ONE

The Modern Mind

The Disappearance of Eschatology in the Modern World

Nowhere, over the field of Christian doctrine, is the gulf between the biblical viewpoint and the outlook of modern secularism so yawning as in the matter of eschatology. The whole New Testament prospect of a return of Christ, accompanied by the transformation of this world-order, a general resurrection, a final judgment, and the vindication of the sovereignty of God over heaven and earth, is regarded by the scientific humanist of the twentieth century as frankly fantastic. The biblical narratives of the last things seem to him as incredible as the biblical narratives of the first things appeared to his grandfather a century ago. Or, rather, they are more incredible. For, whereas the Genesis stories, reinterpreted, could, it was found, be harmonized with the evolutionary picture, the second advent and its accompaniments appear to the modern a simple contradiction of all his presumptions about the future of the world, immediate or remote. And yet, despite its incompatibility with the modern outlook, the biblical view of the last things, unlike that of the first, has hardly stirred a ripple of controversy. The entire Christian eschatological scheme has simply been silently dismissed without so much as a serious protest from within the ecclesiastical camp.

This could only have happened if the church's doctrine at this point had become not merely incredible, but irrelevant. "The storm in a Victorian tea-cup," as Professor Raven called the previous controversy,

at least proved that an intensely live issue was at stake. But for contemporary thought today the Christian doctrine of the last things is dead, and no one has even bothered to bury it. To appreciate why this is so, it is necessary to take account of two changes in the secular outlook which distinguish the mind of the twentieth century from that of the nineteenth.

Reasons for the Disappearance of Eschatology

The First Cultural Change—The Real Possibility of Global Destruction

The first change would appear perhaps to make the Christian teaching seem more rather than less relevant. It is the fact that it is very much easier today than it was for our grandfathers to reckon seriously upon the end of the world. The nineteenth-century scientists may have known well enough the chilling prospects for the future of this earth under the second law of thermodynamics. But it was not a knowledge that modified in any serious way the general optimism of the Victorian outlook. The end of the world was far away, and human society had ample time to reach the goal of its progress before that need be reckoned with. Moreover, it was only a limited number of people who really believed that, in the most significant sense, this was the end. The majority retained enough of the Christian heritage to doubt, even if things should prove to go out not with a bang but a whimper, whether it seriously mattered. But to a generation brought up, not merely to the conclusions of the laboratory, but, more importantly, to its perspectives and horizons, the picture of the last state of our planet colors, or pales, much of its more sober thinking.

But today, of course, it is nothing so gradual or remote as the processes of entropy[1] (or the now-favored probability of a scorched earth, as the sun converts more and more of its hydrogen into helium) that has forced men to reckon again with the end of the world as a serious possibility. Scientists may deny the likelihood of the disintegration of this planet, or even of the total annihilation of human life, as the result of unforeseen[2] chain reaction from atomic fissure. The layman is left

1. [1968: "the cold processes of entropy."]
2. [1968: "uncontrolled."]

to place what confidence he can in such assurances and to derive from them what comfort he may.[3] But whether the eclipse of human history be total or merely partial, the live possibility, not to say probability, of such an event in the immediate[4] future, has brought back the issues of eschatology not simply to the laboratory, but to the lobby.

All this might, as was said, seem to betoken a new relevance and promise a new hearing for the Christian message of the end. And there have not lacked those who, in their preaching and evangelism, have sought to turn the situation to account.[5] But this is to reckon without the second great change that has come over the nineteenth-century prospect.

The Second Cultural Change—The Loss of a Telos *for History*

Up to the end of the last century, and well into this, men were convinced that it was natural to seek the clue to the course of history in its final stage. That was an assumption which was foreign to the ancient world, except to the Jews and to such as had come under Zoroastrian influence. But with the spread of Christianity it became one of the accepted axioms of western civilization. The modern belief in progress is, as has often been said, a Christian heresy—a secularized version of Hebraic eschatology. As long as this belief persisted, it was still to the end of things that men looked to find the meaning and justification of the whole. So much was this so, that, from the eighteenth century onwards, political theorists were happy to speak, as Christianity with its dimension of eternity had never done, as though every generation except the last could be regarded as a means to an end, provided that that last generation did obtain the promise. The logical conclusion of this

3. Cf. the already much-quoted conclusion of the Scientific Correspondent of *The Times* on the hydrogen bomb: "There seems . . . little doubt that within a few decades, if not a few years, it will be possible for any Power with modern industrial resources to destroy the world as we know it." *The Times*, Jan 27, 1950. [This footnote was removed from the 1968 edition.]

4. [1968: "foreseeable."]

5. 2 Pet 3:10, for instance, provides an admirable "atomic" text: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

assumption can be seen in Marxist thought, where the eschatological element is strong.[6] If every generation is a means to an end, then so is every individual in it—and so he can be treated. But, pursued ruthlessly to its secular conclusion or not, the assumption that it was legitimate to interpret history in terms of a goal was all but universally accepted.

Today that presumption is disappearing. The final generation, far from being the favored one, will simply be the unlucky one, either as it is called upon to endure natural conditions increasingly insupportable for human life, or as it has to witness the final agonies of racial suicide. Special value or significance attaches to the last term of a process only when the whole is thought to be purposive. Apart from a belief in teleology there can be no true *telos* or climax, but only a stopping, a cessation, a petering out. In this case, any term in the series becomes as important—or as meaningless—as any other. And in so far as men today have lost a conception of the end of history as more than cessation, whether lingering or catastrophic, they must fail to see any relevance whatever in a doctrine of last things. For the last things, on this reckoning, have no more significance for the understanding of the world than the penultimate, prepenultimate, or any other. It is for this reason that the gulf between the church's teaching on eschatology and secular thought is wider today than ever before. Men now may have a more lively expectation of an end. But the decisive factor is whether they think of that end as purposive, not whether they believe it to be near. To the nineteenth century, the Christian scheme may have seemed incredible—an improbable answer to an intelligent question; to the twentieth it appears blankly irrelevant—the question itself has become meaningless. For, without some kind of belief in teleology, there can be no eschatology. Discussion of it becomes as futile as a disquisition on the anatomy of mermaids.[7]

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6. [The 1968 edition added this footnote: "See my essay 'The Christian Hope.' In *Christian Faith and Communist Faith*, edited by D. M. Mackinnon.]

7. [The 1968 edition removed this sentence.]

The Perceived Irrelevance of Eschatology

In a series, *Theology for Modern Men*, the modern man would frankly not expect to be presented with a book on the last things.[8] For, however well disposed he may be towards Christianity[9] as a whole, he regards this particular department of it for the most part as dead wood. He might perhaps be prepared for a book on the future life, which is the only part of the traditional content of Christian eschatology in which the secular world retains a flicker of interest. And it does that, in so far as it does it, only because this doctrine has in modern teaching been lifted entirely out of its original framework of cosmic eschatology. How far in consequence this isolated fragment has remained recognizably Christian is another matter, and one that will require further discussion.

But even such interest as attaches to the question of an afterlife is notoriously weak in the modern world, except when it is artificially stimulated in time of war. And even here the Second World War differed from the First in revealing a much less active concern about the state of the departed and a far more widespread spirit of fatalistic indifference. About a question which touches every individual so closely, and presses, one would think, yet the more urgently in an age of destruction, the modern man is blandly unconcerned. In his own jargon, he just couldn't care less.

What is the reason for all this? Ultimately, no doubt, the fact that for the mass of his generation "God is dead."[10] It is no accident that widespread atheism and a refusal to believe in a life after death of any kind (both of them phenomena unknown except in recent times) should have made their appearance together. But, more immediately, there is another cause.

Short of the ultimate issue of belief or disbelief in the Christian God, the most fundamental fact which a writer on Christian eschatology must face is that men today have lost valid grounds for believing any statement about eschatology in any form. Deep down, contempo-

8. [1968: "In an attempt at communication especially designed to speak to him modern man would frankly . . ."]

9. [1968: "the faith."]

10. [In 1968, in light of the subsequent "death of God debate," Robinson added the following footnote: "It is interesting to me on reading it through to find that this phrase occurred in the first edition of 1950."]

rary skepticism may doubtless be traced to irreligion; but to the skeptics themselves it is a question of *evidence*. The initial problem for anyone approaching the subject is, therefore, epistemological.

The Theological Challenge for the Church

What grounds are there for making any assertions about eschatology which may reasonably claim to be true? Until recent years[11] such statements were thought to rest securely, like other theological truth, on the twin foundations of revelation and reason. Time was when the future prospects both of the individual and of the world could be asserted with confidence on the authority of infallible propositions of Holy Writ and the necessary postulates of rational thinking. Today that confidence has been almost entirely shattered. In matters eschatological, perhaps more than in any other department, the modern generation believes neither in the inerrancy of scriptural statement nor in the validity of metaphysical thought. The whole edifice in which our forebears lived and hoped has collapsed with the crumbling of its epistemological foundations. The dark paths of the future have been abandoned to "the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators" (Isa 47:13), who, together with the Theosophists, Spiritualists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, British Israelites, Christadelphians, The Panacea Society, and the rest have stepped in to answer for the modern man Kant's third great question, "What may I hope for?"—to which Kant himself first caused men to doubt whether there might be a rational answer. And even those who do not go all the way to Endor have ceased to believe that assertions about the hereafter comprise more than a web of speculation, in which any statement is as likely, or as unlikely, to be true as any other. You may not pay your money, but you still take your choice. Christians themselves are beginning to lose confidence[12] in their ability to give a bottom to their hopes which is more solid than sanctified wishful thinking. Even to the theologian the field of eschatology must appear the least amenable to those canons of induction and verification whereby his discipline, like any other science today, must substantiate its claim to give valid knowledge.

11. [1968: "a hundred years ago or so."]
12. [1968: "have lost confidence."]

Before anything can be said, then, of the content of Christian eschatology, it is necessary to enquire afresh into its credentials. Ours, as we stressed in the Introduction, is a day when the most significant biblical theology is soaked through with eschatology. Its rediscovery has transformed and quickened our understanding of the gospel of Jesus and the apostolic church. If this new light is to break through into Christian doctrine and have any chance of touching secular thought, modern man has first to be convinced that the whole eschatological viewpoint, accepted without question by the New Testament writers, has any validity or relevance for the twentieth century. Unless this task of apologetics is successfully performed, we shall be left, as Albert Schweitzer was, to make the best of a situation where biblical theology requires us to interpret the gospel in categories that are confessedly fantastic and false for the modern world. And to rest there is either to abandon the gospel as dated and irrelevant, or to sever it from all ties to its historical foundation. And the latter, despite Schweitzer's heroic inconsistency,[13] is equally to sound its knell. For an unhistorical mysticism of "the spirit of Jesus" may be magnificent, but it is not Christianity.[14]

Moreover, whether men hear or whether they forbear, the eschatology of the Christian gospel should be capable of addressing this generation with a most fearful relevance.[15] Never since the first century have men been so conscious of living in the last times. "'We live in an apocalyptic age'—one hears from people who do not believe in any apocalypse whatsoever."[16] But more and more in the past generation the church has been faced by people who *do* believe in apocalypses—the great secular myths of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, each with its own eschatology of history. These myths have come up like thunderstorms against the wind. In an intellectual atmosphere slowly stifling all forms of teleology, these vast, irrational cyclones have swept everything before them.

13. [1968: "heroic example."]
14. [1968: "but it is hardly catholic Christianity."]
15. [1968: "genuine relevance."]
16. Quoted from Berdyaev by Lampert, *The Apocalypse of History*, 12.