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The
Coming
of
God

Christian
Eschatology

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say that God is there, and will be there, in the place to which his promise calls men and women. God does not need any name in order to be invoked and to be present. God is there. That is enough. All the individual promises in history point beyond their particularity to the universal appearance of God himself: 'The whole earth is full of his glory' (Isa.6.3). All God's individual acts in history point towards 'the day of the Lord'.

The God of hope is himself the coming God (Isa.35.4; 40.5). When God comes in his glory, he will fill the universe with his radiance, everyone will see him, and he will swallow up death for ever. This future is God's mode of being in history. The power of the future is his power in time. His eternity is not timeless simultaneity; it is the power of his future over every historical time.⁵⁵ It is therefore logical that it was not only God himself who was experienced as 'the Coming One', but that the conveyers of hope who communicate his coming and prepare men and women for his parousia should also be given this title: the Messiah, the Son of man, and Wisdom.⁵⁶ The coming God is older than the various expectations of the messiah and the Son of man. These live from the hope for him. By virtue of hope for the coming God, the expected future acquires an inexhaustible 'added value' over against present and past in the experience of time. *Sub specie aeternitatis* not all times are of equal significance. Nor is time experienced as the power of transience, like Chronos, who devours his own children. If God's being is in his coming, then the future that comes to meet us must become the theological paradigm of transcendence.

Entering into God's coming future makes possible a new human becoming: 'Arise, *become* light, for your light *is coming*, and the glory of the Lord is rising upon you' (Isa. 60.1). The proclamation of the near – the coming – the arriving kingdom of God makes human conversion to this future possible. 'Be converted, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4.17). This unity between the divine coming and human conversion is 'fulfilled time' (Mark 1.15). The First Epistle of John also links human becoming with the divine coming: 'It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (I John 3.2). The writer is talking about the Christ of the parousia. The eschatology of the coming God calls to life the history of new human becoming, which is a becoming without any passing away, a becoming into lasting being in the coming presence of God.

2. Future or Advent?

European languages generally have two possible ways of talking about what is ahead. *Futurum* means what will be; *adventus* means what is coming. The two words go together with two different conceptions of time.⁵⁷

Future in the sense of *futurum* develops out of the past and present, inasmuch as these hold within themselves the potentiality of becoming and are 'pregnant with future' (Leibniz's phrase). Only that can become which is already implicit or dormant in being, and is heralded in the trends and latencies of the historical process. In the Greek myth, Physis is the eternally fruitful womb of Being. Physis is Being that brings forth. But that is only one side of her: if future (*futurum*) is her eternal process of becoming, past is her eternal process of dying. Matter is both matrix and moloch, the mother who bears and devours, like the Indian goddess Kali in Calcutta. In the process of the ever-recurring 'die and become', the times are equal. The future offers no special reason for hope, for the past predominates, inasmuch as that which is not yet, will one day no longer be. Because what is future is already latent in the tendencies of process, these tendencies cannot, either, bring anything astonishingly new. In this concept of time, the future enjoys no primacy, there is no category *novum*, and really no 'principle of hope' either.⁵⁸

The German word *Zukunft* is not a translation of the Latin *futurum*. It is a translation of *adventus*. But *adventus*, in its turn, is a rendering of the Greek word *parousia*. In secular Greek, *parousia* means the coming of persons, or the happening of events, and literally means presence; but the language of the prophets and apostles has brought into the word the messianic note of hope. The expectation of the parousia is an advent hope. For in the New Testament the past presence of Christ in the flesh, or the present presence of Christ in the Spirit, is never termed *parousia*. The word is kept exclusively for Christ's coming presence in glory. There are not three parousias: in the flesh, in the Spirit, and in glory, as later theological tradition said, in an attempt to put the advent hope on ice. Although *parousia* means arrival, Luther was right when he translated the word as 'Zukunft Christi', the future – or rather the future coming – of Christ, thus bringing into the word the messianic note of hope. To translate *parousia* as 'coming

again' or 'second coming' is wrong, because that presupposes a temporary absence.

What happens when we carry this concept of the future into the usual linear notions of time? We then find that we are dealing with two different concepts of the future: on the phenomenal level – the level of everyday experience – we are conscious of past time – present time – future time. But on the transcendental level we then presuppose the future as the necessary condition if time is to be a possibility at all.⁵⁹ The future as God's power in time must then be understood as the source of time. It then defines the past as past-future and the present as present-future and future time as future-future. Historical time is irreversible: the future becomes the past, but the past never again becomes future. That is because reality emerges from potentiality, all past and present realities being realized potentialities; but reality never again turns into potentiality. Just as potentiality surpasses reality, so the future exceeds the present and the past. Of course this is true only of the transcendental future of time, not future time in the phenomenal sense. If transcendental future is the source of time, then it does not abolish time as does timeless-simultaneous eternity, nor does it lose itself in the maelstrom of the general transience of all temporal being. It rather throws open the time of history, qualifying historical time as time determined by the future.

The 'eschaton' of an eschatology which works with the concept of God suggested here, and with this advent understanding of the future, is not an eternity which can neither *enter* time, nor remain *outside* time. This eschaton means a change in the transcendental conditions of time. With the coming of God's glory, future time ends and eternal time begins. Without a transformation of time like this, eschatology cannot be thought. This actually already emerges from the idea of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, in which death is no more; for all reflections about time here and now are determined by the *memento mori*, the remembrance of death.

Futurist eschatology is a contradiction in terms, because the future (in the static sense of *Futur*) cannot be an eschatological category.

An eschatology of the eternal present is a contradiction in terms, because it abolishes time.

Only the idea of the coming God, and the advent concept of time which is in accord with him, open up categories for eschatology.

3. The Category *Novum*

'Newness is not a category which is determinative for the divine. That category is eternity', said Bultmann.⁶⁰ This may be applicable to deity in Greek religion but it is not true of the messianic religions of biblical origin. For them the category *novum* – the new thing – is the historical side of their eschatological openness to the future. It is not without good reason that Gerhard von Rad headed his account of the 'Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions':

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.
For behold, I purpose to do a new thing (Isa. 43.18f.).⁶¹

The category *novum* emerges theologically among Israel's prophets first of all. To put it briefly, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC, the God of history, known from the remembered past of the Exodus and the settlement of the promised land, became 'a hidden God', a 'God who was far off', and who 'had turned his face away from Israel'. The prophets taught that the catastrophe of 587 had to be seen as God's judgment, and that the people had to hold fast to Israel's God in this light. In proclaiming the judgment on God's people, the prophets also proclaimed a new act on God's part. True, they interpreted the ancient traditions about God, but over against these they also brought something new to expression. They proclaimed the God of history as the creator of a new future. In this way the foundation of salvation shifted from the experienced past to the expected future. The remembrance that had been severed turned into new hope. Hosea promises a new settlement of the land, Isaiah the new David, Jeremiah the new covenant, Deutero-Isaiah a new Exodus, and Ezekiel a new temple. In Isa. 43.18 the breach between the old and the new becomes so deep that hope takes over from remembrance altogether.⁶²

In prophecy the category *novum* acquires at least two typical characteristics:

1. What is new announces itself in the judgment on what is old. It does not *emerge* from the old; it makes the old obsolete. It is not simply the old in new form. It is also a new creation. That is why *barah* is used – the word employed exclusively for the divine creation. *Creatio ex vetere* – creation out of the old – stands in analogy to *creatio ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing; for it is *creatio nova*, a new creation.