

PROGRESS, APOCALYPTICISM AND THE COMPLETION OF HISTORY, AND LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Introduction

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1. The Supposed Opposition of Individual Striving for Salvation and Striving for the Progress of Humanity

The progress of history and the idea of individual life after death appear to be two ideas that do not lie at the same level. The progress always comes too late for the dead; and the individual person always dies too early to benefit from the progress of humanity. The theme of this book, therefore, brings together two themes that are often not regarded as belonging together: the theme of history, of progress, of the apocalyptic end and the eschatological completion of history; and the theme of life after death and the resurrection of the human person. There is tension between these two themes. The progress of history does not seem to mean much to the individual who strives for his salvation and resurrection or for his release from the cycle of rebirth. Of what value to the individual is the progress that can be realized within a single human lifespan in comparison to eternal life in glory? One might think that the interest in personal salvation exceeds the interest in the progress of the community and of humanity so much that little room remains for interest or even the engagement in the progress of humanity. There is even less interest in the progress of history and in individual life after death for the person who is convinced of the apocalyptic end of the world and of history.

Leo Strauss – and, in a different way, also Thomas Hobbes – already had an analogous thought about the relation of religion and politics, of individual striving for salvation and striving for political and social progress. The question of politics, how one should live politically in the few years before eternal life, become unimportant from the perspective of eternal life. Or, as Hobbes puts it: One cannot conduct politics with people who are convinced of the idea of eternal life, because they will always be prepared to place questions about eternal life above questions about the correct order of social existence, of politics, and of progress. These people, according to Hobbes, will also not keep political

peace, because they are not afraid of death and because with them, therefore, the strongest power that moves people to obey the political sovereign and the laws, namely the fear of death, is only weakly developed.

It is easy to recognize the application of this problem beyond Christianity to other religions, such as Islam and Hinduism. The accusation is often made against Islam that its emphasis on eternal life increases the readiness to die for the faith in a holy war and, therefore, sometimes does not make political peace easier. Hinduism, in turn, frequently receives the reproach that the interest of the believing Hindu in overcoming individual rebirth outweighs his interest in a political rebirth or in social progress so much that too little room remains for social progress.

It is obvious that this reproach against the religions – that with their concern for individual salvation and, therefore, about the “progress of the individual,” they forget about the concern for political and social welfare and, therefore, about social progress – falls short. The religions are in general aware that the attainment of individual salvation cannot be separated from the realization of common salvation or the common good. The progress of the individual is closely connected with the progress of the community in which he lives.

Because we live in a globalized world and conduct economic activity within a system of global division of labor, both the progress of the individual and that of the nation are tied to the progress of the human race and the world. For the sake of the earthly and eternal salvation of the individual human being, therefore, the religions must be interested in the progress of the communities and of the human race.

2. Apocalypticism, Eschatology, and Faith in Progress

What is the nature of the tense relationship between the idea of progress and the idea of the apocalypse of the end of the world? The Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus said that the Christian revelation of John, according to which the Anti-christ stands at the end of history, has only one function: to prevent us from believing that history is a single history of progress, in which everything will always get better, even without the individual moral effort of the individual.¹

¹ Cf. P. Althaus, “Eschatologie VI. Religionsphilosophisch und dogmatisch,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1958), cols. 685 and 688: “Faith has always expected and testified to the end of history, even as the zeitgeist revelled in the idea of infinite progress. The modern awareness of life and thought has changed: today it is anxious about the possible self-destruction of history. Faith may greet the change, but it does not have to rely on it. Its knowledge about the end of history does not flow from historical and contemporary reflection, but from the certain expectation, based in the promise of the kingdom that Jesus Christ in person represents. His coming means the end of history, the end that is at the same time the fulfilment of its meaning, that indeed first gives meaning to it at all.... Eschatology ... cannot and

This danger of the idea of the one great progress of history, that, with its faith in the inevitable self-realizing progress of the human race, it will forget about individual moral and spiritual progress is a mirror image of the danger that the individual search for salvation, with its focus on individual spiritual progress, will forget about social progress and the common good.

There is also tension between the eschatological idea of the completion of history and apocalypticism's idea of the apocalyptic end of the world. Apocalypticism has only a transitory character for eschatology. It is not an end in itself. The end of history is only the transition to its completion, just as death and the end of the individual human person are only a transition to his eternal life and his completion.

The religions attempt to avoid both errors, that of political-social utopianism and that of salvation-seeking privatism and redemption-egoism, and likewise to show the human person a way out and an orientation from the trap of the universal faith in progress, as it was advocated in the first half of the twentieth century by the secular ideologies with catastrophic consequences, and to open up an alternative to the quietism of only circling spiritually around one's individual salvation. According to Christian doctrine, it is not permissible to seek one's individual salvation without consideration of that of one's neighbor.

There is, however, also the doctrine, which is to be drawn from the disaster of the twentieth century, that the individual cannot be exonerated from accepting responsibility for his own ethical actions and to realize his "progress" as a moral and intellectual individual by a universal idea of progress, a progressive ideology or a collective goal. The one large progress cannot replace the small progresses of the individual, and the small progresses of the individual must be pursued in association with the progresses of the community in which the individual lives.

3. The Connection between Eternal Life and the Completion of History: Exodus on the Earth instead from the Earth

The connection between the search for individual salvation and the social conditions under which the realization of the prerequisites necessary for attaining salvation or eternal life or *nirvana* bring it about that the attainment of final salva-

may not become apocalypticism, i.e. a doctrine of the end of history, its stages and events. It must limit itself from talking about ends and goals. Eschatology as the expectation of the salvation of the finite from the transcendence, of God's day and deed, means a limit and moderation for all confidence in the results of Christian *activity* in history. It is a "no" to the delusion that the action of the Christian and of Christendom would create the new man, the new humanity, the new world. But the Christian healing would be completely misunderstood and misused, if it were to lead to a paralysis of action. From it flow instead seriousness, joyfulness, and confidence of action despite ever new limitation and disappointment." Cf. also P. Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge: Lehrbuch der Eschatologie* (1922; 10th Ed., Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1970).

tion or eternal life is linked to the completion of history and the world. The completion of all human beings, who are destined as individuals for eternal life, is linked to the final realization of the conditions that allow or make it easier for the individual to attain eternal life. The completion of humanity to eternal life is only possible by the completion of history.

This relationship between eternal life and the completion of history is also a necessary relationship, because everything in the world is made for finiteness and not for eternal life. According to the second law of thermodynamics, the "most metaphysical of all natural laws" (Henri Bergson), all energetic states strive for the more probable state, thus the more disordered, more undifferentiated state. Negentropy or order is replaced by entropy or disorder; life by death. The state of eternal life is not possible in a world subject to the laws of thermodynamics. Resurrection, eternal life, or *nirvana* requires, instead, a world in which the second law of thermodynamics is not valid. It requires an ontological transformation of the world, its complete transformation and transfiguration.

Only a transformed world permits being able to think of eternal life as a state, because in the world as we know it, all life and all high degrees of organization or order are subject to decay and death. Everything temporal is determined by the passage of time. As Paracelsus wrote, "Time causes decay in all things." This decay of time in all things can be remedied only by a complete transformation of all things. Therefore, transformation becomes a basic concept of the religions; indeed, all of the hopes of the religions come together in the transformability of nature and of the human life.

This is especially true of the Abrahamic religions, which set their hope in the bodily resurrection and a bodily eternal life. The bodily resurrection and the bodily eternal life are only conceivable under the assumption of a complete, ontological transformation of matter. Therefore, the transformability of matter is among the great hopes of mankind. Christianity – as well as Judaism and Islam – assumes that, just as a transformation of matter and the body to coarseness and mortality has taken place as a consequence of the fall, so an eschatological and apocalyptic transformation of matter and corporality to the transfigured and eternal body will be realized.

Such a hope in the transformation of matter is also the basis of the idea in Hinduism and Buddhism of the karmic body, which with better deeds attains for its possessor a better mode of existence and a finer materialization. To be sure, Hinduism and Buddhism do not recognize eternal corporality and understand the eschatological state of perfection as disembodied. The question whether the cycle of rebirth is eternal for living beings as a whole or whether it will sometime come to an end for *all* living beings, and the question whether *nirvana* or *moksha* possesses characteristics of an eschatological completion are of great significance to the dialogue of the world religions and to understanding their

answers to the question of this book, to the question of the completion of history and eternal life.

It is only noted here that the eschatological hopes of modern technology also cannot disregard the law of entropy and the prediction of the heat death of the universe. Even the technological utopias of computer scientists such as Bill Joy, who assume that modern technology will be in the position to create human immortality, regard this as possible only under the presupposition that we leave our solar system when its energetic potential is exhausted.² Even here immortality is considered to be possible only if an ontological change of the energetic situation takes place. According to the technological vision of immortality, this transformation of the situation of the human race can take place only if the human race performs an exodus from the earth and its galaxy to other galaxies or worlds. One easily sees in this utopia the future of a human race that performs one exodus after another from one star to another in order to ensure its eternal life.

The biblical interpretation of eternal life is not that of an exodus *from* the earth, but instead one of an exodus *on* the earth. The biblical interpretation of eternal life is that of an eschatological, ontological transformation of the human person and the earth. The prophecy of the renewal of the face of the earth in the Bible opposes the picture of the exodus from the earth as the utopia of modern technology.

The biblical religions and the thermodynamics of physics are based on the idea of the world as a whole, which – as it is – has a beginning, which is on the basis of the present character of matter and energy finite, and which will have a state of exhaustion, of ending, and of death.³ The apocalypticism of the expectation of an end of the world and of history is, therefore, deeply inscribed in the religion and natural science of the Western world.

² According to Bill Joy, "Many people seriously advise us to abandon the earth as quickly as possible. According to von Neumann, we should colonize the Milky Way with spaceships and hop from one solar system to another. This step ... could already become necessary in the middle of this century" [!] ("Warum die Technik uns nicht braucht: Die mächtigsten Technologien des 21. Jahrhunderts – Robotik, Gentechnik und Nanotechnologie – machen den Menschen zur gefährdeten Art," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 2000, pp. 49 and 51, here p. 51). On the attempt of modern technology to ensure human immortality, see P. Koslowski, "Nature and Technology in the Religions," in Koslowski, ed., *Nature and Technology in the World Religions*, Discourse of the World Religions, Vol. 3 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), pp. 11ff.

³ Cf. P. Koslowski, "Energie," *Staatslexikon*, 7th Ed., Vol. 2 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1986), cols. 247-53.

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