

Philosophical Myths of the End

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THIS ESSAY traces the course of eschatology in the modern West as a site and tool of secularization, but also as a powerful resource for its resistance, one that Christians cannot ultimately do without. First, though, a set of definitions. By “eschatology,” of course, I mean the study of the last things. Traditionally, these have been itemized as death, judgement, heaven, and hell. But my use of the term is inflected structurally. I am interested specifically in thought about the “last things” as they relate to present systems of life and action; and about those systems insofar as they are seen as determined by their end. This delineation of eschatology admits of a widening of the term (one that is not mere obfuscation) beyond the four traditional loci, to capture wider thinking about the shape and end of human life and history. In this domain, eschatology goes beyond teleology in that the end-relatedness it envisions is often other than simply teleological: many eschatological accounts involve a *peripeteia*, whether this “turn” be that of divine judgement, Tolkienian eucatastrophe, or Ragnarök. Eschatology does, however, require that the “last things” be thought of as relating to, and in some sense determining, the system they cap. The pragmatic prediction that a nuclear war may end the world is not in itself eschatological; a narrative of the human condition as an arc of human progress that bears the seeds of its own ultimately inevitable destruction is.

Eschatology in both its traditional and this wider sense, perhaps more immediately and starkly than any other theological field, reflects the state and role of the Christian Church in the world at any particular time. For Christians of the first to third centuries, as for their Jewish forebears, political oppression and persecution found their correlate in vivid apocalyptic

visions of liberation, triumph, and a messianic kingdom of peace. During periods of secular Church government, much theological effort and imagination were invested in intricate maps of the next world, detailing eternal rewards or punishments for moral and civic obedience or subversion. This is not to suggest that eschatological beliefs have merely been a product of social and political circumstances; indeed, they have often contributed to such circumstances. Still, it is undeniable that eschatology often projects onto the screen of eternity the concerns, priorities, fears, and hopes of the present. Eschatology is therefore a good “weather cock” for the state of Christian culture in different periods, and its course over the last few hundred years charts remarkably incisively both the causes (or at least contours) of modern secularization and the potential of compelling Catholic responses.

This is particularly true because eschatology acts as the framing device for the way we understand and experience the shape of the world, and our place within it, more broadly. For most of Christian history, the biblical promise of Christ’s Second Coming, followed by the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgement, and the advent of the heavenly Jerusalem, guided people’s understanding both of their own actions and of the times they lived in. That promise had both a moral and a historical dimension. Morally, it set all actions within the purview of an omniscient judgment to come: regardless of current inequalities and deceptions, at the last the all-seeing God would weigh all deeds and judge all people equitably. Historically, it ordered all events within a divine drama leading through anguish to triumph: suffering, humiliation, and persecution were no more than the biblically foretold birth pangs of the messianic kingdom. Throughout Christian history, religious conflicts arose from disagreements over how rightly to map biblical prophecy onto the present time: whether, for example, the pope should be understood as the vicar of Christ presiding over the thousand-year messianic reign preceding the Second Coming, or as the antichrist beguiling the faithful. But these disputes did not touch the explanatory framework itself. The pressing religious question, in other words, was not how the drama of life and history was plotted, but only what role each was playing in it.

The Enlightenment, challenging the reliability of revelation as a source of historical and metaphysical knowledge, inevitably changed this. After all, the last things were paradigmatically *revealed* knowledge. It was from the dominical sayings and actions, and from biblical (and sometimes extrabiblical) prophecy, that the divine plan of salvation and judgement was known. The Enlightenment crisis of revelation was therefore, perhaps foremost, a crisis of eschatology. If Christian morality and world history were determined by their end, and the reliability of knowledge about that

end was radically in question, how should one continue to talk about moral and historical action? The form as much as the content of Pascal's wager was a paradigmatic response to that crisis of scepticism.

Friedrich Schleiermacher's apocatastatic eschatology was the first fully developed attempt to meet that challenge. But he was merely one of many theologians who no longer felt able to rely solely on biblical testimony for their assessment of moral action or their expectation of the direction and end of history. Instead, they tried to find supposedly more reliable sources of knowledge about the last things (still framed in broadly biblical terms) in reason and experience. This led to a large-scale shift, shaping much of nineteenth-century thought, from understanding the eschatological kingdom foretold by Scripture as the act of a transcendent God judging his creation, to reading it as the outworking of an intrinsic movement of creation in which God was seen, to some extent, to be immanent as a guiding world spirit. In the former view, it had been questions of judgement that naturally loomed largest; in the latter view, it was questions of potentiality. Nineteenth-century eschatology, particularly in its Protestant forms from Schleiermacher to Albrecht Ritschl, was accordingly dominated by a theological optimism about the continuation of human progress beyond death or crisis, and a corresponding scepticism about traditional doctrines such as the eternal duration of post-mortal punishment in hell.

The growing consensus in nineteenth-century Protestantism that hell could not be eternal, and the more scattered, yet powerful renewal of anticipation of a millennium of messianic peace are fascinating developments that bear on our topic, but I will not pursue them further here.¹ I will only note briefly that Roman Catholicism was the only major Western denomination largely exempt from these developments, largely because of the insulating effect of its traditional belief in purgatory and in a-millennialism (that is, the idea that the millennium is already underway).

For now, however, it is the larger philosophical and cultural, rather than the narrowly theological, shifts in eschatological thought that primarily concern us. I deliberately speak about "shifts" rather than "abandonment." The standard philosophical narrative is that philosophers overleapt the crisis of revelation by formulating theories of ethics and of history that no longer depended on a divinely ordained end; that is, by making eschatology obsolete. But eschatology as a structuring frame of historical and moral thought was not obsolescent; it was merely reworked.

¹ I discuss this shift in detail in Judith Wolfe, "Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*, ed. Joel Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 40.

“Don’t Immanentize the Eschaton”

This middle section of my essay examines a few ways in which this philosophical reworking took the form—always an ultimately unstable one—of “secularization.” Secularization has a precise sense in this context, namely the transposition of the eternal into the *saeculum*, the age of the present world. If the crisis of revelation was a crisis of eschatology, the rise of secularization was, among other things, a transposition of eschatology: a multi-faceted endeavor to immanentize the eschaton. Two main modes of immanentization concern us here: historico-political and existential.

One structural move these modes have in common is their interlocking of eschatology and freedom. A basic move of those historians of philosophy who claim to have left eschatology behind in the ruins of received tradition is to argue that with the Enlightenment, *freedom* rather than expected judgement became the chief principle of action. This may be so. But if it is, then these historians decisively overlook the extent to which the valorization of freedom did not eclipse eschatology, but itself relied on new eschatological narratives. In thinkers from Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel to Søren Kierkegaard and Nicolas Berdyaev, eschatology became, among other things, the framework within which conflicting conceptions of freedom were articulated and defended.

Concretely, in philosophical systems that conceived freedom as a nomological or rational power (such as Kant’s, Hegel’s, and Ernst Cassirer’s), eschatology came to legitimate, sustain, or direct the entire system through the postulate of a final state of freedom, without which that system would be incoherent or powerless. By contrast, in philosophical theories that defined freedom as an anti-nomological power, that is, as a sheerly indeterminate or creative force (such as Berdyaev’s or, focusing not on human but on divine freedom, Kierkegaard’s and Karl Barth’s), freedom found its consummation in the eschatological overturning or rupture of *all* systems. As Jacob Taubes put it, expounding Kierkegaard: “The holy is the terror that shakes the foundations of the world. The shock caused by the holy bursts asunder the foundations of the world for salvation.”²

This brief sketch already suggests the main contours of the two modes of secularization we are examining here. The historico-political has generally (paradigmatically in and after Hegel) been nomological, even when it has taken revolutionary forms. The existential has generally been anti-no-

² Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 193; I discuss this in more detail in Judith Wolfe, “The Eschatological Turn in German Philosophy,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 1 (2019): 55–70.

mological, and therefore sceptical of notions of progress in life or history. Brief case studies in each will flesh out their shapes, and so also prepare the ground for possible Catholic responses.

Although existential eschatologies arose, historically, in reaction against historico-political ones, I will discuss them first, via the outstanding example of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger has been a subject of my research for over ten years, and those who know my work will be familiar with the following, brief account; but his path is so significant for twentieth-century European thought that it is worth reiterating here. Heidegger's early philosophical path was guided, among other things, by a strong though idiosyncratic interest in eschatology. In the years 1909 to 1915, Heidegger—who was born into a devout Roman Catholic family in 1889 and espoused anti-Modernism in his youth—gradually dissociated himself from the Roman Catholicism of the First Vatican Council, against the background of his growing sense of the importance of philosophical questions “*as questions*.” By this he meant two things: one, the epistemological questions about metaphysics posed first by Kant and now by Husserlian phenomenology; and two, the problem of “historicity” for an understanding both of individual human existence (as inherently temporal) and of Christianity (as a historically situated and developing religion). Searching for a theological method capable of doing justice to lived experience rather than assuming the spurious god's-eye view of the neo-Scholastic *philosophia perennis*, Heidegger, after 1915, began to synthesize Schleiermacher's and the medieval mystics' “proto-phenomenology” with the emphasis on suffering and mortality he found in the early Luther, Friedrich Hölderlin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Franz Overbeck. The result was a phenomenology of religious life that took affliction—suffering our own finitude—as the basic religious experience.³

These concerns converged on a re-appropriation of early Christian eschatology in Heidegger's thought of the early 1920s, within the context of similar but competing appropriations by other theological thinkers of the time, especially Barth and Eduard Thurneysen. In concord with a dominant approach in early twentieth-century Protestant scholarship, Heidegger posited, in the early 1920s, a profound irreconcilability between the earliest (“authentic”) Christian experience, centrally characterized by eschatological expectation, and the subsequent development of Christian philosophy and culture when this expectation failed to materialize. Building on his phenomenological analysis of affliction with our

³ See Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology: Theological Horizons in Martin Heidegger's Early Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chs. 1–3.

own finitude as the basic religious experience, Heidegger now found in early Christian eschatological expectation an instantiation *par excellence* of authentic religious existence. His description of this expectant restlessness, however, turned out to be at odds with its original Christian context, for Heidegger's commitment to a phenomenological description of the human situation—that is, a description of that situation solely from within—led him to divorce the “existential” experience of expectation from its (from this perspective merely “existentiell” or derivatively postulated) object, the “blessed hope” of the coming kingdom of God. As a consequence, that hope no longer appeared as constitutive of, but rather as inimical to eschatological unrest as Heidegger understood it, because it projects an end to that unrest, and so a cancellation of the nexus of authentic existence.

Against the Christian vision, Heidegger thus developed, in the mid-1920s, an eschatology without eschaton that culminated in his account of being-unto-death in *Being and Time*. On this account, its own being is, at the deepest level, a *question* for each person. This question cannot be answered or resolved in any traditional sense, because as soon as a person's existence is complete and therefore in theory intelligible, that person is no longer there to be capable of understanding it. The consummation of one's existence—death—is at the same time its negation. To live authentically within these conditions can only mean to live in resolute anticipation of this perpetual, inavertible, and inescapably personal possibility: an attitude that Heidegger labelled, after Luther and Kierkegaard, “being unto death.”⁴ This is an eschatology in the vein of Overbeck, who wrote forty years earlier: “Eschatology teaches us exactly what death teaches us, no more and no less.”⁵

If Heidegger's is (as Hans Urs von Balthasar argued in *The Apocalypse of the German Soul*, though in different terms) the defining existential eschatology of late modernity, then the ten years following the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 bent the philosopher's mind—unexpectedly, but not perhaps improbably—toward the other main mode of modern secular eschatology, the historico-political.

In raising the issue of historico-political appropriations of eschatology, I am conscious of retelling well-known narratives. Classic accounts by Berdyaev, Taubes, and Karl Löwith, as well as much recent work, have long

⁴ See Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology*, chs. 4–6.

⁵ From the unpublished *Kirchenlexikon* (a collection of several thousand index cards), on a series of cards entitled *Christentum Eschatologie Allg.*, 2–3; quoted in Rudolf Wehrli, *Alter und Tod des Christentums bei Franz Overbeck* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1977), 297–98.

established the debts that “political theologies” on the left and right have owed to Christian millenarianism—that is, the expectation of a messianic reign of peace in advance of the Last Judgement.⁶ We can trace these debts in American as well as European nationalisms, and in movements on the left (as Roland Boer has done for Marxism) as well as the right (as Klaus Vondung has done for Nazism). Lest the broad scope of this claim threaten to render it meaningless, however—if everything is eschatology, after all, then nothing is—I will give a brief sketch of one of its lineages, that of German nationalism.

It is well-documented that the nationalism of nineteenth-century Germany was always eschatologically inflected.⁷ The nationalism of the educated middle classes had, from its beginnings in the Napoleonic Wars, been a glorification of the German national “spirit” (*Geist*) as nothing less than a pure expression of the quasi-divine “world spirit” which would, in its self-realization, perfect the world. Johann Fichte and Hegel consciously appropriated the Christian apocalyptic tradition especially of Joachim of Fiore, whose apocalyptic periodization of history into the empires of God the Father (Old Testament), the Son (New Testament and Church), and the Holy Spirit (the age to come) served as the model for Hegel’s own periodization in the *Philosophy of Religion*, and for his eschatological Germanic Realm in the *Philosophy of Right*.⁸ The identification of the World Spirit harnessed by Germany with the Holy Spirit of Scripture made this appropriation of the biblical foretelling of an eschatological outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh (e.g., Joel 2:28–9; Acts 2:17) a natural one.

⁶ See, e.g.: Fritz Gerlich, *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom Tausendjährigen Reich* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1920); Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism*, trans. R. M. French (London: G. Bles, 1937); Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, trans. Stephen D. Ricks (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Roland Boer, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁷ See, e.g.: Vondung, *Apocalypse*; Judith Wolfe, “Messianism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 301–24.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), nos. 352 and 358; Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Peter Hodgson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also: Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Jayne Svenungsson, *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*, trans. Stephen Donovan (New York: Berghahn, 2016); Wolfe, “Eschatology.”

This nationalism was, at heart, a matter of education as much as of political or military action, and played into the rise of the German research universities. In 1808, Fichte published his conviction that it was in Germany that “the seed of human perfection is most decisively planted, and to whom progress in this development is entrusted.” “If you perish in this your essence,” he exhorted his countrymen, “then all hope of the entire human race for salvation from the depths of its evils perishes with you.” In 1821, Hegel declared that Germany’s ascendancy would mark the “absolute rule” of Spirit, in which “all peoples would find their salvation.”

This nationalism of *Geist* was so deeply rooted that during the early years of the First World War, it was widely exploited to romanticize German militarism, not only by politicians but also by intellectuals. Publishers in Berlin, Gotha, Jena, and Stuttgart issued war booklets by philosophers including Rudolf Eucken, Friedrich Gogarten, Adolf Lasson, and Heinrich Scholz. They commonly identified the German military force as an embodiment of its national spirit, and that national spirit in turn as the agent of eschatological freedom: “Our army and navy too are a spiritual power” (Lasson);⁹ “To our highest thoughts, the German people and the German spirit are the revelation of eternity” (Gogarten).¹⁰ A German defeat, consequently, was strictly unthinkable: it would “rob world history of its deepest meaning” and “signify the downfall of human history” (Eucken).¹¹ Even Franz Rosenzweig, who wrote his dissertation on Hegel’s philosophy of states, at that time (still under the influence of Hermann Cohen’s assimilationist project) shared the expectation that the war would “serve as a theatre for the triumph of German ideals.”¹² The attitude was so common as to furnish the satirical epilogue of *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind*), in which engineer “Dr. Sunset from Berlin” appears as a self-declared “knight of the Spirit” who concocts lethal gas in order “finally to achieve the final final victory, so as finally infinitely to triumph.”¹³

Even the horrors of the war did not initially confound this optimism. After all, Hegel had predicted a phase of radical negativity as the neces-

⁹ Adolf Lasson, *Deutsche Art und deutsche Bildung*, speech given on September 25, 1914, at the University of Berlin (in the speech collection *Deutsche Reden in schwerer Zeit* [Berlin: Carl Heymans, 1914–1917]; translation mine).

¹⁰ Gogarten, *Religion und Volkstum*, col. 55; cited in Vondung, *Apocalypse*, 191.

¹¹ Rudolf Eucken, *Die weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung des deutschen Geistes* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Austalt, 1915), 22 (translation mine).

¹² Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 82.

¹³ Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (Vienna: Fackel, 1918), 278 (translation mine).

sary “birth pangs”¹⁴ of the final phase of the self-realization of absolute Spirit, that is, the Germanic empire.¹⁵ But the colossal disappointment of post-war politics dispersed these eschatological hopes and fomented the crisis of historicism to which conceptual removals of eschatology from world history by existential thinkers influenced by, for instance, Overbeck formed one urgent response.

It was primarily those who were to become the intellectual leaders of the National Socialist movement who, in a textbook case of apocalyptic prediction revision, recast the Weimar settlement not as a failure of the expected messianic kingdom, but merely as its delay. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, author of the programmatic *Dritte Reich* (1923), chose “the Third Reich” as an epithet for the Germany of the future not only in succession to the two preceding “German” empires, but above all by reference to Joachim of Fiore’s apocalyptic “third empire” of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The condition from which this *Reich* would be born, he warned, was one of pain and mourning, a condition symbolized by the “sable flag of need, humiliation and utter bitterness.”¹⁷ Hitler encouraged the apocalyptic terminology of a “Third Reich” until 1938, when he discarded it for more pragmatic language.¹⁸

This rhetoric was initially ambiguous as to its philosophical underpinnings, and was interpreted by many philosophers as a straightforward return to the eschatological nationalism of Fichte and Hegel: a nationalism of spirit rather than (as in the emerging mainstream of Nazi ideology) of blood. When the German Philosophical Society under Bruno Bauch pledged its allegiance to Hitler in 1933, it was with such a vision in mind.¹⁹ At its October meeting, to which Hitler sent greetings, Bauch spoke of

¹⁴ See the accounts of the onset of the eschatological kingdom in Matt 24:8, Rom 8:22, and the book of Revelation.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, no. 358.

¹⁶ Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany’s Third Empire*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), 12–13. On Nazism’s appropriation of apocalyptic language more generally, see, e.g.: Ekkehard Bärtsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Fink, 2002), B.I.1–3; Klaus Vondung, “National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 87–95; Wolfe, “Messianism,” 310–15.

¹⁷ Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany’s Third Empire*, 242–43.

¹⁸ For a fuller account, see Wolfe, “Messianism.”

¹⁹ See *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Philosophischen Gesellschaft* 10 (April 1933): 1. See also George Leaman, “Reflections on German Philosophy and National Socialism: What happened and Why It Matters to Philosophy,” in *Philosophie und Zeitgeist im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Marion Heinz and Goran Gretic (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 233–50.

National Socialism as the beginning of a “wonderful national revival” of the Fichtean dream, destined to “radically overcome the malign spirit of pragmatism and materialism”—a vision, he added, which German philosophy would support as a “sacred duty and task.”²⁰ This superimposition of a spiritual conception of Germany on the blood-and-soil nationalism of the political leadership was one of the chief ways in which philosophers came to support the Nazi regime; it later appeared as if they were, as Hannah Arendt reported of Heidegger to Günther Gaus, “caught in the trap of [their] own ideas.”²¹

There are many conclusions Catholics can draw from this second case study in secularized eschatology; the most obvious is that expressed so pithily by C. S. Lewis: “Spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison.”²² That a towering thinker like Heidegger, who had formulated an existential eschatology that would shape philosophical thought in twentieth-century Europe, was nevertheless seduced by the will-o-the-wisp of a national apotheosis, testifies to the depth of this human need. Transnational secular eschatologies like those of transhumanism are contemporary vehicles for the promises pursued by secularizers who have merely immanentized, not overtaken, religious hopes.²³

“Behold, I Make All Things New”

How do we as Catholics respond to these forms of secularization? We can be guided by their inherent instability. Secular eschatologies mark deep-seated desires, but (is this one of the curses of human existence?) cannot help but pursue them in such ways as to destroy their objects.

Heidegger’s call to being-unto-death, of course, does so intentionally. Human existence, for him, just *is* to live not toward fulfilment but towards its impossibility. And yet for all its heroism of finitude, his tale depends for its pathos entirely on the assumption of a desire to transcend finitude

²⁰ Published as Bruno Bauch, “Wert und Zweck,” *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* 8 (1934): 39–59.

²¹ Television interview given on October 28, 1964, on Gaus’s programme *Zur Person* (ZDF). I have written about Heidegger’s distinctive reception of this tradition in Judith Wolfe, “Religion in the Black Notebooks: Overview and Analysis,” in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology*, ed. Märten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23–48.

²² “Equality,” in C. S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: Harper-Collins, 2000), 668.

²³ Michael S. Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future* (New York: Routledge, 2015), broaches but does not nearly exhaust this topic.

which he cannot and does not attempt to account for. The passionate acts of “shattering oneself against death” or bearing its “affliction” which characterize authentic human existence²⁴ are predicated on a contrary longing which Heidegger’s analysis assumes as consistently as it obfuscates it.

Historico-political eschatologies, by contrast, usually pursue collective fulfilment. Yet they achieve it, if at all, only at the cost of redefining out of recognition either “fulfilment” or those who obtain it. This is most obvious in those political theologies on the left and right that tend toward totalitarianism. The German Catholic convert Erik Peterson (1890–1960), almost unknown in English-language scholarship, was an incisive critic of such systems’ failures to observe an “eschatological reserve” (*eschatologischer Ausstand*), and his thought has not yet been exhausted as a resource for future Catholic responses.²⁵ More complex collective eschatologies, like Heidegger’s Hölderlinian nationalism of the late 1930s,²⁶ or ascendant varieties of transhumanism, also pursue fulfilment, but acknowledge that this fulfilment is likely to bring “the end of the world as we know it”: it is not humans, but their successor AIs, who will inherit the kingdom.

This encapsulates what we might call the antinomy of secular eschatology: the irreducible tension between end as cessation and end as fulfilment.²⁷ This tension is sublated in Christian eschatology, which embraces both dissolution and fulfilment, and understands each through the other—Cross through resurrection, and resurrection through Cross. The New Testament

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), nos. 46–53.

²⁵ Not much of his work is available in English, but see Erik Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); in German, see esp. also Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, ed. Barbara Nichtweiß, *Ausgewählte Schriften* 6 (Würzburg: Echter, 2012[1924]), which contrasts so interestingly with his friend Karl Barth’s eschatology. Recent German scholarship has shown a vivid interest in Peterson’s eschatology; see esp.: Kurt Anglet, *Messianität und Geschichte: Walter Benjamins Konstruktion der historischen Dialektik und deren Aufhebung ins Eschatologische durch Erik Peterson* (Berlin: Oldenbourg Akademieverlag, 1995); Anglet, *Der eschatologische Vorbehalt: Eine Denkfigur Erik Petersons* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh, 2000); Barbara Nichtweiß, ed., *Vom Ende der Zeit: Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie bei Erik Peterson: Symposium Mainz 2000* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2001). English-language engagement with Peterson’s eschatology has been sparse and conducted mainly in the context of Carl Schmitt scholarship, inspired by Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁶ See Wolfe, “Religion in the Black Notebooks,” 37–40.

²⁷ See Wolfe, “Eschatology,” 691; Wolfe, “The Eschatological Turn,” 57.

promises of the kingdom, in other words, are not simply utopian: they do not project the linear (or even dialectical) completion of human potentiality. Instead, they require the death of the old Adam, and renewed birth with Christ, “the firstborn from the dead.”²⁸ This rebirth or re-creation extends not just to humans, but to the whole world: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”²⁹

Nor is this an arbitrary requirement. It is rooted in the human vocation to be drawn, at the last, into the triune life of God: that love between Father, Son, and Spirit which defines the divine nature or life, and overflows into the creation of a non-divine world. This “deification” is not a calling that is attainable by human capacities, because “to be like God” does not consist (as Adam and Eve were tempted into believing) in achieving autonomy, but in being drawn “above the condition of [our] nature to a participation of the Divine good.”³⁰ Therefore, although “man by his nature is ordained to beatitude as his end,” he is ordained to *attain* this end “not by his own strength,” but only by the “help of grace,” which draws him into the love of God.³¹ This grace is poured out through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; as the Church Fathers never tired of saying, “God became man so that man might become god.”³² Death, once the punishment for sin, was here transformed from within into a means of sharing in the action and life of Christ, and so moving toward that life with God which is the innermost human calling.

Catholics cannot ultimately overcome secularization without preaching this vocation beyond the *saeculum*. As Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Robert Jenson and other Protestant theologians have already shown, we must reclaim eschatology not as a slightly awkward appendix to our dogmatics, but as illuminating with the light of glory our path through the present valley of the shadow of life. N·V

²⁸ Col 1:18; see also Rom 5:18, 1 Cor 15:22.

²⁹ Rom 8:22–23.

³⁰ St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 110, a. 1.

³¹ ST I-II, q. 114, a. 2.

³² E.g., St. Athanasius, *De incarnatione verbi* 54.3; quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §460.