

Apocalyptic Eschatology

Every Christian ethics is determined by a presupposed eschatology. In differing ethical decisions we must always deal not only with differing ethical conceptions but also with fundamental theological decisions in eschatology, and then in Christology. In this chapter we will make this clear from an apocalyptic eschatology, a christological eschatology, a separatist eschatology and a transformative eschatology.

The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk. In his early academic life he talks like Augustine about the struggle of the *civitas Dei* against the *civitas diaboli*, the city (or state) of God against the city (or state) of the devil, a struggle which will dominate world history apocalyptically until the end. Cain and Abel, Jerusalem and Babylon, the good and the evil forces, God and the devil are always engaged in the struggle for human beings and creation. Just as this conflict dominates world history, it also determines the personal life of Christians in the form of a struggle between spirit and flesh, a struggle of righteousness against sin, life against death, faith against unbelief.¹ This struggle finds an end only in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. It is eschatologically interpreted in conformity with an apocalyptic eschatology, which talks about a future not yet decided and hence a final struggle still to be expected. Inasmuch as this doctrine of the two kingdoms means the struggle between God and the devil for rule over the world, it is not a dualism; it is a doctrine of conflict, and its distinctions are polemical in kind.

Understood in Christian terms, the reason for this endtime conflict of history is found in the coming of Christ, in the proclamation of the gospel, and the awakening of faith. In the light of Christ, the Antichrist too will be manifested; the proclamation of the gospel awakens unbelief as well. Faith's decision for God goes with a decision against the devil. The separation between believers and unbelievers anticipates the endtime judgment. In his accord with God, the believer is in opposition to the godless world, and the world opposes him and leads him into temptations, persecutions and

suffering. For Luther, the human being stands between God and the devil to the very end. He has to 'renounce' the Devil in baptism and must daily fight against the 'age-old wicked enemy'. Since he is at once 'righteous and a sinner', he is involved in continual conflict between his correspondence and his opposition to God, between faith and unbelief: 'Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief'. This apocalyptic doctrine of the two kingdoms does not make a distinction between two different spheres, divided from each other. It perceives two complete aspects of the human being in miniature and of the world as a whole.

Because the *civitas Dei* means the lordship of the creator of the world and of human beings, the church does not stand alone in the struggle against the realm of the devil. There are created orders in this world of evil which are nonetheless in conformity with the kingdom of Christ in the church. Within the great distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil—a distinction which dominates world history as a whole—Luther makes a second one between the saving kingdom of Christ and the life-sustaining kingdom of the world.² In order to restrict and disperse the power of the devil, God has established two different rules or governments: the worldly one and the spiritual one. Within the great distinction, these two kingdoms or rules are directed in God's name against the power of the devil but in different ways, and these must therefore be distinguished from one another. The one is *justitia civilis*, civil justice, the other *justitia Dei*, divine justice. In the worldly realm, rule is by law, reason and the sword—in the spiritual kingdom, it is only by God's Word and Spirit, grace and faith. In the spiritual realm God provides for eternal salvation; in the worldly realm human beings provide for the wellbeing of life.

The two rules limit and complement each other mutually. In the worldly rule, law and force contribute to external order and earthly peace. In the spiritual rule the word of God contributes to faith and salvation. In our confused world this distinction between the two rules is also very much a polemical one: it is directed against every kind of religious politics and every political religion. The worldly realm must not intervene in the spiritual one, for no one can be forced to believe. The spiritual rule must not interfere in the worldly one, for no state can be ruled by means of the gospel. This division of functions would certainly seem to be an ideal state of things, but it always needed to be critically related to the religious and political situation of the time, as it must still. Religion is continually being 'made' using politics, and that leads souls astray. Politics are continually being 'made' using religion, and

that is the ruin of the worldly order. The spiritual rule acts indirectly on the worldly one inasmuch as it de-divinizes and de-demonizes political power. We should deal with the world, with law and force, objectively and rationally. This world is not going to become the kingdom of God on earth, but it is a good earthly order which counters the chaos disseminated by the devil. We should act towards God and the gospel in a spiritual way. The gospel does not create any better orders in the world, but it does save human beings through faith and requires that in the orders that exist we should practise love.

Although the apocalyptic doctrine about the struggle of the two kingdoms and the practical doctrine about the two earthly rules seem convincing in their limited sense, they become difficult where the political life of Christians is concerned. Does the Christian serve two masters? Is he simultaneously a citizen of two different kingdoms? Should he follow the Sermon on the Mount or the law and force? Luther made a corresponding distinction in the personal life of Christians between the faith which justifies before God without works and the works which ought to be performed simply for the sake of one's neighbour: in relation to God, faith alone; in relation to one's neighbour, love alone. In faith someone is a 'Christian person', in works 'a worldly person'. Anyone who mixes the two will act appropriately towards neither God nor his neighbour.

But what criterion determines good works for one's neighbour? Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession says: 'The Gospel does not destroy the state or the family. On the contrary, it especially requires their preservation as ordinances of God and the exercise of love in these ordinances'.³ The state, economic life and the family are named as 'divine ordinances'. Are these mentioned only as the fields for love's activity, or are there also authorities and laws to determine our conduct politically, economically and in the family? We should obey 'the powers that be' and keep their laws 'in so far as that may be done without sin'. Resistance is required only if authority and the law want to compel us to sin. But normally speaking harmony reigns, for God rules through both forms of government, and Christ manifests his kingdom against the power of the devil through faith and good works. The more that God's two rules are seen in their common struggle against the realm of the devil, the more they move into proximity to each other. In politics, economic life and in the family, Christians will then become coworkers with God and witnesses to Christ against the kingdom of the devil. Christian love follows Christ's guidelines in life's diverse sectors. In these different sectors Christians act appropriately and rationally but not under their constraints. In the

struggle against the power of the devil, the church and the worldly orders come close to each other. The orders are then viewed as spheres of God's good creation 'which should all include Christ'.⁴ In dictatorships, the Christian churches did in fact often become the refuge of humanity and freedom and the place of truth.

There are two fundamental questions:

1. The doctrine of the two kingdoms sets the gospel of Christ and the worldly orders within an apocalyptic eschatology about the struggle between the lordship of Christ and the power of the devil. Is this right? Shouldn't the gospel of Christ announce the victory of God over sin, death and devil? 'Hell, where is thy victory!' (1 Cor. 15.55)? Apocalyptic eschatology sees Christ in the light of God's struggle against the devil at the end of history, but it does not see history and the end of history in the light of Christ. It fits Christ into an apocalyptic picture of history and does not let him be the lord of history and its end. For the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the victory of God Paul saw in the resurrection of Christ stands in the apocalyptic future tense, not in the prophetic and apostolic present.

It follows from this that the worldly orders, and preeminently the state, are regarded as God's repressive powers against the evil and chaos of the devil. They are not seen as processes open to the future in which the justice, righteousness and peace of God's kingdom are anticipated. In God's struggle against the machinations of the devil, what counts is the politics of friend or enemy relations and the permanent struggle against evil.

2. The doctrine of the two kingdoms puts worldly government under the law, as distinct from the gospel. But what is the law? The law of Israel's covenant? The natural law of ancient times? The law which is in force in each individual state? If the 'orders' are accepted as they are, what is meant has to be the law in force in any given state. There are no criteria here bearing on 'justice and righteousness'—criteria, that is to say, whereby the justice or injustice of the laws in force are to be judged. If Christianity is supposed to practise love only in the existing structures, this leaves out the creative power of this love in its bearing on law and its power to change structures.

According to the doctrine of the two kingdoms, in worldly structures the Christian acts no differently from other people, appropriately and rationally. But that makes him invisible. So in worldly life Christians become anonymous. There is no plan for a specifically and distinguishable *Christian* ethics.

This doctrine brings into Christian life the realism which takes account of the facts and grasps the normative power of the factual. But it provides

no motivation for the world-changing hope which gives effect to what is possible. It is in the best sense conservative, but it is in no way innovative.

The Apocalyptic Catechon

In apocalyptic eschatology there is a mysterious biblical passage which has led to ever-new speculations down to the present day: 'For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming' (2 Thess. 2.7-8, NRSV).

Who is this 'restrainer', in Greek the *κατέχων*, the 'catechon'? In whose name does he hold back the complete revelation of the evil and therefore delay the victory of 'the Lord Jesus' over the evil one?

It is impossible to discover exegetically whom Paul means in the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians. After the Constantinian turn of events, Christian tradition saw the catechon as being the Roman state. It was that which restrained the power of endtime evil, thus winning time for the church to spread. Whereas persecuted early Christendom tried to hurry on the end, praying 'Amen, come Lord Jesus, come soon' (see Rev. 22.20), the imperial Constantinian church prayed *pro mora finis*—that the end might be delayed. Whereas the early Christians suffered from the delay of the parousia (2 Pet. 3.4), the imperial church deliberately went along with this delay of the parousia and fortified 'the restrainer' by legitimating it theologically.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer praised the 'restrainer' as being the ordering power of the state,⁵ which with immense physical power stood successfully in the way of what would have led to disaster. 'The restraining power... is the force that is made effective within history by God's rule in the world which sets limits to evil. The 'restrainer' itself is not itself God, and is not without guilt, but God uses it to protect the world from disintegration.... The 'restraining force' is the ordering power of the state.⁶ According to Bonhoeffer, this ordering power sees its ally in the church, and such elements of order as still exist seek the proximity of the church. Bonhoeffer wrote this during the Second World War, after he had already joined the resistance. At that time the mystery of wickedness was by no means restrained by the state. On the contrary, the German state served the cause of wickedness. It was empowered by the evil which through the agency of the German state spread death and destruction. The Nazi dictatorship was organized 'wickedness'. In the resistance Bonhoeffer evidently looked for the true power of the state, which can 'restrain' this

destructive power. And what gathered around the Confessing Church was in fact the political and cultural resistance against the Nazi barbarity.

In its power against evil, the catechon does not merely hold back the complete development of evil, but in doing so it also corresponds in time to the final annihilation of evil which will come about through Christ's appearance. In so far, it is at the service of God and ministers to the lordship of Christ. Unless it could be understood in this sense, the 'restrainer' would hinder not only the culmination of evil but the coming of Christ too. But then it would be impermissible for Christians to support the ordering power of the state. They would have to be anarchists, so as to hasten Christ's coming; for after all they expect with Paul that at the end Christ will 'destroy every rule and every authority and power... that God may be all in all' (1 Cor. 1.24, 28).

The political theology of the conservative constitutional theorist Carl Schmitt was rooted in his apocalyptic eschatology and was intended to serve solely its expectation of the final struggle.⁷ Consequently in his speculations about the theology of history, he again and again came to speak about the mysterious catechon which the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians talks about. His political theology begins with the revelation of God, the truth of which is accepted only in faith. Unbelief is therefore not only an enemy of faith; it is an enemy of God as well. The divine revelation divides friend from enemy. It is the revelation itself which brings about this separation. 'It is only because of God's revelation that there is enmity against God.' So unbelief is not an inability to believe; it is rebellion against God. What Carl Schmitt calls in his politics the fundamental 'friend-enemy' relationship originates in the division between belief and unbelief. The primal metaphysical image of the political friend-enemy relationship is the relationship between God and Satan in the conflict of world history. The eschatological orientation in history is given by the relation between Christ and Antichrist in the decisive battle of the endtime.⁸

'I believe in the catechon; for me as a Christian it is the only way in which to understand history and to find meaning in it.'⁹ There are three reasons impelling Schmitt to this belief. 1. The idea of the catechon explains the delay of the parousia without surrendering the expectation. 2. It explains why there is still history at all after the coming of Christ. 3. It gives the state a meaning in the context of salvation history. Since Christ's coming, there must have been a catechon in every era. 'Its place was never unoccupied; if it had been we should no longer exist', said Schmitt, and yet he was unable to give the catechon a name. If it is meant to be the state, which state? Every

state or only legitimate states? Up to now there has been no universal state which could have held back the end of world history. Are there as many catechons as there are national states? Or is it individual persons important in world history who are meant? Or is it an angel? After all, Paul talks about the catechon in the singular. So the catechon must be universal. Not without a certain ironic recollection of Carl Schmitt's anti-Semitism, one is reminded of the story about the 'ten righteous men' for whose sake God was to spare Sodom, as Abraham prays (Gen. 18.22-33). That has found its place in the Jewish legend about the few righteous in every generation for whose sake the world still exists and because of whom the Last Judgment is still deferred.

However it may be with the deferring of the final struggle, the catechon doctrine lends state power a sacred status in salvation history, and for Carl Schmitt that was the point. From an eschatological viewpoint it preserves human beings, but only in an extreme state of alert, as German Lutheran theologian Wilhelm Stählin thought;¹⁰ or to put it more precisely: it awakens an apocalyptic alarmism which is hardly conducive to the surmounting of historical crises, because it paralyses the power to act. It defines the task of the state one-sidedly as being the repression of evil, chaos and anarchy. It confers apocalyptic legitimation on this repression. This of course is no protection against the hostile takeover of state power by evil itself. But state terrorism and anti-Christian politics have put their stamp on twentieth-century experience.

In the twenty-first century, we are facing another threat to the state: international terrorism, particularly of an Islamic kind. Suicide activists cannot be punished by death. They have departed from the foundation of all international agreements, which is the will to survive. Their desire is annihilation, the annihilation of others, of themselves and often of this whole wicked world. Terrorist groups are recruited from states in which the state's monopoly of power cannot be sustained.¹¹ These are disintegrating states, such as Somalia and Pakistan. But even in the wealthy countries of the West, the state's power monopoly is surrendered once security is privatized and made a commodity only the rich can still afford. These people then live in gated communities and pay private security personnel. On the other hand, in these same countries there are slums in which the police are powerless. In this briefly outlined situation, to which we shall return, the catechon must first enforce its constitutionally legitimated monopoly of power, and out of many catechons a worldwide catechon must emerge to organize humanity's will to survive, suppress apocalyptically aligned terrorism and hold back the manmade destructions of the world.

Armageddon

This prophecy can be found in the book of Revelation in the chapter about the outpouring of God's wrath through seven angels.

For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty...and they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon. (Rev. 16.14, 16)

The prophecy has no connection with the victory of Christ and the downfall of Babylon. Since the name 'Armageddon' is not explained any further, it is probably meant to remain a mystery. Historically, there may be an echo here of an old myth about the onslaught of the demonic army against the mountain of the gods, the demons then being annihilated by light-emanating divine beings.¹² The struggle between the Almighty God and the demons talked about here does not play a central role in the Apocalypse of John because it does not talk about 'the victory of the Lamb'.¹³

In the apocalyptic tradition of the English Reformation, the central point from the beginning was the struggle between Christ and the Antichrist, God and the devil, believers and unbelievers.¹⁴ Nowhere else in Europe were so many commentaries on the book of Revelation written as in England. Among them we may especially mention one written by King James I and another by Sir Isaac Newton. In the political mythology of the Pilgrim Fathers in the American colonies, the Exodus from Egypt (Europe) and the arrival in the promised land (America) always played a legitimizing role for the occupation of the lands belonging to America's original inhabitants. So the apocalyptic dualism of the English Reformation itself was adopted too, brought over and became deeply anchored in the American soul. American expectations of the end of the world were always concentrated on the final struggle between God and the devil, the good and the wicked. Nowhere else in worldwide Christianity did this mysterious name 'Armageddon' play such a key role for churches, politics, world history and 'the rest of the world'.¹⁵

In the middle of the seventeenth century, a Christian Zionism emerged in England.¹⁶ The Jews no longer counted as agents of the Antichrist, as they had in the Reformation period. They were now seen as agents of the apocalyptic redemption of the world.¹⁷ The scenario has remained the same down to the present day. Act I: The Jews return home from the Dispersion and build the state of Israel. Act II: The demonically ruled Gentile nations make

an assault on Israel. Act III: These nations will be annihilated by God in the battle of battles at Armageddon. Act IV: Then Christ will come with his own, who have been 'caught up' or 'raptured' before the great tribulation; he will appear on Zion and set up his thousand years' kingdom. So all the Jews must first be compelled to return to Israel. Christian Zionists such as the television preacher Pat Robertson have collected millions of dollars in order to finance the return of Russian Jews to Israel. In Jerusalem, the 'Christian Embassy' sees to the distribution of the money. Then the true believers must be prepared for the final struggle in Armageddon by being made certain that they will be snatched away and by cutting themselves off from all those who remain behind. In the scenario Hal Lindsay developed in *The Late Great Planet Earth*,¹⁸ in the first wave Soviet Russia's 'Red Army' will move against Jerusalem and will be annihilated in Armageddon by US atomic bombs; then the People's Army from China will move up; it will be annihilated in the same place by US hydrogen bombs. And then Christ, 'the Lion of Judah', will appear with those who are his and will bring about the millennium.

One can brush all this aside as apocalyptic nonsense, but unfortunately that kind of thinking influences American politicians too. In October 1983, United States President Ronald Reagan told a journalist from the *Jerusalem Post*: 'I turn back to the Old Testament prophets and to the signs which announce the Armageddon, and I ask myself whether we are not the generation that will experience it. I don't know if you have recently come across any of these prophecies, but believe me, they certainly describe the time we are living in.' Asked later by *Time Magazine* whether he meant a 'nuclear Armageddon', Reagan said 'yes';¹⁹ but then said no more; for in order to bring about a nuclear Armageddon it was he himself, not God Almighty, who would have had to press the button.

However it may be with the apocalyptic Armageddon, this expectation of the endtime struggle puts the present, both religiously and politically, into a permanent state of war: religiously by separating believers from unbelievers, politically by continually fanning anew the flames of 'friend-enemy' thinking. Enemies—in the Cold War it was the Red East, the Soviet Union and China; after that came the 'rogue states': Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Without an enemy there can be no struggle, and without a struggle there is no expectation of the final battle and the victory of the good and its God over the wicked.²⁰