

THE END OF THE WORLD: FEAR, CONSPIRACY, AND HOPE

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*Dies irae, dies illa
Solvat saeculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sibilla.*

...

*Iudex ergo cum sedebit,
Quicquid latet, apparebit;
Nil inultum remanebit.
Quid sum miser tunc dicturus*

...

Salva me, fons pietatis.

...

*Recordare, Iesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae;
Ne me perdas illa die.*

...

*Confutatis maledictis,
Flammis acribus addictis,*

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Voca me cum benedictis.

. . .

Lacrimosa dies illa,

Qua resurget ex favilla

Indicandus homo reus.

The day of wrath, that day
Will dissolve the world in ashes,
As both David and the Sibil testify.
When the Judge is seated on his throne
Whatever has been hidden will be unveiled.
What shall I, wretched as I am, say then?
Save me, O Fount of compassion.
Remember, compassionate Jesus,
That I am the purpose of your earthly journey;
Do not do away with me on that day.
When the accursed have been confounded
And cast into the sharp flames,
Summon me among the blessed.
That day of weeping
In which the guilty person shall rise from the ashes to be judged.

The last day is terrible, horrifying, a day of infinite dread, fear, and pain. Yet it is also a day of compassion and therefore of hope. From the Ancient Near East to the twenty-first century its power to inspire fear and hope continue. And no wonder, for the last day will come for each person, and none of us knows the day or the hour. The psychology of your own last day entails the psychology of humanity's last day. No thoughtful adult can avoid reflecting at least occasionally about his or her final moment.

But the great body of thought — theological, philosophical, literary, and artistic — that has produced such powerful images over the millennia is not limited to reflection on our

own personal lives and deaths. The variety and extent of the meanings of the last day in this long tradition must be grasped before the power of the last day can be understood. The terms used in describing such ideas were vague at the time and remain ambiguous, but for the purposes of this article their meaning is as follows: Eschaton: the end; Eschata: the last things; Eschatology: any discussion or presentation of the endtime, whether mythical or theological; Apocalypse: a revelation of secrets about the eschata, especially as in the Apocalypse of John (Revelation); Apocalyptic: belief and conduct according to such revelations about the endtime; Messianism: the belief that a ruler (Iranian Soshyans, Hebrew Mashiach, Greek Christos; Muslim Mahdi) will come at the end to set the world right); Millennium: a thousand years; millennialism or millenarianism or chiliasm: the belief that we need to prepare for the coming end of the world, which will usher in a thousand-year rule of Christ on earth; *Parousia* (lit. “arrival”): referring to the second coming of Christ (although modern theologians use the term far more often than early ones: the word appears in the Bible only in Matthew 24).

What, then, is the tradition of The End? In the most obvious sense, the end is the physical death of you and me and each of us. In the next sense, it is the final, eternal goal of each of us. Its other senses go beyond the personal. The last day is also perceived as the end of the entire human race; or of the planet; or of the entire universe; or of all matter. It is the end of the physical universe, of both space and time, but not the end of the cosmos, the *kosmos*, the *logos*, the meaning and purpose of the universe, which is eternal. In fact, far from being the end of cosmos, the great hope of the last day is that it is the final victory of cosmos — the right order of the world, over *chaos*, the disorder or evil, of the world.

The meanings of the “world” are ambiguous in every language. In common parlance, we speak of “sailing around the world” or of a “world atlas,” implying that the word *world* is equivalent to *the planet Earth*. But the ancient god Atlas holds the sphere of the heavens as well as that of Earth on his shoulders. Many of the most recent world atlases rightly supply maps of the moon, Mars, and Venus and photographs and charts of other planets, stars, and galaxies, and even the entire physical universe. Thus the “world” is again beginning to be commonly understood as the “universe.” And this is the way that ancient

philosophers took the meaning. When Aristotle or Paul or Aquinas or Luther contemplated the “end of the world,” they intended a large spectrum of meaning that includes all meanings of “the world.” Christian writers also intended a radical change in the inmost sense of the “world”: this present world, “this world” or “this age,” the world of humans, of the flesh, of sin, of the Devil, of corrupt human society will be replaced by the world of God, the city or kingdom of the blessed. This is the eschatological sense: that the old world, the depraved, decrepit and temporary present world will be destroyed and replaced by the new world, in which God reigns with truth and justice. Eschatology (the study of the events ending the world) declares that at the endtime, the rule of evil will be replaced by the rule of good.

Now, looking at the question rationally, it must be true either that the world is essentially good; or it is essentially evil; or it is a mixture of good and evil; or it is neither good nor evil but a pointless, meaningless universe. The last option has hardly ever been held except among some of the leading intelligentsia over the last hundred years or so. This last option, if really taken seriously, excludes all discussion, for it is an option in which *kosmos* and *logos*, meaning and purpose, either do not exist at all or can be spun like dreams from the feelings of each of us. It is a world in which no truth is possible, and therefore one in which its adherents have no right to claim — though currently dominant philosophers continue to do vociferously — that their own views are superior to any others. This option is entirely foreign to the worldview of the eschatological tradition and will be discussed no further.

The worldview of the eschatological tradition is that the world is a *kosmos*, that it has order and meaning and that therefore the endtime will have, despite its horrors, order and meaning. Still, there are ancient and basic variations in this tradition. Did the universe always have meaning, was it always a cosmos? Various ancient myths (I use the term *myth* in its modern technical sense of a story meant to convey meaning, rather than in its current usual sense of “falsehood”) — both Mesopotamian and Greek — assume an initial state of chaos from which God or the gods formed cosmos. In this point of view, chaos is something that God struggles to overcome, that resists him, and is therefore his

enemy. It is something evil, or at least non-good. One of the most common Ancient Near Eastern myths, found in a number of cultures, is the “combat myth,” the struggle of the forces of order against the forces of disorder. This myth posits a war of chaos and its defenders against the creators of cosmos. Sometimes it is a short struggle, as in Genesis, where the Lord completes his task in six days. Sometimes it is a very long struggle, often fought periodically or even annually; in this view the struggle is ongoing and has not yet been won. For example, in Canaan, the fertility god Baal must struggle continually against Mot, the god of death and sterility; in Egypt the god of life, Osiris, is locked in a continual struggle with Set, a god of death and sterility. Chaos is only partly transformed into cosmos, and the process of creation continues. If this view were entirely foreign to Christianity, there would be no need of a Christian eschatology; but that Christ will come again is a certain indication that the job has not yet been completed. A late twentieth-century school of thought known as Process Theology went so far as to say that God himself is still in process and will not be completed before the endtime. The essential meaning of the myth is the movement from *chaos* (Ur-evil) to *kosmos* by divine intervention, and then to the wrenching apart of cosmos by evil (whether demonic or human), and then to the destruction of evil by a Messiah or other divine means, then finally culminating in a restoration of primeval good (the future replacement of the current evil age by eternal truth and justice).

A similar trend of thought — common among Orphics, gnostics, Manicheans, and Cathars — was that the world was created evil by a malign power often called the Devil, and that the forces of light must struggle constantly against the powers of darkness. This sort of extreme dualism, originating in both Greek and Iranian thought (in Orphism and Mazdaism), had its appeal to many Christians but has been decisively excluded from the Christian tradition.

An opposite, philosophical view is that the world is perfectly good as it is if we but understood it. This view has gained little traction over time, for it would oblige us to consider the holocaust of the Jews and the slaughters of central Africa, not to mention a billion minor crimes and horrors that take place every day and everywhere, as good. If the

divine ways are that inscrutable, then there is no common ground between ourselves and God. If torture, rape, and murder are part of the divine plan, then no one but grotesque criminals are in harmony with that plan — which, curiously, leads back to the idea that the world must be evil.

Another viewpoint is that God, being good, created the world good, but that something went wrong — or, perhaps, chaos, once having been overthrown by cosmos, is revived by some horrible disaster as represented in the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve. Representing the entire human race, the first parents by their prideful disobedience disrupt the cosmos that God has so beautifully composed. Then a second struggle must ensue, and here, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the ancient combat between chaos and cosmos was now translated into the struggle between good and evil.

Evil, let loose in the cosmos and so deforming it, must be fought again and defeated again, time after time. Adam and Eve, having broken the contract with God, introduced an age of sin until God gave humanity a second chance with the covenants he made with Israel and the prophets he sent to the children of Israel. Eventually he sent Christ to break the back of evil and restore the good in the reign of God. But since it is clear that evil persists in the world even after the Incarnation, evil will come to an end only at the second coming of Christ, when the kingdom of God will be established eternally with truth and justice and mercy.

In the meantime, however, we live in a *civitas permixta*, a city, a society, a world in which good and evil still struggle against one another. The proof of that view is seen daily in the newspapers and on television. Still, the endtime will occur with the victory of good.

That is the essence of the question of whether the endtime is a time of fear or a time of hope. It is a time of hope, for then truth and goodness will eliminate lies and evil forever. (The ancient and persuasive distinction between the truth and the lie, however attenuated in present-day courts, governments, remains essential in any society with pretensions to justice.) Yet the end must also be a time of fear, and, as the medieval hymn *Dies irae*

illustrates, it is the fear that has often captured the attention of Christian thinkers. Whether that last day is perceived as a literal day or whether it is a metaphor for all of time under the eschatological intent of God, it is terrible. The fears are not minimal: the tradition offers no easy entry into heaven. Before heaven come tribulations of every sort, including wars, plagues, and famines, the Antichrist and the last battle, judgment of each human being, and, for those who have turned their lives away from God, hell. There have always been some who face torments bravely on the way to the end, but perhaps many more for whom pain and suffering seem too terrifying an obstacle to look forward with joy or even equanimity to The End.

Whatever else doomsday meant, it meant the *complete* transformation of the world in space and time and its replacement by a new age of truth and justice, a new age that would not only be a restoration of the original goodness but also an improvement: a *reformatio in melius*, a restoration that would be better than the original. In Judeo-Christian terms, the final paradise will be an improvement on the original paradise of Adam and Eve.

The Christian view of the endtime derives directly from the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha, with earlier influences from Ancient Near Eastern myth, Iranian dualism, and Greek Orphic dualism. The Ancient Near East had many creation myths but few eschatological myths, the assumption being that the world, once having been made, was eternal. The eschatology was chiefly individual, as when the Egyptian god Anubis judges every soul upon death, but death was ameliorated by resurrection myths, as when Babylonian Ishtar descends to the underworld and emerges again; or as when Egyptian Osiris is torn to pieces but reassembled, or as when Greek Persephone descends to the underworld every year in the winter and emerges each spring.

In Iran, however, thoroughgoing world eschatology emerged several hundred years before Christ in the religion of Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism). When fully developed, Mazdaism presented a completely dualist worldview: there is neither one god nor are there many, but there are two: Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd), the god of light and joy, and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), the god of darkness and deceit. These two powers struggle with one another

over the domination of the world until, at the end, the last Soshyans, the final Saint, appears, Ohrmazd triumphs, evil is obliterated, and the world is purified in the Frashkart, the restoration of perfection. When the end comes, there will be a final judgment in which the children of light go to live with Ohrmazd in joy while the children of darkness perish in the House of the Lie. This dualism of two warring spirits may well have influenced apocalyptic Judaism, though the chronology and interactions are still debated.

It may be in this original spiritual dualism that the notion of vast conspiracies, so common down to the present, originated. If you were a child of the light, then you were faced with a vast worldwide conspiracy headed by Ahriman and supported by his evil followers. And of course if you were a child of the lie, you were continually foiled and outraged by the conspiracy of the righteous followers of the god of light who intended to destroy you. Jews have always felt threatened by the vast conspiracy of the Gentiles against Israel, and the Gentiles rage against the supposed power of the Jews. In Christianity, the true faith (however defined) must fend off the vast conspiracy of pagans, Jews, Muslims, heretics, and witches bent on thwarting the saving work of Christ. In Islam, the unbelievers form a vast conspiracy against the prophet, the shar'ia (Muslim law), and the true faith, while to Christians the Muslims are the dreaded unbelievers. Communists struggled against the conspiracy of greedy capitalists against the workers, while the free world was terrified of the worldwide Communist conspiracy. Only recently in the USA George Bush declared that "anyone who is not with us is against us." It is possible to formulate non-dualist eschatologies, as in Buddhism or modern secular liberalism, for example, but dualism to one degree or another prevails in the Western religions and their secular offspring. Dualism has the great advantage of recognizing — what is obvious to anyone who has not been propagandized to disbelieve — that true evil, radical evil, exists in the world. It has the great disadvantage of pressing people into stereotypes which can then be branded good or evil, thus promoting paranoid fantasies, whetting hatreds, and abetting wars, all of which would exist without dualism but all of which are worsened by it.

The contributions of ancient Greece to the formation of Judeo-Christian eschatology were rather indirect yet in the long run of great importance, the greatest being the Greek

philosophical idea of *logos*, reason, which eventually made Jewish, Christian, and (for a time in the Middle Ages) Muslim theology possible. Explanations by myth (story) and by metaphor continued, but they were now both challenged and refined by the use of reason, especially logic. On the other hand, the Greeks and Romans had very little eschatology: for them the world was eternal, cyclical, with no beginning or end, as when Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.278-279) declares of the Roman people: *His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono; imperium sine fine dedi*. "To the Romans I set no limits in space or time but have granted them endless empire." Although the Greeks have a claim to have founded history with their great writers Herodotus and Thucydides, it was not until the Christian Saint Augustine set forth a rational description of the change through time from beginnings to endings that a full historical sense developed. As for the struggle between good and evil, the Greeks, like the ancient Egyptians and the modern Hindus, viewed the world as a mixture where the two are inseparable. This monism, as opposed to Iranian dualism, perceives humans, and even the gods, as mixtures and often shows them as "doublets": in Egypt, for example, the "good" god Horus was sometimes shown as one being with the "bad" god Set, and the nurturing goddess Hathor is also Sekhmet, the ravaging goddess of destruction; in India Vishnu creates and destroys; in Greece Apollo is not only the sun god but the destroyer, while Artemis is both protector of beasts and the goddess of hunting; she is also both goddess of virginity and of childbirth. This monism is often found farther afield, as with the Central American god Quetzalcoatl who brings both life and death, both generation and decay.

But there was one dualist trend of thought in Greece that went counter to this monism: the cult of Dionysus, which was related to a vague set of ideas known as "Orphic." Such ideas, despite their lurid and complex mythology, were present by the sixth century BC and influenced the philosophers. The basic mythology is that Zeus fathers a son, Dionysus, whom the Titans (the evil powers of the earth and underworld) tear apart and devour. Zeus, however, is able to save the boy's heart and eats it, enabling him to sire Dionysus again. Then Zeus in revenge destroys the Titans, reducing them (and the child they had devoured) to ashes, from which eventually arises the human race. The human race therefore has in it both the Titanic evil and the Dionysian good. The point of the

myth is to demonstrate the worldwide struggle between the power of good and the power of evil, but unlike the Iranians, who posited a war between two spirits, the Dionysians postulated a war between spirit (the good) and matter (the evil). The purpose of life is to extricate oneself from the matter that binds us to evil and thus to return humanity to some original, instinctual oneness. This spirit-matter dualism influenced the Platonists, who thought in terms of a mind-body dichotomy. More directly important for eschatology it influenced the Hebrew Essenes and late pre-Christian Hebrew writers, especially those of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, so that by the time of Christ eschatology was common in much of Jewish thought, including among those Jews who chose to follow Christ. Once Christianity spread to the Gentiles, these Hebrew apocalyptic and dualist ideas were reinforced in Christianity by Greek dualism. The interconnections of all these dualisms are manifold and often obscure, so that no chronological cause-effect line can ever be drawn among them; it is enough to say that by the beginning of the Christian era they were widespread.

Hebrew religion, especially the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was far and away the greatest influence upon Christianity. In fact, some historians plausibly describe the growth of two different Jewish sects — the Christians and the Pharisees — in the first century A.D., a view that is helpful in understanding several points. First and foremost, it makes clear that Christianity is, like Pharisaism (which developed into rabbinical Judaism) a Jewish religion; secondly, it helps us understand the apparent anti-Semitism found in the New Testament. The anger of the followers of Jesus was directed at the Pharisees, and they used (historically fatally) the generic term “Jews” for the Pharisees. The early Christians, being Jews themselves, could not be anti-Semitic, or even anti-Jewish; they were anti-Pharisee, and the dislike was mutual, as indicated by the Pharisees’ expelling Jesus’s followers from the synagogues in AD 90. Modern efforts are being made to bring the great Abrahamic religions closer together, but that is matter for a different article. Here the apocalyptic, messianic, resurrection, and eschatological views of late Hebrew religion are the point.

The earliest thoroughgoing apocalyptic book in the Old Testament is the Book of Daniel (estimates of its dates range from the sixth century BC to the second century BC. Iranian influence on Daniel is dubious, and it is generally agreed by scholars that the inspiration and justification for Daniel and the later, uncanonical apocrypha and pseudepigrapha lie mostly in the earlier prophets. The origins of apocalypticism in Hebrew religion are native to Hebrew thought, however much dualism entered in the later works from 150 BC to AD 100.

The underlying basis of Hebrew apocalyptic is the Hebrew understanding of history. If Saint Augustine fully developed historical understanding in the fourth century AD, the template he used was that of the Hebrew understanding that time moves forward in a meaningful way from a point A to a point B. Putting aside the original creation of the cosmos, the Hebrews measured time according to a series of ages. In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve, who decided to follow their own will rather than God's. Their sin began a period of alienation that ended with God destroying humanity, leaving only a remnant under Noah, with whom God made the rainbow covenant. But again humanity failed to worship God properly, necessitating the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet again we failed, so God sent us into exile in the Land of Egypt. There he sent his prophet Moses, under whose successors the Israelites conquered the territory that in the twenty-first century is known as Palestine or Israel. But again the people failed, so God punished them with attacks by hostile empires, attacks culminating first in the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in the eighth century and then in the conquest of the Kingdom of Judah by the Chaldeans (Babylonians) in the sixth century. The conquest of Judah entailed terrible consequences, especially the destruction of the First Temple (the center of Israelite worship) and the deportation of a large number of Israelites, especially their leaders, to Mesopotamia. This period, known as the Babylonian Captivity, produced many of the books of the Old Testament in their generally accepted forms. King Cyrus the Great of Persia, having conquered the Chaldeans, restored Jerusalem to the Israelites and helped them rebuild the Temple (The Second Temple). But yet again the Jews were attacked by the evil empires of the Greeks, Syrians, and Romans, who profaned the Temple. Following the abortive revolt of 69-70 AD against the

Romans, the Third Temple (which the Romans had allowed King Herod to build) was destroyed, and most of the Jews went into yet another exile, the Diaspora, which lasts until today. The sense of exile, tribulation, and guilt permeated Judaism from the first century onward. For Jews, the exile is simply wrong and must in some way be overcome, either by the resurrection of the Jews in Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple, or by the coming of a Messiah who would bring about this end, or (from the nineteenth-century) Zionism, which is aimed at reoccupying the ancient land of Israel. Zionism, entailing a form of secular progress, is a departure from traditional Judaism, which viewed the endtime as a supernatural event restoring truth, justice, righteousness, and the Temple. This endtime is the ultimate Point B, so that the whole process from the creation to the end of the world has intrinsic purpose and meaning.

Judaism was the first religion to take time and history seriously, and its endurance is largely due to its commitment to the purpose and meaning, the beginning and the end, of Israel and of humanity in general. The story is a story of creation of love, sin, pain, punishment, and restoration. No wonder the last days are seen as both fearful and joyful.

Originally The Day of the Lord was a day of victory and rejoicing at the enthronement of the king of Israel (or Judah) as the Lord's representative. For the eighth-century prophets it became the hallmark of apocalypticism. Isaiah declares that "The day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt, and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them... See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it... I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant and lay low the insolence of tyrants... I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger" (Is. 13:6-13). "For the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord execute judgment" (Is. 66:15-16; cf. Is. 27).

Judgment is connected with the Day of the Lord. On that Day God will come and save the righteous, who will rule on earth. God judges individuals and peoples: “The Lord judges the peoples; judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous” (Ps. 7:8-9; cf. Ps. 96:10-13; Ps. 98:9). “You have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name forever and ever... But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity” (Ps. 9:4-8). “Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you” (Ps. 82:8). Both humans and angels are subject to judgment: “On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven in heaven and on earth the kings of the earth” (Is. 24:21) “Whoever flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit” (Is. 24:18). “For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision... I will not clear the guilty, for the Lord dwells in Zion” (Joel 3:14-21). “I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways” (Ezek. 18:30; cf. Ezek. 33:20). “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter and for every work” (Ecc. 3:17).

Judgment is accompanied by the salvation of the righteous — those who have remained faithful to the Covenant: “Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart” (Ps. 97:11). “For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever” (Ps. 9:18). “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.” (Ps. 58:11). “With righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isaiah 11.4). “It will be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Is. 25:9). “On that day: a pleasant vineyard; sing about it... Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit” (Is. 27:2-6). “In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk” (Joel 3:18). Even the Gentiles may be saved: “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (Is. 56:6-7).

The salvation of the righteous is accompanied by resurrection. “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy” (Is. 26:19). “And on that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem” (Is. 27:13). The Lord leads Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones and instructs him to prophesy to them: “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause flesh to enter you, and you shall live. . . . And the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as for the spirit, God says, “come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that may live... And the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a great multitude” (Ezek. 37: 1-10). Such texts indicate the idea of the resurrection of the dead goes much further back than the second century BC, to which time most scholars have referred it.

Righteousness will be restored. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you... The Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory... In its time I will accomplish it quickly” (Is. 60:1-22). “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight” (Is. 65:17-18). “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her... For as the new heavens and the new earth that I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain” (Is. 66:10-22).

The Book of Daniel, the most apocalyptic book in the Old Testament although entirely within its tradition, can be treated separately from the others. Daniel (2), interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the four kingdoms, establishing one of the many apocalyptic successions of ages (though seven, corresponding to the seven days of Creation became much more common than four). Four evil empires will rule on the earth, but they will be destroyed and replaced by a fifth monarchy ruled by The Most High. The idea of a Messiah (*Mashiach*: “king”) to come was now well established in Hebrew thought. Daniel says that four beasts will appear in the last days, their evil powers to be shattered by the

Lord, another image to be used in the New Testament Revelation or Apocalypse of John (Dan. 7). The fourth beast, particularly powerful, was taken in later Apocalyptic to represent the Devil or, for Christians, the Antichrist. He “shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces... He shall speak words against the Most High... Then the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away to be consumed and totally destroyed. The kingship and dominion... shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom” (Dan. 7:23-27). Daniel had another vision in which an angel tells him “what will take place later in the period of wrath; for it [the vision] refers to the appointed time of the end” (Dan. 8:17-18). Four kingdoms shall arise, and then, at the end, another “king of bold countenance shall arise, skilled in intrigue. He shall grow strong in power, shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in that he does. He shall destroy the powerful and the people of the holy ones. By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall be great. Without warning he shall destroy many and shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, but he shall be broken, and not by human hands” (Dan. 8:23-25). This figure too would be interpreted by Christians as the Devil or the Devil’s servant the Antichrist. Even the wise shall in the last days “fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder” (Dan. 11:33). But then “Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:1-3).

Daniel had a vision of the one to come: “I saw one like a man coming with the clouds of heaven... To him was given dominion and glory and kingship... His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed... The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever” (Dan. 7:13-18). Here are the motifs of the Book of Life in which the names of the saved are inscribed, as well as a clear indication of resurrection.

Daniel also mentions, although with lack of clarity, an abomination of desolation (Dan. 12:11), a phrase frequently to be used by later Christians. The emphasis upon Apocalyptic became much greater in Hebrew thought from the second century BC onward, and it continued in both Judaism and Christianity. The results of such apocalyptic views are twofold: they offer hope, and courage, and joy for those who love the Lord; they offer ruin and destruction to those who do not. This dichotomy is true for both individuals and nations and for both humans and angels. The view that evil is loose and is coming soon to a head on a day (or period) when we shall undergo great temptation and suffering at the hands of evildoers has often promoted terror of conspiracy and, at worst, a demonization of persons and nations (and worldviews). Apocalyptic, like explosives, is something to be handled very circumspectly.

Apocalyptic motifs were further developed in the uncanonical Jewish apocrypha (“hidden books”) and pseudepigrapha (books written under the name of ancient prophets). The First Book of Enoch, allegedly a vision by the patriarch Enoch mentioned in Genesis 5:24, was actually written sometime between 160 BC and AD 100, the period that also produced the apocalyptic visions of Daniel in the Old Testament and of John in the New. Pseudo-Enoch presents the typical, ambivalent view of the endtime: horrors followed by resolution and restoration. But from the beginning emphasizes the ultimate good. “I speak about the elect ones... The God of the universe, the Holy Great One, will come forth from his dwelling... And there shall be a judgment upon all, (including) the righteous. And to all the righteous he will grant peace. He will preserve the elect, and kindness shall be upon them. They shall all belong to God, and they shall prosper and be blessed; and the light of God shall shine unto them” (En. 1:3-9). In the endtime, the forces of Azaz’el or Semyaza (angels of the Devil) will be bound under the earth for seventy generations; then evil angels and humans will be plunged “into the bottom of the fire — and in torment” forever (En. 10:12-14), but also “in those days I shall open the storerooms of blessing... And peace and truth shall become partners together in all the days of the world, and in all the generations of the world” (En. 11:1-2).

On [that last] day my Elect One shall sit on the seat of glory and make a selection of their deeds... their souls shall be firm within them when they see my Elect One, those who have appealed to my glorious name. On that day I shall cause my Elect One to dwell among them; I shall transform heaven and make it a blessing of light forever. I shall transform the earth and make it a blessing and cause my Elect One to dwell in her But sinners have come before me so that by judgment I shall destroy them from before the face of the earth (En. 45:3-6).

Enoch envisions the resurrection: “In those days, [the world of the dead] will return all the deposits which she had received and hell will give back all that which it owes. And [the Elect One] shall choose the righteous and the holy ones from among [the risen], for the day when they shall be selected and saved has arrived. In those days, [the Elect One] shall sit upon my throne... And the earth shall rejoice; and the righteous ones shall dwell upon her, and the elect ones shall walk upon her” (En. 51:1-5). “The elect ones [shall be] in the light of eternal life which has no end, and the days of the life of the holy ones cannot be numbered... There shall be a light that has no end, and they shall not have to count days (anymore). For... light shall be permanent before the Lord of the Spirits” (En.58:3-6). Pseudo-Enoch’s visions of the end continue through the book, displaying a sense of the Day of the Lord, of the Elect One (the Messiah), of judgment, of the condemnation of the wicked and the joys of the righteous, of the resurrection, and of the ultimate renewal of the heavens and the earth. Such motifs were essential in the formation of early Christian eschatology.

Christianity is not an essentially eschatological religion (as some twentieth-century scholars believed), but eschatology is certainly central to it. Humanity as a whole suffers the Passion of the Christ: the story of humanity is gruesome and horrible and deathly — yet at the end there is a new world, a world without suffering and pain. This article treats first-century Christianity as a whole; it is not concerned with which of the Pauline epistles is by Paul himself, or how the Gospels do and do not accord, or whether Jesus’s words and actions are “accurately” reported. Rather, the point is what first-century Christians bequeathed to the Christian community of the second century onward. First-century

Judaism and Christianity witnessed a number of foundational events that would set the pattern of eschatology for thousands of years: the coming of Christ, the destruction of the Third Temple in AD 70 after the failed rebellion against the Roman Empire, the (so far unbridged) split between the Christian-Jewish community and the rabbinical-Jewish community, and the growing sense that these events presaged an end to the world that would come soon..

In the last few centuries BC, Hebrew religion, under the pressure of evil empires, increasingly expected the coming of the Messiah who would defeat the empires and restore Israel with truth and justice. For his followers, it is Jesus who was “the Messiah appointed for you” (Acts 3:20). The ultimate meaning of the end is that the world will be transformed, made anew, and the old order, the old age, the age of evil and corruption, will be replaced, turned upside down from the bad to the good. The earthly advent of Jesus presages just such a transformation. With Jesus, the old order — the world in the sense of human society — is already undergoing the process of destruction and rebuilding; in that sense Jesus brings the beginning of the eschata with him. Elizabeth exclaims to Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord,” and Mary replies with the Magnificat, which includes powerful revolutionary promises: “[The Lord] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:45-53). And in the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus promises that “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3-10). This is the beginning of pure eschatology in this world: the whole structure of success through wealth and fame and power is to be wrested down and replaced with a structure

of peace and love. The way is already shown, and its goal is the literal eschata, the literal last things that will come at the endtime, “on that day.”

When is that day? “You know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13; cf. Acts 1:7). But it is soon: “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64; cf. Mark 14:62), and it will be sudden and radical: “I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left” (Luke 17:34-35). “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work” (Rev. 22:12). The Day of the Lord portends the liberation of the cosmos, but it will be a terrifying day for all, and for those devoted to evil it is the day of their destruction. It is the day of wrath against the old order, the order of Satan and the age of earthly wealth and power. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9), but for those who do not, “By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5). The horrors of The Day are particularly manifest in the Apocalypse of John: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:16-17); “woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth” (Rev. 8:13).

The terror of the Day is especially the judgment it brings upon all of us (Christianity is called a “crutch” only by those who do not understand the death agony of the Son of God or the horror of divine judgment.) “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him... all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:31-32). Christ will say, “Go away from me, all you evildoers! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13:27-28). “He will repay according to each one’s deeds... [to those who love God and the good] he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but

wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom. 6-8). “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne... And the dead were judged according to their works” (Rev. 20:12). It is Christ who is the judge of “the living and the dead” (2 Tim. 4:1). “The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). Judgment falls upon angels as well as upon humans: “And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day” (Jude 6). “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). “The present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless” (2 Pet. 3:7).

From these and other New Testament texts Christians would derive the idea of two judgments: the personal or “Particular Judgment” of each individual at the time of death, and the Last or “General Judgment” upon individuals, communities, and the whole human race. The New Testament was not shy in expressing the fate of those whose lives are not justified. “The angels will... separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:49-50; cf. Matt 22:13; Matt 25:30). “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:41, 46; cf. Rev. 20:10). Indeed, death itself has two meanings: the physical death, which means the temporary separation of body and spirit, and the infinitely more fearsome spiritual death, which destroys evil and banishes those who follow evil from the presence of God forever and ever (Traditional theologians distinguish between “soul,” the complete human being in spirit and body, and “spirit,” the non-material part of the soul). The idea of two deaths is frequent in early Christianity: the death of the body and, at the endtime, the death of the evil soul: “As [for evildoers], their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8).

The ongoing warfare of evil against good is epitomized and concluded by battles between Christ and Satan, for Satan is the originator of evil and the leader of all evildoers. Often the adversary of Christ in these battles is the Antichrist (a human being or a set of human beings) who will lead Satan's armies in the Final War. As Christ does the will of the Father, so Antichrist does the will of his father the Devil. "Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray" (Matt. 24:11). "Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come" (1 John 2:18); every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (1 John 4:3).

The Incarnation of God in Christ is needed to overcome these powers: "Those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7). The "Day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction... The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan" (2 Thess. 2:3, 9). The identification not only of sinners but also of unbelievers as antichrists or followers of Satan had the unsalutary effect of encouraging people to think of their confrontations with others as confrontations between us (the righteous) and them (the diabolical). The ancient Hebrew belief in the struggle of Israel against evil empires was continued in the Christian struggle first against the evil empire of Rome and then, after Rome converted to Christianity, to the other evil kingdoms and empires of this world.

The Apocalypse of John is the most vivid expression of the war between Christ and Satan; the many evil beasts that it portrays are representative of the forces of the Devil, specifying that the greatest beast has "the number of a person. Its number is 666" (Rev. 13:17-18). No Biblical passage had as much effect on eschatology as the beginning of Revelation 20:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent

who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years and threw him into the pit, and locked it and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while” (Rev. 20:1-3; cf. Rev. 20:4-7).

This passage complicated early Christian eschatology and led to a huge variety of millenarian expectations, many of which still persist: Does Christ have to come again twice in order to put a final end to evil? Does the Devil reign for a thousand years, or does Christ rule for a thousand years? Or both? Or what? This article can only suggest a particle of this strange, diverse, yet rich tradition.

Linked to the Last War are the times of tribulation, which encapsulate all the pains of the world, and which must occur before Christ can come again. In a passage sometimes called “the little apocalypse,” and which sums up both the pain and victory of the endtime, Jesus says:

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs. Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name... So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken by the prophet Daniel..., then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat... For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now... Immediately after the suffering of those days... the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven... And [the nations] will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds (Matt 24:6-31; cf. Mark 13:3-37).

The Book of Revelation presents the sufferings of the endtime in horrifying terms, describing plagues, famines, blood, darkness, fire, and pain, the whole agony to culminate in the battle of Armageddon or Harmagedon (Rev. 14:19- Rev 15:16). Indeed, the whole of John's vision of the Apocalypse is an extended metaphor for the last days, although much of its historical importance is based upon overt ("literal") understandings of the text as prophetic of a historical future, thus prompting endless speculation from the first to the twenty-first century as to what personages or nations actually *are* the evil beasts described in the book. Further, the colorful images presented in Revelation — the trumpets, the thrones, the white robes, the golden crowns, the seven torches, the seven seals of the scroll, the four beasts, the four angels or "horsemen," the war in heaven between (the archangel) Michael and "the great dragon" and "ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan," the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, the mark of the beast, the seven bowls of wrath, the great whore and Babylon, "the mother of whores, the jewels and gold of the heavenly city, the throne of the Lamb from beneath which flows the water of life, and many more motifs — lay deep in Christian consciousness and expressed themselves frequently and powerfully in artworks and literature (Rev. 4-5; 8; 12-14; 16-17; 20-22). And although the book is ultimately one of hope, ending in words ascribed to Jesus: "Surely I am coming soon" (Rev 22:20), it is the luridly terrifying images of the last days that were most frequently expressed.

These pains will be banished by the second coming of Christ, which will deliver each of us, and Israel, and the entire world from evil. Just as Christ himself suffered and then rose from the dead, so shall all humans rise, the faithful to everlasting joy and the evildoers to pain that never ceases. The general resurrection fulfills, extends, and completes the resurrection of Christ himself. "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being, for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (I Cor. 15:20-22; cf. Acts 4:2; I Thess. 4:13-17, which implies the rapture of the living to heaven at the end; I Peter 1:2-4). Thus the original righteousness in which Adam and Eve were created, and which they discarded,

has now been restored by Christ, but it is a *restoratio in melius*, better than the original paradise, for now God has (as he had not in the days of Adam) become human himself. Thus God reconnects the alpha with the omega, the beginning and the end, the paradise of Adam with the heaven of Christ.

This is the new creation, a new city, the new heaven and earth, the new cosmos, the “universal restoration” (Acts 3:21) that Isaiah had prophesized. “There is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Rev. 21:5). “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2; cf. Rev. 3:12). Yes, eschatology is a terror, but it is much more a joy and a liberation, and the eschatological message of the New Testament is one of hope and love more than of fear. Suffering is real, but it will be overcome by Christ in universal and endless happiness.

The Christianity of the first three centuries dealt with the concepts of the endtime left them by the New Testament in two ways: by expanding and elaborating on them, and by the use of reason to reconcile and organize them.

According to Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), at the end the just will rise to share in a life of ease and abundance in a restored Jerusalem for a thousand years, and then will come a general judgment of all. For Justin and other early Christians, the *number* of judgments was in question. Does each person at death undergo judgment immediately, or is the person’s judgment postponed until the Last Judgment, or is the person’s judgment confirmed in the Last Judgment, or are both judgments one and the same to God who sees all time as one? Will there be a general Judgment at the time of the resurrection, or will it come after a thousand years, or will there be two general Judgments? In any case, the church fathers were all in agreement that God’s judgment would always remain the same: that is, the judgment that a person deserves at the time of his death will not be changed in the Last Judgment. But, argued Paulinus (c. 354-431) and Jerome (c. 345-420), since none of us is without sin (except Jesus and Mary) and since most of us have a good many imperfections, there must be, at judgment, a moment of purification by fire

for those who are neither perfect nor damned. Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-368), Ambrose (c. 339-397), and Jerome all viewed the purification as extremely painful, so to avoid it we should lead a life as simple and grateful as possible. This idea of a moment of purgation would be expanded by the twelfth century to a *time* of purgation, which then became known as Purgatory. Purgation, though it is torment, is not connected to hell, but rather to heaven: anyone who is in the process of purgation is destined for heaven.

Purgation is analogous to the time of trials or tribulations that the entire community, indeed the whole world, must endure before the moment of salvation. Tertullian (c. 160-225) saw in the persecution of Christians by the pagan Roman Empire a fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecy of plagues, famines, wars, and persecution. Christians continued to view Rome as one of the evil empires that the Hebrews and now the Christians had to suffer — until in the fourth century the Roman Empire converted, and other remaining pagan nations were branded as evil. Sulpicius Severus (c. 360-430) and many Christian historians after him believed that there would be ten persecutions or tribulations. For Sulpicius, the Emperor Nero was the Antichrist, or perhaps Nero ruled under Satan in the West while Antichrist ruled under Satan in the East. Tertullian believed that Antichrist would be a false prophet mimicking Christ and leading many astray. Irenaeus (c. 130-200) declared that the Antichrist was an unjust human ruler on earth who would encourage and support every lie and cruelty and would delude many into thinking him a god; he would ultimately be destroyed by Christ, who would establish a kingdom of harmony, plenty, and peace. Lactantius (c. 250-325) worked out a scenario in which Antichrist would be a king of Syria who would reign for three and a half years, after which the Last Battle would occur in which the Jews would be converted and the pagans destroyed. Origen (c. 185-254) atypically, but not without Biblical precedent, said that the antichrist is a metaphor for everyone and everything that blocks God's plan for the cosmos, but Jerome insisted that the Antichrist was a real human individual who would be a false Messiah deceiving individuals and whole nations by performing false miracles and in rebuilding The Temple. By the fourth century it was common to believe that the Antichrist was a Jew, either of human parents or of a human woman (possibly the whore of Babylon) mating with Satan, that he sprang from the tribe

of Dan, and that he was born in Babylon. The servants of Antichrist were persecutors, Romans, Jews, heretics, (later) Muslims, and all Christians who set their face away from God.

The apocalyptic idea giving the most difficulty to the early fathers, and indeed on into the twenty-first century, was the millennium. The millennium, suggested Origen, Jerome, and Augustine (354-430), could be taken metaphorically. There were several levels of meaning in the Bible, overt (“literal”), meaning objectively, scientifically, or historically true; metaphorical, moral; and eschatological. The millennium could legitimately be taken as an eschatological metaphor. But none of these influential theologians considered it *only* a metaphor: there would in fact be a period of time in the future that we can call a millennium. But that was only the beginning of the difficulty, for it was unresolved whether the millennium would precede the Second Coming of Christ or whether it would follow it; or whether the millennium takes place on earth or in heaven. A number of people (now called millenarians), including the Montanists and some Gnostics, emphasized the millennium as an important part of their theology, but the great writers Origen, Jerome, and Augustine decried making it central and preferred (like most writers after them) to let it remain ambiguous. They argued that the Apocalypse of John should not be taken as prophetic of specific future historical persons and events. Nonetheless, millenarian views would continue to crop up repeatedly in the Middle Ages, in the modern period (with Swedenborg), and in the present-day United States.

Irenaeus, in a view different from all the catastrophism inherent in apocalyptic thought, indicated that God may be leading humans gradually and without agony toward our perfection in God, and Origen argued strongly for what he called the *apokatastasis*, the eventual return of all humans, animals, and the entire cosmos to God, who created it by bringing it forth from himself and who would reabsorb it: the result, whether catastrophic or gradual, would end in glory. The Nicene Creed (fourth and fifth centuries) states that Christ will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, that his kingdom will have no end, that the dead will be resurrected, and that there will be life in the age to come. Glory — an unpopular concept in the early twenty-first century — is

essential to understanding the Christian concept of the end. Not only will all things be made anew and good, they will be glorified, bursting with love and light and strength and joy.

Augustine of Hippo, the most influential of all Christian theologians, was the first to enunciate a clear theory of time. For God, who is outside time and space, all time is one; for us, who are inside time and space, time is moving inexorably from beginning to end. Augustine argued that all the human past before Christ had been leading up to his Incarnation and Passion, and that now, after Christ's First Coming, the present and future are leading up to his Second Coming. In his younger, optimistic days, Augustine took a gradualist position: the whole purpose of time since Christ is to lead more and more people to the truth so that Christ can come again when the world is prepared for him. In this gradualist view, the end of the world, though indeed it will occur, is less important than the present. As we have, on Christ's own showing, no idea when he will come again, there is no point in dwelling extensively on the endtime. What is important is the struggle between good and evil that is going on now, the struggle between what Augustine famously called The Two Cities, analogous to the two kingdoms of God and Satan. The City of God, the heavenly city, has as its citizens the good angels and all the saints — the faithful of past, present, and future. The other City is the City of Satan, of those angels and people practicing evil. At present, the citizens of each City are known only to God, for the earthly societies — including the Church — that we observe from our human, time-bound perspective are mixtures of good and evil. The endtime will be just that — the end of time — and what is eternally patent to God will be revealed. Augustine, again insisting that we cannot know how and when the end will come, nonetheless believed (*The City of God* 20:30) that there will be discernible signs of the Day: the prophet Elijah will return to earth, all the Jews will be converted, the Antichrist will arrive and persecute the City of God, God will separate the good from the wicked, the wicked world will be destroyed and will be recreated perfect. Augustine rejected the millenarian view that there would be a thousand-year reign of peace and happiness on earth. Indeed, as he grew older and witnessed the collapse of the Christian Roman Empire, he retreated from his optimistic, progressive views, but he always believed that

the endtime would culminate in joy and eternal happiness. Therefore, we who are living in time should daily act as citizens of The City of God, loving God and neighbor, faithful to Christ and doing his works in the world, and longing for the consummation of time in the eternal peace and justice of the new world, the kingdom of heaven that Jesus promises.

The worldview of a sixth-century anonymous Syrian monk writing under the pseudonym of Dionysos the Areopagite whom Paul converted in Athens became immensely influential in later thought, in Thomas Aquinas, Dante, and in the mystical traditions of both the Eastern and the Western church. Dionysos (c. 500), like Origen, had a very optimistic view. In the beginning, God created the world from nothing. This “nothing” was not something separate from God, no *chaos* that God had to bring into order, for there can be nothing apart from God. The statement that God created the world out of nothing does not mean that God created it out of something called “nothing.” It means absolutely *no thing*. Everything is in God, so God created the world out of himself. God creates the universe with his overflowing love, for which Dionysos used the word *eros* (a term lacking in the New Testament). God’s *eros* for the cosmos is unceasing, and so eventually, at the end, God will draw the cosmos back into himself. The endtime, then, is a joyous time when the whole cosmos, purified and glorified, returns to God.

In the Middle Ages the foremost question was how this world could be conformed most closely to the City of God and whether indeed that was possible at all. It was not doubted that Christ was the ruler, but it was hotly debated who held the authority on earth under Christ. The question of proper authority was readily mixed with questions of pragmatic power, as popes, bishops, emperors, kings, and prophetic voices vied for authority. The high point of the controversy came in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. In 1073 the monk Hildebrand became Pope Gregory VII and launched a campaign to reform society in the mold of the City of God. The reform centered first on replacing or educating illiterate clergy and removing corrupt clergy. But no division between “church and state” could exist in the City of God. The concepts of “church and state” and their separation is purely modern. In the ancient world, religion and state were

one entity. In the medieval mind there was one Christian Society, which had to be ruled by whoever held the authority from Christ. Gregory VII and his successors believed that they were responsible to Christ for all of society, so that reform could not be limited to strictly ecclesiastical matters: all of society must be subject to Christ's vicar on earth. Papal claims to such authority had previously been disputed by bishops, secular rulers, and church councils, but for two and a half centuries the papacy combined a strong claim to legitimate authority with a good deal of pragmatic power.

Corruption, ignorance, and falsehood had to be cleared away in order to establish *Iustitia*, "justice," defined as that state of society most closely congruent with the City of God. The pope claimed the authority to ensure that justice was done throughout society. That meant the reform or removal of secular powers that did not conform to justice (the medieval root of the modern conviction that the people can, and should, disobey an unjust government). It was easy to assign the role of antichrists to those who opposed the reform movement; of old it had been Herod or Nero, now it was Muhammad and Saladin, and a variety of allegedly wicked emperors such as Heinrich IV and Friedrich II. Equally, the pope's enemies such as the Holy Roman Emperor accused a variety of popes (Boniface VIII and Benedict XI, for example) of being antichrists. Later Luther and other Protestants would claim that the papacy in general was the antichrist. That the struggle was not one of church and state but one of authority over all of Christian society is clearest in the struggle between Gregory VII and Heinrich IV, when the emperor had his own pope and bishops and Gregory had his own emperor and princes. In contrast, Heinrich IV, Friedrich I, and Louis VII were considered by imperial and royal parties as proper leaders of Christian society.

The Reform movement meant the imposition of right belief as well as right practice. The City of God and its analogous authority on earth had the duty to educate, reform, and if necessary combat ideas that blocked the way of the Kingdom of God. That meant Jews, Muslims, and heretics: as early as the eighth century, Beatus of Liébana identified Muhammad as the antichrist, an idea that persisted through the time of the Protestant Reformation and beyond. Jews, who had lived in considerable peace with their Christian

neighbors before the eleventh century, now found themselves under intense pressure to convert, to depart, or to face sometimes severe penalties. The old idea that the Antichrist is a Jew was revived: he is born of a loathsome union between Satan and a Jewish whore of the Tribe of Dan.

Muslims were subject to crusades designed to recapture some of the Christian lands they had conquered centuries earlier and to destroy the antichrist Muhammad. Heretics were subjected to especially close scrutiny and prosecution. The definition of a heretic changed and expanded as the reform movement progressed, until not only demonstrably non-Christian heresies such as Catharism were included but also any movement that hindered reform or else advanced reform too independently. Heretics and apostates were thus liable to be identified as antichrists as well as Jews and Muslims.

The ideal of a Christian society based on the model of the City of God was a noble one that produced great good, but it is clear from the above that it also ended (as movements tend to do throughout human history) in great evils. The growing intensity of opposition in the struggle meant that whoever claimed to be following *justitia* could claim that the other side was serving the Devil. From the point of view of the Reform Papacy, secular rulers, disobedient clergy and bishops, and heretics were servants of Satan; from the point of view of the royalists, imperialists, and many bishops, it was the reform popes who were unjust. From the point of view of the popes, heretics were evil; from the point of view of the heretics popes were evil. The language of opposition became fierce: metaphors of decay, corruption, infection, depravity, leprosy, perversion, and the like were hurled from all directions, and the language of this ideology of dualism often led to wars, executions, massacres, and tortures.

Among the heretics condemned were a variety of millenarians. Although Augustine, Jerome, and Pope Gregory I the Great (c. 540-604) had all stoutly rejected millenarianism, it remained an almost invisible undercurrent in the Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202) and other millenarians flourished. The revival of millenarianism arose mainly from an

understandable disillusionment provoked by the struggles over authority in Christian society; the millenarians believed that society was not at all perfectible and that only at the complete destruction and replacement of society at the endtime could peace and justice in the Kingdom of God be established. Apart from millenarianism, medieval literature presents many works of literature and art, such as the Old English *Christ and Satan*, and the popular plays in England, Germany, and France (such as the fourteenth-century *Jour du jugement*) featuring Christ's victorious struggle against the Devil and Antichrist. In the plays and other popular literature, the Devil and demons appear as ludicrous fools, dupes, and clowns, a motif designed to mitigate the gloomy terror of their unceasing activity on earth (on speculation I suggest that this gloominess may have been the result of the fact that in the seventh century the Muslims conquered the sunny lands of the southern Mediterranean from the Christians, shifting the center of Christianity from Africa and Asia to the darker, damper lands of Europe).

The great wealth of intellect in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is best represented by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Aquinas attempted to establish a pure and thorough Christian theology based on both revelation and reason. He drew clear lines between true doctrine and false doctrine, but he was never ready to condemn any person as evil. Aquinas and other scholastic theologians addressed many of the perennial problems of salvation. Heaven was perceived as here, now, and afterward, the last days culminating the process of conforming to the Kingdom of God. Whoever chooses God is in heaven; whoever chooses himself rather than God is in hell. Those in heaven see God face to face in the Beatific Vision, as established by Benedict XII (r. 1334-1342). Heretics could gain no comfort from scholastic theology, but unbelievers could. It is clear from the New Testament that no one is saved except through Jesus Christ. But this had to be interpreted broadly. First of all, the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets are clearly in heaven even though they lived before the institution of baptism. Good pagans — those who believed in other religions and practiced them faithfully for the good — will also be saved, either by a revelation of Jesus Christ to them in their last moments or by the simple action of divine mercy. As Augustine had said earlier, when in doubt one should take the most charitable

interpretation. Certainly one sees in artworks and literature vastly fewer Jews, Muslims, and pagans in hell than false and wicked Christians.

The greatest literary work on the last things is of course Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Although *Inferno* has always been the most popular cantica of the *Commedia* because of its luridly colorful representations of the agonies of hell, in *Purgatorio* all the souls are bound for heaven, and *Paradiso* is the most glorious representation of heaven ever limned. Indeed, *Paradiso* begins with the words "La gloria," meaning the light and power and love and goodness and mercy and harmony and justice and beauty and laughter and joy that God beams through the entire cosmos to everything that he made (except for those angels and humans who by their own choice exclude themselves from that glory). God loves everything; his glory penetrates and diffuses through the entire cosmos, and the cosmos reflects it back: *Io credo in uno Dio solo ed eterno, che tutto 'l ciel move, non moto, con amore e con desio* (24:130-132). All of paradise sings:

*Al padre, al Figlio, a lo Spirito Santo,
Cominciò, "gloria!" tutto 'l paradiso,
Si che m'inebriava il dolce canto.
Ciò ch'io vedeva mi sembiava un riso
De l'universo; per che mia ebbrezza
Intrava per l'udire e per lo viso.
Oh gioia! Oh ineffabile allegrezza!
Oh vita intègra d'amore e di pace!
Oh sanza brama sicura ricchezza!* (27:1-9)

At last Dante looks directly at God, The First Love, in the Beatific Vision, *quant' è possibil per lo suo fulgore* (32:142-144) and, incredibly, himself addresses God directly:

*O luce eterna che sola in te sidi,
Sola t'indendi, e da te intelletta
E intendente te ami e arridi* (33:124-126).

So, in the end, the fear and pain of the last days are dissolved forever in the endless glory of Christ.

The Protestant Reformation derived most of its theology from medieval theology, especially as relates to the endtime. The Lutherans tended to take a dim view of the course that the world was taking. They saw that on the one hand, the Turks had overwhelmed Byzantine Christianity and were approaching central Europe, threatening even the Holy Roman Empire; on the other hand, the antichrist pope dominated Europe. The degree of both hope and fear is always greater when the Church feels more threatened. It is not a zero-sum game between hope and fear wherein as hope gains fear declines and as fear gains hope declines. Rather, it is an increase or decrease of intensity in the two together. Luther believed that the world was becoming so fearful that it must accordingly be nearing its end. Our suffering has special meaning *because* we are in the endtime, and because of this suffering the end was devoutly to be hoped for. Calvinists tended to be more optimistic, believing that the Church could be saved by a rigorous reformation and restoration of Biblical and moral purity. Some Radical Reformers, especially among the Anabaptists, continued millenarian speculation, expecting a thousand-year reign of the saints on earth. The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants (at the same time as the Turks threatened ever more powerfully) abetted millenarian speculations, and antichrists could be found everywhere.

Catholic Christianity always entertained a variety of views but, especially from the eleventh through fifteenth centuries, limited the boundaries of orthodoxy. Protestant rejection of the pope's authority and its restoration of the Bible (as they interpreted it) as authority, opened the doors to a vast variety of views of the endtime. In modern mainstream Protestantism — Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican — there was a general but pronounced decline of interest in the endtime. Enlightenment progressivism had a large influence on Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many believed that God is leading us gradually toward the Kingdom, which will come only when this progress is completed. This view, sometimes called "Postmillennialism," assumed the

gradual conversion of people throughout the world to a rationalist Christianity; only a few people would actually be damned.

This liberal, progressive Protestantism flourished in a world that for the century between 1815 and 1914 was spared horrible tribulations (except for the Civil War in the USA), and it was easy to dismiss prognostications of a fearful end. In 1909 it was possible to give credence to the view that Christ's "coming is not an event, it is a process that includes innumerable events, a perpetual advance of Christ in the activity of his kingdom. . . ." "No visible return of Christ to the earth is to be expected, but rather the long and steady advance of his spiritual kingdom"¹. The kingdom of God is not to be awaited but rather to be created here on earth and realized by good social works. This is the basis of the movement known as The Social Gospel. Indeed, there may be no end at all, but continual improvement. Christ could be seen as a businessman or a labor leader more readily than as a glorious king.

Beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, and strengthened by the terrible experience of the Great War and of the influenza plague that followed it, there was a marked turn away from this progressivism. On the theological side, the Neo-Orthodoxy set forth by Karl Barth (1886-1968) and his school demanded a return to Biblical and theological roots and a healthy appreciation that evil was still powerful and would not go away easily and pleasantly. Similarly, the eschatological views of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and his school stressed that every moment was eschatologically under judgment. Neo-Orthodoxy and Eschatology were dominant from the 1930s into the 1960s, when they were replaced for a while by Postmillennial optimism. Since the 1970s, there has been a vast revival of "Premillennialism," the traditional view of the endtime based in the Bible and often heavily embroidered. The increasingly terrifying state of the world under threat of nuclear war, famine, and plague supported the revival of millenarian views. The most important and lasting rebellion against liberal progressivism has been Evangelicalism, which regarded the liberal tradition as decayed Christianity and rooted itself firmly in the Bible. The Evangelicals observed that very little in the twentieth and twenty-first-century

¹ CLARKE, William Newton. *Outline of Christian theology*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909, pp. 444-446.

world supports the view so confidently asserted in 1909. Liberation Theology, an amalgam of Catholicism and Marxism emerging in Latin America in the 1960s, proclaimed that the end would come when the oppression of the poor by the wealthy would forever cease.

But a strange development occurred in the secular world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, secular philosophers tended to support a progressive view of society; on the other hand, they saw enormous obstacles to progress. As a result they formed a variety of secular ideologies based on a strange wedding of progress and millenarianism. Utopias could be reached only by tribulation. For Marx and Lenin, the good, classless society could be formed only when the stubborn beast of capitalism had been overcome; when the process of Communism is completed, there will be no more history. Mao Zedong and Josef Stalin both considered their views of the perfect society to come worth the sacrifice of tens of millions of lives. Hitler, another secular millenarian, declared that the obstacle was a conspiracy of Jews, capitalists, and Communists and that when they were destroyed his Third Reich would last a thousand years. Among other secularists, beliefs that strange forces were at work prevailed: extraterrestrials will come down to save us — or to destroy us — or both, as in Stanley Kubrick's *2001* (1968); or perhaps old gods will return; or magic will restore the earth; or ancient sages and warriors can be channeled by a living human, or... the list is endless. All these views seem to spring from the perception that we are in a terrible fix and that only something unearthly can help us out of it (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 1951). Now that human beings have, like Satan, tried to wrest from God the ability to destroy ourselves with weapons of mass destruction, there seem little grounds at present for the happy ending of the human race or of the planet itself.

Evangelicalism is by far the most influential variety of Protestantism in the world today. While liberal congregations and denominations melt, conservative ones flourish. The return to the Bible entails a return to the very foundation of apocalyptic. The Foursquare Gospel, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Pentecostals are among the movements with a pronounced apocalyptic and millenarian bent. There is considerable variation, but the

following gives the general picture: The end is near. The signs of the last days are manifest in contemporary events. Human and natural evil will both increase until they reach their peak in The Great Tribulation. Just before the Tribulation, however, Christ will take his followers up from Earth into heaven, where they will join the saints (those who have already died in Christ). The Tribulation will last seven years, during which the Antichrist will rule the Earth. Then Christ returns with his saints and all the heavenly hosts; they defeat Antichrist at the battle of Armageddon. Christ then rules for a thousand years. At the end of those thousand years comes the Last Judgment. The Antichrist reappears in one last desperate effort to thwart the inevitable, but he is again defeated and this time destroyed in everlasting fire. Now time ceases, and the eternal Kingdom of God, The New Heaven and The New Earth, the New Jerusalem is ruled by Christ in righteousness and justice forever. Evildoers are either converted or destroyed. History ends.

Although Christianity traditionally espoused reason and charity, along with faith and hope, as perhaps higher values than demanding conversion or death. Yet Christians have often viewed one another as antichrists; and Christians have very often perceived Jews, Muslims, and pagans as antichrists. If Antichrist is leading a cohort of demons and human evildoers in a powerful effort to thwart and prevent the Kingdom of God, it follows that there is a conspiracy of which Antichrist is the head. Thus Jews, heretics, and pagans are not simply mistaken; they are — consciously or not — in Antichrist's army, which must be disbanded and destroyed before the Kingdom can be established.

Christians have no monopoly on conspiracy theories. Whatever the evolutionary roots of such theories — tribalism for example — they seem to be a permanent aspect of human nature. Jews see their Exile as the result of the machinations of evil empires, states, and religions. Islamists fear and hate a vast Zionist-Crusader conspiracy to destroy Islam. Communists fear capitalists and capitalists Communists. The Left fears the Right and the Right the Left. Fundamentalists fear evolutionists and evolutionists fear fundamentalists. Physicalists fear the vast array of transcendent views that surpass physicalism. Feminists fear a vast conspiracy of patriarchal men, while men fear social castration by feminists. US Senator Hillary Clinton fears a Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy, and George W. Bush fears

the Axis of Evil. Sunni fear Shi'a and Shi'a fear Sunni. And that is not even to mention the racial hatreds that plague humanity everywhere. Of course not all conspiracies are imaginary; many really do exist; but it is a great fault in humanity that we are so eagerly ready to believe in them and, much worse, to act upon our fear of "the other" in endless spirals of escalating violence.

Since the nations continue to furiously rage against one another, the end may indeed be near. That may or may not be true for humanity as a whole, but it is unquestionably true for each one of us. Hope and fear are inevitable, and one great hope is that conspiracies and fear of conspiracies may disappear. Approaching our end, we may want no day to be wasted without love and gratitude.

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