
ORTHODOX ESCHATOLOGY VERSUS SECULAR AND SECTARIAN-DENOMINATIONAL ESCHATOLOGISM[†]

Gheorghe Petraru*

University 'Al. I. Cuza', Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Iasi, Romania

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to offer a synthetic vision on the Christian Orthodox Church eschatology comparing with the political and secular eschatologies of the modernity. On the other hand, intends to present a vision on the millennialist eschatologism of the neo-protestant sects.

Keywords: Church, Kingdom of God, eschatology, millennialism, secularism

1. Introduction

The eschatology is a very important chapter in the doctrine, the worship, in the spiritual life of the Orthodox Church. Everyday, the celebrating community and the faithful people confess in the *Credo* the eschatological hope of the resurrection from the deads and the eternal life in the Trinity's Kingdom, promised by our Saviour Jesus Christ. Biblically founded and dogmatised by the Church in the first Christian centuries, eschatology suffered changes, especially in modernity by a strange combination between the political and denominational, sectarian elements. The absolutisation of the political order of the state, parallel to the atomisation of the Church, proposed in the Hegelian philosophy [1, 2], the immanent and historical reductionistic vision of the new mankind influenced upon the Christian eschatology. On one side, the naturalism, the materialism, the atheism of the modernity entered strongly the city of the Christianity and eliminated the transcendent and religious view of the world by promising a happy life and social welfare *in saeculum*, on the other side the new Christian denominations preached the imminent and exact date of Christ's second coming and inauguration of the Kingdom as *millennium*, established on wrong numerological calculations. There is a mixing up of religious and political fields,

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* e-mail: petrarugeorge@yahoo.fr

a *feedback*, which creates confusion in human persons, reduced only to the temporal life of this world. In this paper, I shall shortly focus on the main aspects of the orthodox eschatology, and more extended on secular and sectarian-denominational eschatologism.

2. Orthodox Eschatology

The main topics of the Orthodox eschatology as presented in our Dogmatics can be summarised as follows: death and personal judgment, Parousia and the Resurrection, universal judgment and eternal life in the Kingdom of God, the new world in communion with the Trinity, or in hell as a place and a state out of the God's eternal love. This view is dependent on the Dogmatics from the end of the Middle Age, which treated eschatology as the chapter about the Lord's coming and last things, out of the Christology and Ecclesiology. During the Enlightenment and after that in Feuerbach, Marx, Freud's philosophy, the eschatology was diminished, secularised, eliminated. God's death or the atheism as ideologies of the modernity, shaped, changed the traditional, biblical, ecclesiological understanding of the Christian people living in political-social conditions of this world [3, 4].

This condition has imposed the Church to reflect on eschatology according to the Revelation in the Scripture and the thinking of the Church Fathers, taking into account the spirit of our time, the sense of the history, the time in our philosophy and the hope in our way of life. So, especially in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, the eschatology was preserved in the sense of the Triune God's saving and illuminating presence in the life of the faithful people, sanctified by the holy sacraments, in prayers, in liturgy.

For example, in the Baptism, the man is born as a renewed being and this new man is united with our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 2.20), the Father's eternal Logos, unseparated from the Spirit of God present and working into God's creation from the beginning of our world. In the Eucharistic communion with the Lord, man shares, even during the life in this world, the gift of the eternity by eating and drinking the bread and the blood of the resurrected Lord, which is the actual life for the world (John 6.53-56).

The New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ was preaching the Kingdom of God (*he basileia tou theou*), a term that comprehends three possible senses: sovereignty, reign and realm. These terms are logically inseparable and one may find them used as moving freely from one sense to another. The Kingdom of God is not a term which names a human reign in the sense of space and time, a static notion, but it means the dynamic royal presence and saving action of the Eternal and Almighty God, Creator and Saviour of the world [5, 6]. The presence of Christ, God's eternal Son in the middle of his disciples from the beginning of His messianic mission, through His Resurrection, till the Ascension to Heaven, is actually, the presence of the Kingdom of God which begun for the restored humankind in Jesus as personal hypostatic union between God and man, continued for us with the Pentecost by the Holy Spirit who unites us, only

in grace, to Triune God's uncreated and eternal deifying energy. God is eternal and powerful and His Kingdom, in the world created by Him, signifies His dynamic and saving presence with His people as He had promised by the prophets; Immanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7.14), the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Kingdom in His own person, extended by the Holy Spirit to His disciples who are the Church, Christ's Body and the way to Heaven Kingdom [7]. Jesus Himself assures the Apostles that He would be with them always "to the end of the age" (Matthew 28.20) and that the Holy Spirit, the Helper (John 15.26), would comfort all the believers. So, God's Kingdom is seen in an eschatological sense and it designates always the time of salvation [5, p. 132] by Christ's Resurrection, the new life in the communion to the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Jesus Christ Himself represents the fulfilment of the human being in relation to God, and the Church is "the completion of him who Himself completes all things everywhere"(Ephesians 1.23). The state of holiness is considered as the real fulfilment for the human being redeemed by Christ and sanctified in His Holy Spirit in the Church, and it represents an anticipation of the coming of Kingdom, which will be established entirely after Parousia, when "God will rule completely over all"(I Corinthians 15.28).

The saints of the Church, carried out in their relics the human fulfilment by Trinity's grace and love and their relics are the sign of the deification through the preservation of the body, a state of being ready to universal resurrection at the end of the actual world [8, 9].

The Church itself is the realm of the eternity in time as communion of the Christian people with the loving Trinity. Beyond theological reflection, in its sanctifying mysteries and its Liturgy, the Christian community as local Church of Christ's universal Body, has experienced the coming Kingdom, its presence in the heart of the time. As A. Schmemmann wrote, "to baptise with water and Spirit in the likeness of Christ's death and resurrection: to come together as Church on the lord's Day, to hear His Word and to eat and drink at His Table in His kingdom; to relate through the Liturgy time all time, all cosmos – its time, matter and life – to Christ who is to fill all things with Himself: all this was not understood as mere cultic acts but, above all, as the fulfilment by the Church of her very nature, of her cosmic and eschatological calling. Here is the essential point: in the early patristic Church, ecclesiology is cosmic and eschatological. The Church is the mystery of the new creation and she is the mystery of the Kingdom." [10]

We can understand, theologically, the Christian eschatology only in relation with the creation of the world in time by the Eternal God, the redemption of man by the incarnation of the Eternal Word, the Logos, and the new creation by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, so we can speak about an eschatological sense of the creation [4, p. 415; 11] as God's presence into creation from its very beginning when the Spirit of God was moving over the water, (Genesis 1.2) over the world created by and in the Word (John 1.1-3). But theology is not only discourse about God, it is the experience of God, mystical union with Him by the deifying virtues and the achievement of the

commandments by which the man spiritually sees God, unites himself in grace with Him. Only the life in the Holy Spirit by whom we can see Christ in time, will help us to see the beauty of the eternal Kingdom as communion with the Trinity, as the entire divine gift for the human being called to share the eternal merciful love by christification and trinitarianisation, has defined the eschatological state Fr. Justin Popovich [12, 13].

Eschatology is not a time category but a transcendent one and the modern view of being as time; the time restricted to a becoming history into an undetermined future does not suit to the biblical and Christian-orthodox vision. The Pentecost Mystery represents the direct, unmediated union in holiness and, simultaneously, sacred fear of God, as infinite Person, a union that goes beyond time, as Maxim the Confessor affirms [14, 15]. Modern theology has rediscovered the biblical sense of eschatology, which is *nunc aeternum*, the eternal presence of the instant in time. The eschatology does not mean exclusively something that will occur in an indefinite future, in the sense of the temporal triad, past present and future, but it means the eternity content, filling up the time, the creation, eternity in the sense of God's coming and saving presence for His people, as we pray "Your Kingdom come". And the Kingdom "comes not from the future in the instant, but from Heaven to earth" [16].

Orthodox thinking has underlined the personal side of eschatology in the sense that the own, personal death really represents the end and did not make calculations for the Parousia in the sense of millenarianism. But the eschatological sense of the Christian life is, also, a sacramental and ecclesiological one. As V. Lossky said, "eschatology becomes present at the moment when man becomes capable of cooperating in the divine plan. The realisation of the eschatological Promise begins at the point at which the economy of salvation is fulfilled – after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In the historical order, human fulfilment follows upon divine fulfilment. The eschatologies of the Prophets took in at a single glance the messianic promise of redemption, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the last Judgement and the transfiguration of cosmos. It was only ten days after the Ascension of the Lord that the eschatological era began with the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Promise of the Father (Acts 1.4-5), the fire that Christ had come to throw upon the earth (Luke 12.49). Eschatology can only begin at the end. But this end is not a static terminus, a limit: it is the continually renewed beginning of an infinite way of deifying union, in which the dominion of God and the vocation of creation is fulfilled. This realisation of the last end, by the grace of Holy Spirit and the human freedom, is the inner mystery of the Church, a mystery which is accomplished with the angels as wondering witnesses, but which remains impenetrable to those from outside – to the devils, to the children of this age, and to ourselves when we philosophise according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ (Colossians 2.8)." [17]

Jean Zizioulas, in his article *Eschatologie et societe* [18], asserts the same point of view on orthodox eschatology. He presents others senses of the eschatology in the history of the Church, such as that of Iryneus of Lugdunum who emphasise the Christ's incarnation and the future as more perfect than the beginning of the creation; Tertulian who sees the eschatology as a very far and a last event of destruction and the new creation of the world; Origenes influenced by Platonism, considering eschatology as a coming back of the perfect beginning of the divine creation. Augustine, influenced by Neoplatonism, sees the eschatology as a spiritual and internal state of the soul illuminated by God's grace and Denys Areopagite understands it in the sense of the Kingdom of God in Heaven, oriented above and reflected in Liturgy. Zizioulas prefers the vision of Maxim the Confessor who made a synthesis between Iryneus, Capadocian Fathers and Denys considering that eschatology is the *new eon*, the eighth day, the time without end oriented to the future as an eschatology achieved in the Eucharist.

In the same time, the eschatological visions in the works of Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer or Oscar Cullmann [16] are anticipated by the patristic thought liturgically expressed in Saint John Chrysostom's Liturgy as follows: "We give you thanks because You have given us Your Kingdom which will come". Therefore, the tension, the dialectics between *yes* and *not yet* for the Kingdom is understood in terms of *adventus-parousia*, God who comes to us, God is present, not in terms of *futurum*, the things that will become [16, p.45]. The Kingdom already but only is partly present in time but entirely in the age to come. Our life in Christ and the experience of the Holy Spirit is understood in an eschatological way, which begins in the new creation, the first resurrection of the spiritual man (Revelation 20.6) in Baptism, Anointment and Eucharist, a life that will be perfect in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The modern world changed the biblical, theological and ecclesial eschatology into eschatologism, in the sense of a better life on Earth with a political and also a religious side, which are promoted by the Christians denominations that radically preach the millennium.

3. Secular Eschatologism

We may speak about secular eschatologies because secular religions came into being in our world, generally promoted by political regimes together with the naturalist, materialist, philosophical and secularist visions of the world, that tried to replace the Christian worldview, sometimes true utopias with oppressive results.

There are thinkers and people who have no God [19-22], and the cultural and social promotion of the atheist, agnostic or sceptic visions was largely developed. The Marxism, the secular humanism, the existentialism, the consumerism and globalisation are true religions for many of our contemporaries. *The Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) whose optimism was contradicted by Nazism and World War II, followed, forty years later, by *The*

Humanist Manifesto II (1973), considers religion, including of course, the eschatology, “traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that places revelation, God, ritual or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species. Any account of nature should pass the tests of scientific evidence; in our judgement, the dogmas and myths of traditional religions do not do so. Even at this late date in human history, certain elementary facts based upon the critical use of scientific reason have to be restated. We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfilment of the human race. As non-theists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity. Nature may, indeed, be broader and deeper than we know; any new discoveries, however, will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural...” [23] A social and scientist programme is at work and is acting upon people whose religion is ideologically available, in the sense of the Age of Reason. Christian religion as Church is a matter of righteousness, peace and spiritual joy (Romans 14.17) of meeting the Risen and alive Lord, but instead of hope and divine love the contemporary man is confronted with the absurdity, fear, death, ecological crisis, unilateral results, one-dimensional, immanent thinking and selfish, possessive acting in creation and in history.

We can speak about historical and political eschatology, as hopes for welfare and social justice in the world, in the sense of a historical linearity of the human progress and purpose. For the theological eschatology the purpose is the Kingdom of God, but for the secular eschatology, shaped in the sense of Enlightenment, the purpose is the kingdom of men, the motherland of so-called human identity [16, p. 169] without reference to God.

The modern state took upon itself the charge of the providence for its political and social subjects, replacing the divine Providence, and men were reduced both in socialism and capitalism, as democracies coming out of religion, to *homo faber*, making things to live happy. The age of Reason should create a world in which all people are equal in their way to happiness and the abundance of material things for everybody. But this purpose had to focus on the utopia of the project, because the end of modernity brought to mankind fear, disenchantment, threat, a feeling of abandoned, doubt, danger, alienation and anxiety [24].

The revolution from England, brought in America by the Puritans, induced in the conscience of those men the idea of being the ‘new Israel’, the God’s elected people, charged to create a new world with America as a *millennial nation*, dreaming to the Anglo-Saxon superiority [16, p. 213] and bringing to the entire world the liberty. So, we observe in our Western society, also including the American and French revolutions, the Universal Declaration of human rights - a true messianic *pathos*, passing from religious Messianism to political Messianism and from theological millennialism to philosophical millennialism. Especially the English, but also the French or German, Enlightenment was inspired by the Old Testament, was millennialist [16, p. 235]

and assumed the political, economical, scientific and technical leadership of the world with the risks known today in the ecological crisis, in the world politics.

The goal of this political and economical eschatologism is the globalisation of the entirely secularised human society by all kinds of liberalism, by consumerism as a world market, by promising to the people the happiness and the welfare *hic et nunc*, in the life, only on this Earth with the slogan: the richer the man, the more he is loved by God. The material opulence, richness and the impudent culture of the perishable body are signs of redemption for the contemporary man, a trend in a glaring contradiction with the Christian aim of the holiness, with the true sense of the traditional eschatology. To this globalisation, to the entire world, the Church must make known Christ's universal voice, His Gospel, the evangelical way for a true liberated life in the Holy Spirit, the true eschatological sense planned as love in divine communion for humankind by God Himself.

Eschatology means the redemption of the time, the hope of the eternal life shared with God and much less a historical planning as it is thought by the secularised Western society. Eastern Orthodoxy is sometimes tempted by a nationalist eschatologism conceived in expressions as Holy Russia, Orthodox Greece or Great Serbia [25].

The Nazi biological Messianism and the communist Paradise as secular eschatological ideologies fell down. But the separation between Church and state, the success of liberalism as a hermeneutics of the efficient pragmatism without the myth of the 'unseen hand' and the fascination of the technical and informatics progress in the consumerist society represents a paradigmatic shift, in the sense of the detachment from the Christian Tradition of the people waiting the irruption of the Heaven Kingdom in history, which is trying to build up a kingdom of peace and welfare just by pure and historical human instruments of science and politics [26].

The theology of hope in Moltmann's view turned the eschatological hope grounded in the crucified and resurrected Christ in historical and social action. Jean-Baptiste Metz's political theology focuses on the prophetic aspect of the Church as a critical and practical role in society, an evangelical action based on the faith in the Kingdom of Heaven for social justice. Liberation theology, in the third world, points to the elimination of all kinds of slavery and human alienation by human communion [27].

These new approaches of the biblical and ecclesial eschatology have diminished the sense of the personal faith as communion in the Church with the Eternal God who makes us, mortal human beings, to participate eternally to His heavenly glory.

4. Modern Sectarian and Denominational Eschatologism

The modern Christian sects, the neo-protestant groups – Evangelicals, Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses - represent the religious side of the modernism, ideologically planned as a coming out of the religion, as disenchantment of the world, in the sense of the coming back of the religion, of the reenchantment of the world. Totally separated by the Church, trying by insolent proselytism to replace the traditional Christian religion, the sects express in the secularised Western world the private and liberal religious action, inspired from political and economical field, to create a free market of the religions for the people desiring to have a kind of religion composed in an arbitrarily way by a spiritual leader. With the Bible in his hands, he tries to establish a community of men and women ready to hear his voice, to accept his opinions and, unconditionally, to accomplish his will.

Obviously, the sects preach the imminent Parousia and a millennium of happiness and joy together with Christ after his second coming on the Earth. Therefore, the sect is a eschatologist community [28-30] waiting for Christ' coming because it lacks the Risen Lord, His sanctifying grace in Sacraments, His divine love in the communion of the Church, the single place of His saving presence in the world. The eschatologist vision of the sect is based on biblical eschatology and its aim is to restore the primary Church, as it is depicted in New Testament [31]. The millennialist sects calculate, on the basis of numerology, the date of Parousia, so the Bible is not perceived as the Revelation of the Trinity for the foundation of the communion with the men, redeemed by the sacrifice on the Cross, but a book of numbers whose combination offers the key for finding out the apocalyptical day before the beginning of the millennium. Therefore, the sects neutralise eschatology [31, p. 233] by their eschatological ideology conceived in the sense of *futurum*, an unlimited future on the earth – the slogan of the Jehovah's Witnesses: *Enjoy eternally for the life on the earth* is illustrative. In the same time, there is a negation of the present time, of the history as the horizon for the human life and work blessed by God, for salvation in the perspective of the eternal communion with God.

The sect manifests itself as anti-Church, and implicitly is totally critical regarding the doctrine of the Church, including the eschatological chapter. The sect lacks the horizon of the eschatological Kingdom because it refuses the Church's the single way, truth and life with Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Father in Heaven [31, p. 236]. The sect takes into account the world where the universal peace and happiness would reign, the body would be better served, the society would be improved by mechanical arts and tools, for a life with much less labour and progress. The service to the soul in a deteriorated world is also important but seems to be placed in the second range [32].

On the map of millennialism there are four trends, four groups who interpret the sense of Revelation 20.4.

1. *Amillennialism* is conceived as the period of time for the spreading out of the millennium or, more exactly, as the Christ' reign with the souls of the dead people. But, what kind of reign it will it be, if according to the sectarian ideology there is no life after death and the soul dies as the body and it will be created again at the Parousia! Then, if the history would come to a cataclysmic end, it is important to do *now* something 'to build the kingdom'. In this sense, the social Gospel is relevant [24, p. 314].
2. *Postmillennialism* is the historical period corresponding to the time of the world evangelisation, from Pentecost to Parousia, for building with professionalism, efficiency, scientific planning, even by discarding the Christian life of all supernatural features, in the sense of the secularity, a ethical community with religious piety and devotion. In the history, the tension between good and evil, God and Satan, will be permanent but in the end Christ will win the battle and He will set up the Kingdom after the apostasy and the destruction of His Enemy [24, p. 320; 33]. This view is as language in the sense of the Christian doctrine, but it lacks the ecclesiological structure, by which the priesthood who by Christ the single Priest in the grace of the sacraments builds the Church, the mystical Christ's body.
3. *Historical Premillennialism* considers that Jesus Christ will come again before the millennium and He will visibly reign over the elect people. Only after one thousand years of Christ's reign, the final state will be inaugurated [24, p. 321; 33, p. 183].
4. *Dispensational Premillennialism* asserts the absolute difference between Israel and the Church. Because the Hebrew people refused the Kingdom offered by Christ, He founded the Church. Then, the Church is like a 'parenthesis', which interrupts the God's plan for Hebrew people and it has no part in the display and the accomplishing of the events presented in the prophecies of the Old Testament [33, p. 191; 34, 35]. Then, the Church is nothing, has no reason in the history, in the culture of the world. This opinion has no biblical reason, is racial, anticultural and taking into account the Christian architecture all over the world is an offence to the God's Christian people.

This opinion indicates the disdainful attitude of the sects towards the Church and the inconsistency and inconsequence of their ideological-religious system, the misunderstanding of the true Christian eschatology.

However, we live in a time of reconciliation, of the ecumenical spirit, of pilgrimage, in mutual respect. Also, as orthodox people we are faithful to the great Christian Tradition of the Church, to our Father and Saints who saw God and shared the holiness. We trust and love the Lord and we wait for the fulfilment of His promise in His eternal Kingdom.

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