’” (Rev 19,11-16).

What could be more explicitly combative, sharply ethical, and challenging in the context of a self-divinized political power and its religious and institutional allies than statements like those? What greater challenge than that to the all-embracing claims of the Roman imperial doctrine? Since the main subject of those pronouncements is Jesus Christ, accused of sedition by the Jewish religious establishment and executed under their instigation by the Roman occupation army, one can only imagine their effect on the authorities of the metropolis. An executed leader challenging his executioners from the memory and the militancy of his followers!

Eschatology as a request for justice

Despite what most of Christianity has made of the biblical message in general and eschatology in particular, both are characterized by an ethical radicality that has nothing to do with passive acquiescence in the face of evil and injustice.

Scriptures are plenty of instances of such an imperative request of a commitment to what is right:

1. God committed himself to avenging Abel's blood shed by Cain (Gen 4,10): "But the LORD said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!'" For the vindicatory sense of that "crying out", cf: Rev 6,10.
2. Zechariah, murdered by order of king Joash, delegates to God the typically Semitic mission of the blood avenger or nearest kin to apply the retributive justice (2 Chron 24,22): "May the LORD take notice and seek vengeance!"
3. God committed himself to avenge the blood of the Christian martyrs by punishing their persecutors and executioners: "They cried out with a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Master, holy and true, before you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?'. Each of them was given a long white robe and they were told to rest for a little longer, until the full number was reached of both their fellow servants and their brothers who were going to be killed just as they had been" (Rev 6,10.11). See God's implicit response in Rev 16,3-7; 18,20.24; 19,2; 20,4.
4. God promises to do justice to the workmen exploited by their oppressive masters: "Look, the pay you have held back from the workers who mowed your fields cries out against you, and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived indulgently and luxuriously on the earth. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person, although he does not resist you" (James 5,4-6). Cf: Rev 18,13.

5. God promises to avenge the death of his prophets and his Son: “What then will the owner [God] of the vineyard [his people] do to them [those who murdered his prophets and his Son]? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others (Luke 20,15.16; *cf.* 13,34; Rev 14,17-20).

Ethics and the main views on eschatology

There are three main hermeneutical approaches to biblical eschatology (basically Daniel and Revelation)—with their variations: continuous historicism (a.k.a. historicism), contemporary historicism (a.k.a. preterism), and futurism.

The first of them is easily traceable back to the beginnings of Christianity and even earlier, since the Bible itself attests that the inspired or canonic writers approached the prophetic texts of their predecessors from such a perspective (*cf.*, for instance, Dan 9,26.27 to Matt 24,15; Luke 21,20).

Historicism holds that as time is the raw material history is made of, foreseen history is the raw matter of prophecy. Since eschatology is preponderantly predictive, its content is no other thing than the future seen before it happens in virtue of divine prescience, although respectful of free will (*e.g.* Isa 41,21-23; 44,7; 46,9.10; Amos 3,7). The interpretative clues to the symbols of this literary genre are basically within Scripture itself. The future events foreseen and announced in this kind of prophecy turn out to be recognizable when they happen by the unequivocal depiction that the prophecy previously made of them (*e.g.*, Matt 24:15; John 14,29; Rev 17,15).²¹

According to this hermeneutical perspective, many Christian scholars—even from much earlier than the 16th century—, saw in the

²¹ According to the American historicist theologian Frank Holbrook, in “Understanding Revelation”, *These Times* (July 1 1980): 32, the system commonly known as...

historical school of prophetic interpretation is based on the idea that prophecy pertains to the realm of time and, since prophecy is set up and expressed in a given historical situation, it will also find its fulfillment in the historical ongoing, which basically means a continuous and progressive fulfillment of the visions from the days of the prophet until the end of the present historical order.

condition of the moral bankruptcy of the church a fulfillment of prophecies like those of Daniel 7 (the little horn), Daniel 8 (the religious phase of the little horn corresponding to the fourth beast of Dan 7), 2 Thessalonians 2 (the apostasy and the antichrist), Revelation 13 (the sea monster with seven heads, ten horns, and a slain but later healed head), Revelation 17 (the bloodthirsty whore or adulteress), 18 (the symbolic Babylon), etcetera.

This interpretation became normative within Protestantism since the 16th century, something that explains the rise—in the same century and within the Jesuit Counter-Reformation—, of the other two and now prevalent interpretative schools: preterism and futurism.

The first was the creation of the Jesuit Luis de Alcázar (1554-1613), and its basic assumption—as its name suggests (“preterism”, from “pre-terit”, namely “past”)—is that the prophetic pictures of Revelation about coalitions of powers hostile to God’s people alluded to the persecutions suffered by the church during the first centuries at the hands of the roman empire. In consonance with this, the antichrist who would try to exterminate Christ’s faithful followers was any of the emperors outstanding for their cruelty, Nero among them.

There is no place in this view for any predictive element. John, therefore, was addressing the present and the immediate future of the Christian church of the late first century.

In the same historical context—the 16th century Counter-Reformation—, the Jesuit Francisco Rivera (1537-1591) developed the interpretive school known as futurism, whose basic axiom, as its name indicates, was that the content of Revelation related to “the time of the end” pointed to events that would happen in a remote future—three years and a half before the end of human history—, when a Jewish antichrist [in harmony with the typically medieval ecclesiastical antisemitism] would fiercely persecute the Christians.

Both seemingly unreconcilable interpretations had nevertheless something in common: They deviated from the Roman church the accusing finger of the protestant—as well as the early Christian—historicism.

Curiously, those two systems of interpretation were adopted by European mainstream Protestantism in the 19th century. While its scholarly, critical, and liberal wing opted for the preterist model, the conservative sector adopted, with some variations, the futurist.

Both views had a deeply eroding influence on the perception of the ethical dimension of biblical eschatology.

In different measures, in different ways, and for different reasons, the three approaches—preterism, historicism, and futurism—lost sight of the multi-dimensional and omni-temporal character of the biblical eschatological prophecy and limited it to a unique historic moment or period, thus silencing its voice, which endeavored to speak to every future generation, even though it aimed particularly at some specific events and historical periods.²²

The first preterists, with an apologetic agenda in mind and in the conditioned and conditioning context of the medieval ecclesiastic polemics, diverted from the *raison d'être* of the biblical eschatology in anchoring it to a remote past which had nothing to do with “the end time”—the leitmotiv of biblical eschatology and the very essence of the prophetic portions of Daniel and Revelation. In consequence, if the powers unmasked, denounced, and condemned in the prophecy were part of the remote past, the present became *ipso facto* exonerated from any divine or transcendent reproach. The prophecy was no longer relevant for the here and now, and much less for the tomorrow. It becomes just an old-fashioned curiosity, a museum piece, a nice salt statue.

The futurists, in the same arena that the former ones, and for the same motivations and conditionings, contented themselves with taking away from the church a dishonor not only self-evident but even denounced from within its ranks.²³ From the futurist interpretative perspective, if the powers denounced and condemned by the prophecy were

²² See Charles Teel, “Growing up with John’s beasts: A rite of passage”, *Spectrum*, May 1991, 25-34.

²³ In this respect, even some high-ranking ecclesiastical authorities—and much before the protestant reformation—saw in the medieval stage of the Roman church the fulfillment of the prophecies about the antichrist announced by Daniel, Paul, and John.

not present yet and were confined to a nebulous and remote future, the silence of the divine oracles toward the past and the medieval present of the church exonerated it *per se* from any guilt and charge. Silence grants consent.

However, paradoxically, the protestant historicist interpretation which insisted during centuries on pointing out to the Roman church as the “little horn” of Daniel, and the Babylonian beastly and human characters of Revelation, made itself, to a lesser degree, also vulnerable to the same mistake of its two counterparts.

Even though it was aware of the manifold historical, concrete, spatial, and temporal manifestations of good and evil in the context of the great controversy between them and perceived the precise historical pertinence of the biblical eschatological denounces, it lost sight of the general, vast, panoramic and continuous dimension of that conflict and, in consequence, of the need of being always alert to detect new disguises, both historically prefigurative and derivative, nuances and shades adopted by the manifold evil besides the main targets of prophecy.

No one will distract the historicist from the right tree—its characteristics, dimensions, location, origin, history, development, etcetera—the Bible points its accurate ax to. But it is simultaneously possible to lose sight of the surrounding forest, the other morphologically related species, the other manifestations and embodiments—ideologies, institutions, movements, characters, etcetera—in which good and evil made themselves visible and fought each other in every epoch and place.

Perhaps this explains in part the acritic attitude and even the legitimation on the part of Christian-rooted Europe and America toward ideologies, practices and policies such as slavery, colonialism, imperialism, bellicism, nationalism, racism, totalitarianism, antisemitism, etcetera.

Could also have been there—in the 16th century chronologic unilaterality of preterism and futurism—part of the roots of the acquiescence of the European theology regarding the perennial pertinence and relevance of biblical eschatology?

The multi-temporality or trans historicity we have been talking about—which makes pertinent and re-applicable with different levels of emphasis the warnings, denounces and rebukes of the eschatological prophecy to the multiform historical manifestations of evil wherever and whenever they show up—demands an accordingly hermeneutical effort to reach an interpretative synthesis which integrates their proper insights on the past and the future as part of the transhistorical relevance of Bible eschatology.

No doubt Revelation had something to say about the most effective *political* instrument of evil ever known in antiquity, namely the Roman Empire. Did not Daniel devote most of chapters 2, 7, 8, and 11 to portray that versatile power in advance? What could be “the iron” and the “terrifying, frightening and very powerful” fourth beast other than imperial Rome?

Holbrook precisely pointed to that historical immediate and primary pertinence or relevance when he said: “The historical system would not deny that certain aspects of the apocalyptic prophecies of Revelation had an immediate and local significance for the early church when it was originally penned”.²⁴

The same is recognized by George E. Ladd:

The prophets spoke not only of contemporary events; they constantly related contemporary historical events to the last great event at the end of history: the day of the Lord when God will visit his people to redeem them and to establish his Kingdom.

This brings us to a characteristic of Old Testament prophecy which is also characteristic of the Revelation, and which solves this problem of distance (futurism) and relevance (the pertinence of prophecy for the addressees contemporary to the prophet). As we have just pointed out, the prophets have two focuses in their prophetic perspective: the events of the present and the immediate future, and the ultimate eschatological event. These two are held in a dynamic tension, often without chronological distinction, for the main purpose of prophecy is not to give a program or chart of the future, but to let the light of the eschatological consummation fall on the present (2 Pet. 1:19). Thus in Amos’ prophecy

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the impending historical judgment of Israel at the hands of Assyria was called the Day of the Lord (Amos 5:18, 27), and the eschatological salvation of Israel will also occur in that day (9:11). Isaiah pictured the overthrow of Babylon in apocalyptic colors as though it were the end of the world (Isa. 13:1-22). Zephaniah described some (to us) unknown historical visitation as the Day of the Lord which would consume the entire earth and its inhabitants (1:2-18) as though with fire (1:18; 3:8). Joel moved imperceptibly from historical plagues of locust and drought into the eschatological judgments of the Day of the Lord.

In other words, the imminent historical judgment is seen as a type of, or a prelude to the eschatological judgment. The two are often blended together in apparent disregard for chronology, for the same God who acts in the imminent historical judgment will also act in the final eschatological judgment to further his one redemptive purpose [...]. In the same way, our Lord's Olivet Discourse was concerned with both the historical judgment of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman armies (Luke 21:20ff.) and the eschatological appearance of Antichrist (Matt. 24:15ff.). Rome was a historical forerunner of Antichrist.

Thus, while the Revelation was primarily concerned to assure the churches of Asia of the final eschatological salvation at the end of the age, together with the judgment of the evil world powers, this had immediate relevance to the first century. For the demonic powers which will be manifested at the end [...] were also to be seen in the historical hatred of Rome for God's people and the persecution they were to suffer at Rome's hands.

Therefore, we conclude that the correct method of interpreting the Revelation is a blending [...]. The beast is both Rome and the eschatological Antichrist—and, we might add any demonic power which the church must face in her entire history. The great tribulation is primarily an eschatological event, but it includes all tribulation which the church may experience at the hands of the world, whether by first-century Rome or by later evil powers.

This interpretation is borne out by several objective facts. First: it is the nature of apocalyptic writings to be concerned primarily with the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the eschatological end of the age. This is the theme of the Revelation: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (1:7). Second: it is the nature of apocalyptic symbolism, whether canonical or noncanonical, to refer to events in history leading up to, and associated with, this eschatological consummation. Third: as already noted, the book claims to be

a prophecy. We have already seen that the nature of prophecy is to let light shine from the future upon the present.²⁵

But, what about the present? Has the biblical eschatology a message, a reserve of relevant, pertinent ethical meaning for today, for the here and now? Can the historical flux of the conflict between good and evil be split in: past (sixth century B.C.—or second according to preterism—in the case of Daniel; first century A.D. in the case of Revelation) and future consummation (the *esjaton*), dispensing with our present, which was the future for Daniel and the past from the perspective of the climax of the *esjaton*?

Had the prophecy so much to say to Egypt, Babylon, and Rome, but nothing against the Ottoman genocide which between 1915 and 1923 barbarously and systematically slaughtered one and a half million Christian Armenians basically on religious grounds? Was the biblical eschatological prophetism voiceless while Nazism and its allies murdered ten million human beings? Or during the massacres perpetrated by the communist regimes? Or during the “ethnic cleansing” in some Slavic countries in the late 20th century? Or during the genocidal South African apartheid? Or when the European colonial powers erased some aboriginal societies from the American continent? Or during the massacres of the civil populations in the proxy wars and the expansionist operations under the guise of antiterrorism? Were those powers not destroying part of the Lamb’s bride? Were not their victims God’s children as well as the Christians persecuted during the first centuries or the faithful Jewish suffering under the heathen nations in Old Testament times? Was there not among them some “remnant”, some “God’s people” (see Rom 2,14-16)?

Such an artificial splitting of the seamless spatial and temporal flux of the conflict between good and evil into mutually exclusive, isolated and unreconcilable categories—past, present, and future—, such confinement of biblical eschatological relevance to a far distant past or future, and the subsequent ethical emptying of the biblical prophetism for the

²⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The Apocalypse of John: A commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 12-14.

here and now surely explains the lack of protagonism of the institutionalized Christianity during most of its history.

De ordinario, nuestros catecismos o proyectos catequéticos presentan el plan de Dios en esta forma: Primer momento (léase *pasado*), Dios crea el mundo y al hombre libre; Segundo momento (léase *presente*), el hombre libre ejecuta el bien o el mal; Tercer momento (léase *futuro*), Dios juzga al hombre libre. Si obró bien = el cielo; Si obró mal = infierno. Este esquema en el fondo no es cristiano. El verdadero enfoque cristiano afirma que la creación no ha terminado, ya que continúa en el segundo momento del esquema. La creación es histórica.

Además, en el segundo momento, el hombre no es el único agente. También Dios actúa haciendo historia. Y no es imparcial, mero espectador. El juicio de Dios tampoco es un tercer momento. *La escatología ya ha dado comienzo. Ya se está juzgando al hombre en la fase histórica.* En la escuela tradicional, la creación y el juicio serían ahistóricos, solamente sería histórico el segundo momento. En cambio [...]. las tres etapas son históricas. Por eso, todo se centra y reduce a la segunda fase, a la historia.²⁶

Crises, eschatological ethics and the faithful

If, as George E. Ladd states, “the eschatological facts are prefigured in historical facts”²⁷ each historical crisis meaningful for the history of salvation—which all of them are in the context of the conflict between good and evil—acts as a catalyst making visible God’s transhistorical remnants against the backdrop of the hostility of institutionalized evil against them.

Thus, the formidable persecutory crisis of the first three centuries of the Christian era made unmistakably evident who were in fact “the saints of the Most High”: Not certainly “the synagogue of Satan”, those who claimed to be “Jews but were not”, neither those who had embraced the gospel during the relative calmness of the first times. Much less those compromising with pagan culture. On the contrary, there were those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” no matter the path goes through the shadowy valley of death (Isa 53; Ps 23); the “few that have not stained

²⁶ Carlos Bazarra, *¿Qué es la teología...?* (Buenos Aires, AR: Ediciones Paulinas, 1985), 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

their garments” (Rev 3.4); those who “did not knee” before Baal (1 Kgs 19,18); the three Hebrew lads of Daniel 3 among the silent majority of their compromising fellow countrymen; those who have “no lie in their lips”, not even to preserve their lives or their acquired privileges.

These, like Christ, distinguish themselves by opposing a pacific ethical—although unequivocal—resistance to the claims and demands of the self-divinized powers opposed to God (see Acts 5,29).

The ethical submission of all the religious organizations in Nazi Germany is something widely known and documented since long ago.²⁸ This relatively recent historical experience serves as a superb illustration of what can be expected just before the final irruption of God in history according to Revelation 13 through 18, when a small and marginalized handful of believers abandoned by their respective institutionalized religious groups, will be again the target of the wrath of a global, self-divinized power whose mystic will seduce most of humankind.

Eschatology and God’s option

In the biblical eschatology, God reveals himself as the God of the weak, the persecuted, the oppressed, and the despised, contrary to the self-divinized, dictatorial and persecuting worldly powers (see Dan 2, 7, 8; Rev 13; 17,2.13.14.17; 18,3.9.11.15.23; 19,19; etc.).

²⁸ See on this Klaus Scholder, *The churches and the Third Reich* (London, UK: SCM, 1988); Guenter Levi, *La iglesia católica y la Alemania nazi* (México: Editorial Grijalbo, 1965); Rolf Hochhuth, *El vicario* (México: Editorial Grijalbo, 1964), especially the historical-documentary appendix; Stafford, “Hitler and the failure of the Church”; etc. It is interesting the stereotyped answer of the religious organizations in general to the all-embracing and self-legitimated powers, an answer more predictable the greater the degree of institutionalization of those organizations, which makes them—by way of fear or of a self-preserving interest—proportionally more vulnerable to the propaganda and the pressure of those in power. That ecclesiastic compromise was the norm in Czarist Russia, in the subsequent communist stage, in Germany under the Nazism, in the socialist satellites of the Eastern Europe during the Cold War and during the right and left-wing dictatorships of Latin America, etcetera. Among the copious available literature on the issue, see, for instance, Sidney Reiners, “Catarama’s Romanian Ordeal: Where was the church?”, *Spectrum*, 18, 1 (October 1987), 26-31; Mark A. Kellner, “Europe: German, Austrian churches apologize for Holocaust actions”, *Adventist News Network*, August 15, 2005, accessed June 17 2024, <https://adventist.news/news/europe-german-austrian-churches-apologize-for-holocaust-actions>.

Therefore, the eschatology of the Bible is a demystification of the devilish-rooted human power. It is the counter-discourse, the delegitimizing par excellence of the kingdom of darkness, the subverted version of the established order whenever the evil disguises behind it.

The deeply destabilizing discourse inaugurated by Christ against the powers of darkness²⁹ implies and represents an eschatological theology and stewardship of power: the slain Lamb defeats the dragon (Rev 5,6-14); those who are poor for God's sake are the truly rich (Rev 2,8,9); the trodden "stars" shine again "forever" (Dan 12,3); the defenseless woman chased by the dragon becomes the wife of the victorious Lamb (Rev 12; 19; 21); the bloodthirsty adulteress/whore turned powerful, wealthy and renowned through her fornication with her mighty lovers ends humiliated and destroyed together with them (Rev 18; 19,1-3); the cry of those slain for their loyalty to the Lamb finally set in motion God's just wrath in the shape of the last devastating plagues (Rev 16); the one who ends on the throne is the unarmed Lamb (Rev 5; 21) while the worldly powers and powerful ones who served as agents to evil end in the lake of fire (Rev 20).

In the style of the anti-Babylonian imprecatory psalms, God puts in his lips the vindictive cry of the Christian martyrs, who no longer can cry for vindication because they were silenced by evil in the shape of the self-divinized political and religious power in its manifold historical manifestations all along the conflict between good and evil.

²⁹ "Your gift may be in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you" (Matt 6,4); "Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt 6,19); "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul [*psyjé*: life]" (Matt 10,28); "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions use their authority over them [...]. It must not be this way among you!" (Matt 20,25,26); "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Matt 20,28); "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20,35); "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers" (Matt 23,8); "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matt 23,11); "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt 23,12); "All who take hold of the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26,52); "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18,36); etc.

See also Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in politics* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), especially the chapter entitled "The political Christ", 142-150; John H. Yoder, *Jesus and his politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

The biblical eschatological genre is, therefore, a preferential exponent of God's unmistakable option for the few and weak in contrast to the preferences and option of evil: the few powerful and the masses cooperating—actively or passively, out of conviction, for fear or personal convenience—to the prevalence, persistence and consolidation of evil (Rev 13; 16).

Unpacking eschatology

An illustrative example of the perception of the reserve of ethical relevance of biblical eschatology happened in the second half of the 19th century in the United States in the context of the debate about slavery.

The economy of the whole country, and particularly of the South, rested largely upon the affluence of the cheap workforce seized with no cost or risk from the African continent.

The main churches heir of the Reformation—particularly the Methodists—soon became divided on the issue.³⁰

The seeming Pauline tolerance of slavery (see his letter to Philemon) and a supposed divine curse reaching the presumed black offspring of Cam (see Gen 9,18-28) was for the southern advocates of slavery enough evidence of God's approval of it. To that it was added a very particular exegesis of Matthew 22,21, according to which "the secular world with its laws and politics pertained to the Caesar and had nothing to do with the spiritual life, which was limited to the practice of religion and the issues of the soul".³¹

As the different positions consolidated and radicalized, the central government became more hesitant to make a choice that would result either in a fragmentation of the territorial and political unit or in a bloody civil war of uncertain results. The North, and Lincoln, were determined to save the unity without abolishing slavery, but that seemed less and less viable.

³⁰ See, for instance, Duncan A. Reily, *Momentos decisivos del metodismo* (San Bernardo do Campo, BR: Imprenta Metodista, 1991).

³¹ *Ibid.*

In such a context, a religious movement derived from the millerite phenomenon and finding its *raison d'être* in Bible eschatology was born: The Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Its pioneers were among the most active antislavery adherents and censured in the most severe terms the slavery itself as well as the vacillating politics of President Lincoln on the issue.

The American historian Jonathan Butler, says:

Like evangelicalism at large, Seventh-day Adventism knew an earlier era of social activism when abolitionist Adventists spoke out for the civil rights of black Americans [...]. We need not be torn between our Adventism and basic humanitarian concern. As we discover from our Adventist heritage, they have been one and the same.³²

In the 1860s, when the antislavery movement was a crusade wielded by the North putting all the guilt for the slavery on the South, the Adventists of New England and the Middle West censured “the peculiar institution”, broke federal law in helping the slaves to escape, and denounced President Lincoln for his slowness to free the slaves.

The Millerite proto-Adventism was born as one of the most sharply ethical and socially progressive reform movements.³³

Joshua Himes, who made William Miller publicly notorious, had built the Chardon Street Chapel, in Boston, where he paid homage to the abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison as well as other famous social reformers of that time.

Charles Fitch, who would become the herald of the message of the second angel of Revelation 14 within Adventism, wrote in 1837 the booklet *Slaveholding weighed in the balance of truth and its comparative guilt*, about the time when he knew Millerism.

³² Jonathan Butler, “Race relations in the church: The early radicalism” (part 1), *Insight* (January 30, 1979): 7-8.

³³ See, for instance, Jonathan Butler, “Speaking up”, *Insight*, June 12, 1979, 17-18; Charles Teel, Jr. “The radical roots of the Peruvian Adventism”, *Spectrum*, December 1990, 5-15; *Idem*, “Revolutionary missionaries in Perú: Fernando and Ana Stahl”, *Spectrum*, February 1988, 50-52.

In 1840, George Storrs, the rediscoverer of the biblical doctrine of the future and conditional immortality of the human being, met frequently with Orange Scott, one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, created to protest the tolerance of the methodists toward slavery.

Joseph Bates, one of the three founders of Seventh-day Adventism, organized an antislavery society in 1830. Like Henry Thoreau and many others in the North, he saw the war launched by North America against Mexico (1846-1848) as an expansionist strategy to extend the pro-slavery territory.

In 1847, he said in his writing entitled *Second advent way marks and high heaps*: “The third woe has come upon this nation, this boasted land of liberty, this heaven-daring, soul-destroying, slave-holding, neighbor-murdering country!”³⁴

It was in the 1850s when Seventh-day Adventists developed their interpretation according to which the two-horned beast resembling a lamb but acting as the dragon (see Rev 13), represented the United States.

John N. Andrews, a young and prominent leader during the early stage of Adventism, said that North America had professed that all human beings are born free, equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights such as life, freedom and the opportunity to be happy. Nevertheless, the American dragon was keeping three million human beings enslaved. Its professed equality was a lie.³⁵

In the decade before the Civil War, each event was for the Seventh-day Adventists a confirmation of the dragon-like character of North America. The law against the escaped slaves flared up even the most moderated northerners, and the Adventists, like others, appealed to what they called “a higher Law [than the federal]” and sought shelter for themselves on it to refuse to give the fugitive slaves back to the authorities. In some cases, the Adventists operated the underground rails with which they helped the slaves to flee to Canada.

³⁴ Butler, “Race relations in the church” (part 1), 6.

³⁵ Butler, *ibid.*, 9.

John Preston Kellogg, the father of the physician John Harvey Kellogg and W. K. Kellogg (inventor of the famous cereal flakes), built one of those underground rails on his farm, in the south of Michigan.

John Byington, who would become the first president of the General Conference, helped several runaway slaves who reached his door, in the state of New York, and was one of the founders of the anti-slavery Wesleyan Methodist Church. He remained nine years as a member of that church because he sympathized with its unequivocal abolitionism and named two of his sons after two famous abolitionists.

In those days, the *Review and Herald*, the official magazine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, expressed its regret for the legislation that favored the expansion of the pro-slavery territory.

The Adventists at that time rebuked the Congress for its muzzling politics which limited the debate about slavery and accused the southern congressmen of violating the freedom of speech.

In the *Review and Herald*, the Adventist evangelist M. E. Cornell referred to the Independence Day of the United States as the celebration of “American slavery, alias independence and liberty”.³⁶

The act of the abolitionist John Brown³⁷ acquired an epic significance for many northerners and, according to J. N. Loughborough, Ellen White regarded it as a sincere and meditated attempt to free the slaves; not as a quixotic and irresponsible action, but as a breath of freedom.³⁸

At that time, Mrs. White was very frank and frontal about the issue and even told a pro-slavery Adventist that he should be separated from the church if he insisted on his opinions favorable to slavery.

³⁶ Butler, *ibid.*, 10.

³⁷ John Brown (1800-1859) was an American deeply religious abolitionist who defended the emancipation of the slaves. He planned an uprising of the slaves in Virginia and the constitution of a free state south of the Appalachians. To that purpose, he assaulted with some companions a federal arsenal in 1859, but no slave dared to join them, and he had to surrender. He was judged for treason and executed.

³⁸ Butler, *ibid.*, 10.

In 1858, she published the first volume of the *Spiritual Gifts* series, which later would be increased to become *The great controversy between Christ and Satan*.

As a part of that material, she identified slavery in America—and the complicity of the American churches with it—as one of the main indications of the world’s moral decline and of its imminent and terrible end. There we read ethical pronouncements tinted with eschatological relevance like the following ones:

All heaven beholds with indignation, human beings, the workmanship of God, reduced to the lowest depths of degradation, and placed on a level with the brute creation by their fellow men. And professed followers of that dear Saviour whose compassion was ever moved as he witnessed human woe, heartily engage in this enormous and grievous sin, and *deal in slaves and souls of men*.³⁹ Angels have recorded it all. It is written in the book. The tears of the pious bond-men and bond-women, of fathers, mothers and children, brothers and sisters, are all bottled up in heaven. Agony, human agony, is carried from place to place, and bought and sold. God will restrain his anger but a little longer. His anger burns against this nation, and especially against the religious bodies who have sanctioned, and have themselves engaged in this terrible merchandise. Such injustice, such oppression, such sufferings, many professed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus can witness with heartless indifference. And many of them can inflict with hateful satisfaction, all this indescribable agony themselves, and yet dare to worship God. It is solemn mockery, and Satan exults over it, and reproaches Jesus and his angels with such inconsistency, saying, with hellish triumph, Such are Christ’s followers!

These professed Christians read of the sufferings of the martyrs, and tears course down their cheeks. They wonder that men could ever possess hearts so hardened as to practice such inhuman cruelties towards their fellow-men, while at the same time they hold their fellow-men in slavery. And this is not all. They sever the ties of nature, and cruelly oppress from day to day their fellow-men. They can inflict most inhuman tortures with relentless cruelty, which would well compare with the cruelty papists and heathens exercised towards Christ’s followers. Said the angel, It will be more tolerable for the heathen and for papists in the day of the execution of God’s judgment than for such men. *The cries and sufferings of the oppressed have reached unto heaven*,⁴⁰ and angels stand amazed at the

³⁹ An allusion to Revelation 18,13.

⁴⁰ Cf. Genesis 4,10; James 5,4; Revelation 6,9.10.

hard-hearted, untold, agonizing, suffering, man in the image of his Maker, causes his fellow-man. Said the angel, “The names of such are written in blood, crossed with stripes, and flooded with agonizing, burning tears of suffering. God’s anger will not cease until he has caused the land of light *to drink the dregs of the cup of his fury, and until he has rewarded unto Babylon double. Reward her even as she rewarded you, double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double*.”⁴¹

I saw that the slave-master would have to answer for the soul of his slave whom he has kept in ignorance; and all the sins of the slave will be visited upon the master. God cannot take the slave to heaven, who has been kept in ignorance and degradation, knowing nothing of God, or the Bible, fearing nothing but his master’s lash, and not holding so elevated a position as his master’s brute beasts. But he does the best thing for him that a compassionate God can do. He lets him be as though he had not been; while the master has to suffer *the seven last plagues, and then come up in the second resurrection, and suffer the second, most awful death*.⁴² Then the wrath of God will be appeased.⁴³

During the war, and before the declaration of the emancipation of the slaves, the northern forces suffered repeated defeats. Ellen White regarded them as divine judgments against slavery.

In 1862 she said:

God is punishing this nation for the high crime of slavery. He has the destiny of the nation in His hands. He will punish the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence.⁴⁴

Uriah Smith, another Adventist pioneer and editor of the *Review and Herald*, referred with disdain to Lincoln’s politics before emancipation as “conservative, not to say suicide”.

In an editorial of the official publication of the church, he said that President Lincoln’s reluctance to abolish slavery would mean...

⁴¹ In allusion to Revelation 14,8,9; 18,6 (italics supplied).

⁴² A clear allusion to Revelation 15, 16 and 20.

⁴³ Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1944), 1:191-193 (emphasis supplied).

⁴⁴ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:264.

... to stand up against the “enthusiasm for freedom” which reigns in nearly twenty millions of hearts in the free North, and against the prayers of four millions of oppressed and suffering slaves. If he continues to resist all these, in refusing to take these steps which a sound policy, the principles of humanity, and the salvation of the country, demand, it must be from an infatuation akin to that which of old brought Pharaoh to an untimely end.⁴⁵

In that initial stage of the Adventist church, its members and authorities openly gave their opinions about the great social and political problems of the day. From a radical and republican position, they requested “Emancipation now!” for all the slaves in front of a president reluctant to that and a nation in crisis. The socio-historic and political concerns were for them a moral and eschatological question.

Talking about the defenders of slavery, the Adventist pioneer John N. Andrews wrote the following:

This sin [slavery] is snugly stowed away in a certain package which is labeled “Politics”. [Those in favor of slavery] deny their fellow men to condemn any of the favorite sins which they have placed in this bundle; and they evidently expect that any parcel bearing this label, will pass the final custom-house, i.e., the judgment of the last day—without being examined. Should the All-seeing Judge, however, inquire into their connection with this great iniquity, they suppose the following answer will be entirely satisfactory to Him: “I am not at all censurable for anything said or done by me in behalf of slavery; for O Lord, Thou Knowest, it was a part of my politics!”⁴⁶

The updating and ethical application the Adventist pioneers did of the biblical eschatology in the light of their historical reality can be summed up by the following words of Jonathan Butler: “Mrs. White’s antislavery statements had been grounded in eschatology. American slavery was [for her] a ‘sign of the end’”⁴⁷

In this respect, she included, as we saw, American slavery in the message of the second angel of Revelation 14. Mainstream Christianity of

⁴⁵ Butler, *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Butler, *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Butler, “Race relations in the church: A segregated Adventism” (part 2), *Insight*, February 6, 1979, 7.

her day had fallen, in God's sight, because of its complicity with human exploitation upheld by the State.

Here and there within the Adventist literature, it is still possible to find examples of this same updating, inclusive and always opened to the present eschatological hermeneutics:

Can the theme of the "fallen Babylon" (Rev. 18) be applied to the whole spectrum of world institutions which are in moral bankruptcy—governments that lie and treat with cruelty their citizens, industries defrauding, stealing and contaminating the environment behind a respectable facade, universities that deify the ideology over the true honesty, religious organizations avid of power and wealth instead of ministering with simplicity, compassion and veracity, as was done by the Founder of the church—or can only be applied narrowly to the roman papal institution?⁴⁸

Some [adventists] have seen in "Babylon" a symbol of all the religious groups, including the Christian denominations, except the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We should be careful not to isolate ourselves nor to adopt the sectarian attitude of "we against them". This erroneous perspective consists in seeing God's true church exclusively as a differentiable group rather than as an invisible organism integrated by faithful believers and located wherever. This is the prevailing view in the New Testament.⁴⁹

Eschatology, ethics and secularism

It is precisely the losing sight of the perennial relevance and of the ethical demands of biblical eschatology that discredited institutionalized Christianity the most in the eyes of secularism and served as a justification for its rejection of God and religion.

Along most of the twice millennial history of the church, in every crisis where its ethical credibility was at stake, the church systematically

⁴⁸ Alf Birch, Bailey Gillespie, Pat Habada, James Park, Monte Sahlin, and Jim Zackrison, *So I send you: Biblical models of soul winning*, Sabbath School Lessons, teacher's edition, January-March 1994, 159.

⁴⁹ Don Eckenroth, Ron Flowers, Bailey Gillespie, Brian Jones and Jim Zackrison, *Three angels' messages: Last call for heaven*, Sabbath School Lessons, teacher's edition, October-December 1994, 85 (*The Great Controversy*, 440, 441 is quoted).

opted for institutional self-preservation, surrendered to evil, and forsook those haunted by it (see Prov 31,8.9).

During the Nazi tragedy, and after its postwar sequels, in what was probably its great opportunity to recover its deeply questioned credibility, the Christian religion received noticeable requests from the skeptical—although committed to good—European intellectuality.

In 1948, in an anthological statement, the existentialist Albert Camus exhorted the Dominican Order of Paris in terms verily evangelic and pastoral:

Comparto con vosotros el horror del mal [...] nunca he de cesar de luchar contra este mundo, en el que sufren y mueren niños [...]. El mundo aguarda de los cristianos que se despojen de la abstracción y se enfrenten con el semblante inundado de sangre que ha asumido la historia en nuestros días [...]. Quizá no podamos impedir que esta creación sea un mundo en el que los niños son martirizados. Pero podemos disminuir el número de los niños martirizados. Y si vosotros no nos ayudáis a ello, ¿quién, pues, nos ha de ayudar? [...] Sé, y lo sé a veces con el corazón transido, que a los cristianos les bastaría con decidirse para que millones de voces en el mundo entero vinieran a unirse al clamor de un puñado de solitarios que sin fe ni ley⁵⁰, abogan en favor de los hombres y de los niños en todas partes e infatigablemente.⁵¹

A decade before, the “voices in the wilderness” of a few Christians opposed to the passivity of the institutionalized European religion during the advances of the Nazi doctrine requested at least an unequivocal pronouncement of rejection from the most influential religious leadership, something that never happened.

The result of that silence [on the part of the German religious hierarchy] disconcerts the Christians and disappoints with the most extreme bitterness the non-Christian, who, other way could be now converts instead of being today losing all confidence in the church as a consequence of its failure in condemning the flagrant injustice.⁵²

⁵⁰ Cf. Romans 2,14-16.

⁵¹ Albert Camus, *L'incroyant et les chrétiens* (Paris, FR: Pléiade, 1948); quoted in J. Feiner y L. Vischer, *Nuevo libro de la fe cristiana* (Barcelona, ES: Herder, 1977), 102, 103.

⁵² Waldemar Gurian, *Hitler and the Christians* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), 162.

Half a century later, pastor Martin Luther King Jr. censured the permissive passivity of a white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian America in one of his famous speeches:

It may well be that we would have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people and the violent actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time. Somewhere we must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So, we must help time, and we must realize that the time is always right to do right.⁵³

How, then, not seeing in that ethical emptying of eschatology a reason for the rejection of so many “prodigal sons” (see Luke 15) against the theology and eschatology of their “older Christian brothers”?

Therefore, it is neither legitimate nor honest to quote Lenin’s “religion is the opium of the people” without setting his rejection—certainly and unnecessarily programmatic—of the Christian religion in itself and as a whole against the backdrop of the connivance of the state church with the government.⁵⁴ It is not legitimate to condemn the atheism of the French revolutionaries without remembering the suffocating and demoralizing tutoring that the monarchic clergy exerted over bodies, goods, and minds during endless centuries.⁵⁵ Nor it is legitimate to anathematize Nietzsche’s disregard for God without seeing in it a reaction to a

⁵³ Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining awake through a great revolution”, accessed on June 20, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/thekingcenter/videos/it-may-well-be-that-we-will-have-to-repent-in-this-generation-not-merely-for-the/648455449232170/>.

⁵⁴ See Godfrey T. Anderson, *The past is always present* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1977), 12-13.

⁵⁵ The absolutist dogma of the monarchy by God’s design had been sacralized by the European ecclesiastic hierarchy as a faithful reflect of the famous thought expressed by Louis XIV, “the sun king”, in his *Memories*: “Todo lo que se encuentra en la extensión de nuestros Estados, de cualquier naturaleza que sea, nos pertenece [a los reyes]. La voluntad de Dios es que cualquiera que haya nacido súbdito obedezca ciegamente [...]. Por muy nefasto que pueda ser un príncipe, la rebelión de sus súbditos es siempre criminal” (quoted in Alfonso Lazo, *Revoluciones del mundo moderno* [Barcelona: Salvat, 1984], 7). In other words, no one was in power unless by God’s will. Therefore, the ruler was accountable for his actions to God alone.

decadent European religiosity that not only did not condemn antisemitism, imperialist bellicism, discrimination, and the deification of human power, but also had consubstantiated with them and became their main apologist, often through its consenting silence.⁵⁶

In this light, Christianity as such seems not to have been the very aim of their criticism, but what the Christian religion became over time.

Those antireligious reactions should then not be interpreted as an attack directed against religion itself, but against what it turned to be:

Un conjunto de prácticas doctrinarias que enmascaran contenidos extrarreligiosos [...] una “ideología” que legitima los intereses temporales de un grupo privilegiado, una clase, o una institución que quiere prolongar el *statu quo* social [...]. En tales casos, el rechazo de la religión es un acto purificador que conviene [...] sobre todo a la religión misma. [Tal rechazo] puede estar obedeciendo a un imperativo religioso mucho más que ateo, puede ser la respuesta a un acto de fe honda mucho más que una negación de lo sagrado [...]. La religión va cobrando a lo largo de su ejercicio una serie de contenidos espurios e inauténticos. En tales casos, los rasgos exteriores se convierten en contenidos esenciales, la pureza inicial cede al hedonismo y la blandura, la austeridad primitiva se diluye en un decorativismo desmesurado y teatral, la emoción sobrecogedora se pierde en la mecánica de comportamientos rituales, en un ceremonial hueco que ha gastado su fuerza simbólica; y la rebeldía social que supone toda actitud de entrega a lo sagrado truécense en la sumisión a los poderes del mundo. Cuando la religión se ha transformado en esta serie de formas [...] la crítica [...] niega legítimamente todo aquello que debe ser negado, destruye y anula esto que traba el desarrollo de una auténtica religiosidad. [Esa crítica] rinde un excelente servicio a la religión, porque por más cruenta que sea, nunca tendrá la fuerza suficiente como para destruir sus contenidos auténticos: al día siguiente de un rechazo, ya sea en la forma de una objeción teórica o de una persecución, la religión renace con mayor vitalidad.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Clifford Goldstein, “Anti-Semites and the City of God”, *Liberty*, (January-February 1985), 24-25; M. A. Zaburov, *Historia de las cruzadas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Futuro, 1960), especially 11-31; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Así habló Zaratustra* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1992); Hans Küng. ¿Existe Dios?, 2nd. ed. (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1979), 554-559; Juan Carlos García-Borrón, prologue to *Así habló Zaratustra* (Barcelona: Hyspamérica, 1974), 23-25; Horacio Lona, *Fe cristiana y realidad social: estudios sobre el cristianismo antiguo* (Buenos Aires: Centro Salesiano de Estudios, 1992), 12; etc.

⁵⁷ Víctor Massuh, *La libertad y la violencia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1968), 119, 120, 122.

En ciertos momentos de la historia de una religión, las formas de la relación que el hombre establece con [Dios] se convierten en obstáculos para la relación misma. Estas formas son doctrinas, ritos, prácticas, símbolos, que con el tiempo se vuelven productos muertos pero sacralizados que sustituyen a Dios mismo”,⁵⁸ says Massuh evoking Buber, and finishes stating:

Lo sagrado trasciende todas sus manifestaciones; ellas mismas pueden alcanzar tal grado de distorsión y degradación que acaso se vuelvan contra lo divino y constituyan formas vacías que encubran la “ausencia” de Dios, una voluntad de poderío, un interés mezquino o una preocupación “humana, demasiado humana”. Marx y Lenin confundieron la esencia de la religión con sus objetivaciones alienadas y sus deformaciones históricas. Confundieron las formas que Kant llamó “estatutarias” de la religión, con sus contenidos eternos. Sólo tuvieron ojos para sus rasgos caricaturescos, para aquellos aspectos —que sin duda existieron y existen— en que las iglesias aparecen pactando con los poderosos y en que los teólogos aparecen legitimando el *statu quo* social.⁵⁹

Sadly, those achievements and victories that had to be the natural and spontaneous patrimony of Christianity in virtue of its acutely ethic, critical and transforming message were achieved despite Christian organized religion or at best without it.

Esa afirmación de lo finito y concreto, del hombre bajo la forma de la valoración del cuerpo, de la historia y del tiempo [...] esas conquistas se hicieron bajo las banderas del ateísmo porque la religión había, por lo general, permanecido hostil o indiferente a aquellas potencias, y porque se distrajo en una divinidad ajena a la vida, a la historia y a la finitud terrena. El ataque antirreligioso fue tan legítimo que obligó a la religión a revisar su propia imagen, a incorporar a su seno las conquistas realizadas fuera de su propio campo. Ella aprendió la lección: bajo la compulsión correctora del humanismo ateo dirigió sus pasos hacia el mundo... acentuó su necesidad de insertarse creativamente en la historia y ocuparse de los problemas sociales.⁶⁰

It is in this Christianity uncommitted and foreign to reality, hostile or indifferent to it, and in the ethical emptying of the biblical prophetism, where should be sought the main trigger of modern and contemporary disregard for God.

⁵⁸ Víctor Massuh, *Nihilismo y experiencia extrema* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1975), 87.

⁵⁹ Massuh, *La libertad y la violencia*, 121, 122.

⁶⁰ Massuh, *ibid.*, 88.

It is valid here the distinction Karl Barth made between Christian faith and religion. In this respect, and commenting on the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Julio de Santa Ana concludes:

La religión implica una huida del mundo, la anulación de la historia, a la vez que una actitud netamente individualista que procura únicamente el bienestar eterno para el individuo que dice creer en algo o alguien. En cambio, la fe cristiana es una actitud *responsable* (es una respuesta servicial a los llamados que Dios presenta al hombre a través de las necesidades de sus prójimos) no escapando a este mundo ni a esta historia, sino asumiéndolos en todas sus dimensiones, porque es el mundo de Dios, y la historia es el proceso a través del cual los hombres son llevados al Reino de los Cielos. Si el Evangelio fuera “religión”, entonces cabría afirmar que el cristianismo es un ingrediente del “opio de los pueblos”. Nadie duda de que en determinadas circunstancias históricas la fe cristiana ha caído en la esfera de lo religioso. Pero el caso no es tal: Jesús no viene a salvar “el alma”, sino a procurar el bien del hombre en todos los aspectos (sana enfermos, da de comer a los hambrientos, brinda su compañía a los parias de la sociedad, no cae en actitudes demagógicas buscando la adhesión de las multitudes, no coacciona al prójimo, sino que respeta su libertad de decisión, etc.). Un cristianismo no religioso no intenta la distinción entre la esfera de lo sagrado y la de lo secular. Esto significa limitar la acción de Dios a la primera, caer en un dualismo (carne versus espíritu) que no tiene ningún fundamento en las fuentes de la revelación cristiana. Ya no pueden tener lugar actitudes escapistas y monacales para vivir la existencia cristiana; ése es el gran significado de Lutero y de la Reforma: señalar que la vida cristiana no es cosa exclusiva de un grupo especializado y de ambientes convencionales, sino que es “vida-en-el-mundo”.⁶¹

Conclusion

Has the biblical eschatology any consequences for the here and now or it is an anachronistic, outdated discourse exhausted in a preterit instance? Has it to do with an expectation anchored in a remote and elusive future?

From the biblical perspective, it rather seems that the eschatological prophetism in general (Daniel, the synoptic apocalypse, 2 Thessalonians, etcetera) and the apocalyptic in particular (Revelation) is neither only past (preterism) nor only future (futurism), but a balance between both

⁶¹ de Santa Ana, *Protestantismo, cultura y sociedad*, 106, 107.

historical moments seeking to illuminate and accompany the human being along the most meaningful and crucial stage of history, that of the consummation of all things. It is a lighthouse set in the destination harbor while projecting its light along the human historical ongoing from even before the first century A.D. until the end of the way. As it happens with a distant light, it becomes clearer as one walks toward its source, as we go along the road, as we are increasingly closer to its distant origin. Biblical eschatology was both present and future for the prophets and the apostles, for Daniel and John, while it is past, present and future for us, and it will remain so until the very end as tomorrow becomes today and today becomes yesterday.

Then, the question the believer has to ask himself or herself regarding biblical eschatology in the context of its ethical permanent, transhistorical relevance is not so much what it said to the remote past (it certainly said something to it) or what it will say to the near or far future (it certainly will speak to it), but what is its message for the here and now, for the present, for us individually and collectively, for the moment and the scenario of the great conflict between good and evil we are actors—not spectators—in.

Whether biblical eschatology is as pertinent for us as it was for Daniel and John to some degree depends on the answer we give to that question.