"The End is where we start from"*

Reflections on eschatological ontology

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Introduction

Eschatology became a dominant theme in theology particularly since the middle of the previous century. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, written in 1957,

"If Troeltsch's comment that 'the bureau of eschatology is generally closed these days' was true for the liberalism of the nineteenth century, it is in the other hand true that the same office has been working overtime since the turn of the century".[1]

It was mainly the Biblical scholar Johannes Weiss who brought to our attention the central and crucial place of eschatology in the teaching of Christ by his work *Die Predigt Jesu von Reiche Gottes*, published first in 1892. This was followed by Albert Schweitzer's *Geschichte der Leben – Jesu- Forschung* in 1906. Both Weiss and Schweitzer indented to criticize the Protestant liberal theologians of the nineteenth century with a propose to show that Jesus was not interested in preaching a God who reigns in the souls of men, or in proposing ways by which society would improve morally, but in proclaiming the immediate intervention of God in history in accordance with the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition of Israel which expected the sudden coming of God's Kingdom in the days of the Son of Man or Messiah. The "essence of Christianity" was not, therefore, to be found in certain ethical principles, as Harnack and other liberal theologians claimed, but in the coming of the Kingdom. Whether this coming was immanent or delayed, future or "realized" (in C.H. Dodd's expression), this is of secondary importance. The crucial thing

* T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, 1979 p. 42.

[1] H. Urs von Balthasar, "Eschatologie" in *Fragen der Theologie heute*, J. Feiner et al. (eds.), 1957, p. 403.

is that eschatology constitutes the heart of our Lord's teaching, and this in itself is a thesis of tremendous significance for all of theology.

The consequences of this thesis for systematic theology deserve special emphasis. Such consequences were brought out and underlined in the nineteen-sixties particularly by Karl Rahner, Johannes Metz and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Roman Catholic side, and Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg on the Protestant. Among these, it was mainly Pannenberg who worked out a complete *Systematic Theology* (in three volumes) on the basis of what might be called an "eschatological ontology". Moltmann found a wide audience particularly among politically concerned theologians, since his *Theology of Hope* appeared to be full of implications for social life, particularly in support of the victims of injustice and oppression in society. Today, after a certain decline of the interest in sociology and politics modern philosophers in Europe and in America keep alive, in various ways, the interest in eschatology, thus maintaining its centrality in contemporary thought.[2]

Orthodox theology with the exception perhaps of G. Florovsky who devoted special studies to Patristic eschatology, appears on the whole to be uninfluenced by these developments in spite of the fact that eschatology lies at the heart of the Orthodox Church's liturgical life. The reasons are manifold and we cannot enter into all of them here. One of them has to do with the unfortunate fact that the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* do not seem to have been fully integrated in Orthodox theology. With the exception of the late Fr. Alexander Schmemann, Orthodox theologians have not worked out the eschatological significance of the Holy Eucharist, while in the area of dogmatic theology the doctrines of the Church are still treated on the model of the rationalistic method of traditional western and orthodox nineteenth century dogmatic manuals which reserve for eschatology the place of the last chapters. The liberation of Orthodox theology from western rationalism attempted by one of the most influential of twentieth century Orthodox theologians, the late Vladimir Lossky, led Orthodox Dogmatics away from Western Scholasticism, yet in the direction suggested mainly by the thought of the Areopagetic writings in which eschatology is notoriously absent, as opposed to those of St.

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[2] Emphasis on eschatology in modern philosophy could be traced back to Heidegger. The self-understanding of Dasein (hermeneutics of facticity) always projects itself towards its future and thereby becomes aware of its finitude ("Vorlaufen zum Tode"). See especially his O*ntology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Engl. Trans. by J. V. Buren, 1999. The new generation of phenomenologists, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste and Richard Kearny engage, each in different ways, some kind of eschatology in their phenomenological analysis (Marion treats the relation between Eucharist and Eschatology in his *Dieu sans l' être*, 1991, pp. 197-222).

Maximus the Confessor whose entire thought is dominated by eschatology. Thus, Lossky's liberation of Orthodox theology from western rationalism has led it to the path of the "mystical" and the "apophatic", i.e. to the "here and now" experience in which the "not yet" and the still expected are understood not in terms of *time*, of a future to come, but of an apophatic cloud of ignorance already experienced by the saints. In this approach liberation from rationalism has meant an understanding of truth through the logical structure of antinomies –an idea familiar to the Russian predecessors of Lossky – which seems to rule out *a priori* an eschatology of pure "yes", of a future state in which we shall see God "as He is". In brief, the concept of a future *time* has been almost entirely eliminated from Orthodox theology and eschatology in its biblical sense, or in the sense of an Irenaeus or a Maximus the Confessor, for whom the eschata belong to a future age affecting our past and present situation while retaining fully their character as events which are still to come.

So, Orthodox theology has a great deal to do in order to appropriate and integrate in its doctrine and, I would add, its ethics the eschatological outlook provided by the liturgical and Eucharistic experience of the Orthodox Church. An attempt in this direction is made in a forthcoming book on which I am currently working. In the present paper my scope is limited to answering a particular question: *what are the implications of eschatology for our understanding of such things as Truth, Reality or Being itself?* How does eschatology affect our existence in its most fundamental aspects involving not simply our *bene esse* but our *esse* itself? In other words, the aim will be to offer suggestions towards what might be called an *eschatological ontology*.

Eschatology and Ontology

How truly can something be said to *be*, to possess *being*, if it is going eventually, or in the end, to cease to be?

The answer to this question would depend on whether our ontology is based on and derived from the *Alpha* or the *Omega*, the beginning or the end, whether, in other words, it is a *protological* or an *eschatological* ontology. In our 'common sense' rationality we would have no doubts as to the answer to the above question: of course, we would reply, something can be said to 'be' *now*, or to 'have been' *in the past*, even if it ceases to be in the end. Existence is full of existents that are now and will not be tomorrow, or have been and no longer are, and will continue to involve such 'beings' which we normally call 'temporary' or 'transient' as opposed to the 'eternal' and 'everlasting' ones (if these latter are accepted as 'beings' at all).

It is not difficult to detect the kind of ontology that lies behind this common sense rationality: it is a *protological* ontology. Since something has

existed, it has had true being. Being is derived from the past, and even when applied to the present it is its 'actuality', its *facticity* that guarantees or 'proves' the truth of its being. In this sense even the empirical approach to reality presupposes a sort of *pre*-existence of the thing recognized as truly being: the mind grasps only what is *already* there; if it grasps whatever is not already there the thing grasped risks being the product of our imagination. The scholastic principle defining truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus*, implies that somehow the *res*, what we call 'reality', is already there in its fullness so that it may be 'grasped' and 'seized' or 'comprehended' by the intellect.[3] If the *res* is not already there as a given to the intellect, we cannot speak of *truth*, but of fiction or imagination.

In this common sense rationality, therefore, only *facts* are real. The word 'fact', which derives from *factum est* (it is done or finished) point to something done or made in the past, i.e. before it is grasped by our minds. Thus being is derived from the past, and it is because of this that it can be 'true' even when it has "passed" and belongs to the 'past'. On this basis what belongs to the future, what will be, can only be said to have true being if it can be turned into a fact, i.e. into a reality capable of being enclosed in a past and "experienced"-- our minds can only 'grasp' complete and 'finished' things. In order for something to be 'true' it must be 'real', a completed and complete *res*.

Now, there has been a wide and seminal discussion in our time concerning the question whether what we call 'reality' can be conceived as complete and finished, and whether even what we call historical facts can remain unaffected by the process of hermeneutics. We have alluded to Heidegger as the initiator of this new approach to facticity but it was mainly his pupil H. - G. Gadamer with his *Truth and Method* that dealt a blow on the idea of a closed and complete 'fact'. We shall refer to this again later but at the moment going back to 'common sense' rationality, let us note how difficult it is to reconcile protological ontology with the biblical concept of *faith*, as it is defined in the Letter to the Hebrews (Ch. 11,1). This text defines faith in ontological terms when it says that faith is the "substance (ὑπόστασις) of things hoped", i.e. of things not yet existing and not subject to our senses ("not seen"). It is no wonder that faith has been in our minds pushed into the realm of psychology rather than ontology as "trust", "anticipation" and "expectation"

[3] Cf. the structure: *res cogitans-res extensa* established by Descartes and assumed by Kant and the Neo-kantians. This implies the subject-object split and locates the question of Truth in the bridge between the consciousness of the knower and the objects to be known which are imagined to be already out-there.

of something not yet 'real'. The conflict between the 'already' and the 'not yet', or between faith and reason, has its roots deep in protological ontology.

Protological ontology bears certain characteristics which are worth mentioning. At the level of ontology it leads to what we call *metaphysics*. Metaphysics in this case is what the etymology of the word suggests: a step beyond physics, a transcendence of something already there, of a pre-existent. Metaphysics in its Aristotelian origin depends on 'physics' and follows upon it. Its function depends on *substance*, and substance indicates something already in existence, whether as "first substance", which in Aristotelian terms is the particular, or as 'second substance', which even in Aristotle is to be identified as being there already from eternity. In other words, substance ontology, in whatever form, and protological ontology go together. A protological ontology is a substantialistic ontology and *vice-versa*. In this sense eschatological ontology cannot be properly called 'metaphysics'. Even if the notion of substance is understood as relational (Pannenberg), or if we speak in a neo-thomistic sense of an "openness of being" (Mascall) eschatology is following upon the past and the present instead of granting them truth and being.

The fundamental claim of eschatological ontology as contrasted with what has just been described is that truth and being emerge only *from the future*; only what *will be* justifies and confirms ontologically what is or has been. This is not because reality possesses a relational character and thus an openness to the future (Pannenberg); this would still be protological implying a movement from the past to the future; but rather because reality is *caused* by the future: *what will be is the reason (the cause)* of what has been or is, of "reality"; "reality" would not have been there but for the future, for whose sake it exists or has existed.

Behind this ontology there lies the assumption that reality or being is endowed with a *telos*, a purpose or goal and *until this telos is realized we cannot speak of the 'truth' of any being*. But there are two ways of understanding this teleology. One is to conceive it in the sense of Aristotle's *entelecheia* which means that the *telos* is *already* present in the substance of what exists as potentiality moving towards its actuality. This would be again protological in that the *telos* is already decided at the beginning, The same observation applies to Aristotle's "final cause". In this case too the *telos* is set already at the beginning either in the mind of the maker or in the substance itself.

In order for ontology to be truly eschatological, i.e. to conceive of being as emerging not from the past but from the future, it would be necessary to attribute the *telos* of being to the *will of a person*, i.e. to *freedom*: the *telos* of being coincides with the will of someone which gives "substance" to it. Eschatological

ontology presupposes a doctrine of creation out *of the will – not of the substance* – of someone. The Athanasian and Nicene doctrine of creation which attributes the being of the world to the will and not to the substance of God implicitly rejects any Aristotelian substantialist ontology and leads logically to attributing the cause of being to a *telos* which lies *outside* the being itself. The world is moving towards a goal which is set freely by someone; it is a goal extrinsic to creation and is *not yet there* either in potentiality or in actuality.

In this kind of eschatological ontology we move away from either Aristotelian or Hegelian monism in giving priority to the future in ontology. By coinciding with the will of a person, the eschatological future is extrinsic to reality, and in this sense also to history. The eschatological future has nothing to do with the future we experience as the third stage in historical time (past-present-future) which would allow us to develop an ontology of time or a theology of history on the basis of eschatological ontology. (A criticism expressed in the past against Pannenberg). The future of the eschaton coinciding with the will of someone outside creation affects time and history *from outside*. The future itself of historical time is affected by the eschatological future. When we speak of a priority of the future in this case we do not refer to the future which is part of the historical time or to an *eternity* understood as the *sum* of our broken past-present-future experience (Pannenberg), but to a future which "visits" historical time from outside. The dialectic between history and eschatology is not removed by eschatological ontology, because the future is identified with the *will* of someone who freely brings it about. In this way we have a more radical departure from protological ontology than in the case of associating the eschatological future with the future of history. The eschaton does not come "by observation" (Luke 17, 20) but as "a thief in the night" (I Thes. 5, 2).

By attributing the eschatological future to the will and not to the substance of the Creator we exclude the possibility of including the being of God in eschatological ontology (as in Pannenberg). An eschatological ontology based on the will and not the substance of the Creator keeps eschatological ontology clear from any protological elements that may creep into our ontology and, at the same time, from a "theology of history" of a neo-hegelian type.

The consequences of such an ontology for our human condition (what we usually call "existential") are crucial. Protological ontology is based on *necessity* and constitutes a provocation of human freedom. Nothing oppresses us more than our irrevocable past. *Facts*, which are supposed to constitute the "truth" and "reality" of our existence in a protological ontology shape and determine us. We "are" what we "have been" rather than what we "shall be". The human being does not seem to be "comfortable" with a protological

ontology. Liberation from "reality" seems to constitute an existential need for the human being.

Now, eschatology seems to respond precisely to this need in its utmost ontological sense. The "fact" *par excellence* which determines us as the irrevocable "given" is *death*. The essence of Christian eschatology lies precisely in the proclamation of the *Resurrection*, i.e. in the abolishment of death. This makes eschatology ontological in its very basis. It is, of course, true that in the context of Jewish apocalyptic, in which Christian eschatology appears historically to have emerged, the essence of eschatology seems to lie in the restoration of God's rule understood mainly in terms of obedience to divine order, elimination of social injustice, physical pain (Rev. 7, 17) etc. This has led to an interpretation of eschatology in terms, chiefly, of social justice, as is the case of Moltmann, or of "divine rule", as with Pannenberg. And yet as early as in the earliest epistles of St. Paul the dominant theme in eschatology is the abolition of death: all powers and principalities of this world will be subjected to divine rule, but the ultimate, the final, the "last" (ἔσχατος) act of God will be: "καταργείται ο θάνατος» (I Cor. 15, 26).

Protological ontology, therefore, is an ontology of death. It is based on "facts", i.e. on realities that have "passed", constituting the "givens" of our existence, with death as the "ultimate (ἔσχατος) enemy" that threatens our very being. Eschatology, therefore, with the abolition of death is the most decisive stage in the *Heilsgeschichte*. We are not "saved" until this stage is realized. Or, we are saved only because of this stage of the history of salvation. The end "causes" our salvation by liberating us from the bondage of the past.[4]

Eschatology and History

[4] "Facts" are freed from their deadly nature only if they are opened up by the future. In epistemological terms this is the case in hermeneutics. From the point of view of Christian doctrine this is the role and work of the Holy Spirit who brings the "last days" into history (Acts 2, 18). If the "end" does not intervene in this process, i.e. if "facts" are left to their facticity, even if they are open to the future, they inevitably lead to death. This is the lesson we learn from Heidegger's hermeneutics.

"The things of the Old Testament are shadow (σκιά); those of the New Testament are eicon (εἰκών); The things of the future state are truth (ἀλήθεια, ἡ τῶν μελλόντων κατάστασις)".[5]

This is a statement of great interest for the relation between history, ontology and eschatology. Why is Truth to be located only in the future? Are the historical events of the Old and the New Testaments not true? And what does it mean that the Old Testament things are "shadow", while those of the New are εἰκών? Underlying these questions is the problem of the relation between *reality* and *truth*: to what extent and in what sense these two relate to each other in the light of Christian theology? Can something be real and yet not true?

I shall begin with an observation drawn from common experience. This will indicate the existential significance of the problem.

A lover kept saying to his beloved one "I love you", and he meant it. Ten years later he fell in love with another person and the beloved one recalling this confession could not but question its truth: he lied to me, for if he really loved me he would not abandon me for another person, The paradox is evident: the lover's confession was "true" at the moment it was uttered but the future proved it to be a lie. How are we to account for this paradox?

There are certain things, particularly those which matter existentially, that can only be true if they are eternal. Such are the things that matter ontologically, like *love* and *being*. These cannot end and yet be true; they cannot be sheer history; they must be also eschatological. This is the view expressed in a dramatic way already by Plato particularly in his *Symposium* and his *Phaedros*. And it is also stated by St. Paul in his 1 Corinthians.

In Plato's Dialogues eros is inconceivable without the ἀεί, the ever being. Fidelity in love is not a moral matter but an ontological one: without it love ceases to be love. Eros is tied up with immortality; it is because we seek immortality that we love. This is why for Plato eros must be directed ultimately to the Idea of Good and Beautiful. Only then is it eternal, for it is only the Idea that is immortal.

St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians also refers to the eternity of love. In his famous hymn to love he writes that "love never fails", i.e. it never ceases to be. Everything will in the end disappear, all charismas will cease, even

[5] St. Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia eccl. Hier*. 3,2, PG 4, 137D). The *Scholia* are attributed to Maximus but many of them belong to John of Skythopolis (middle 6th cent.). However, this particular one must be authentically Maximian, as it is evident from *Amb*. 21 PG 91, 1253CD and *Cap. Theol et oecon cent*. 1,90 PG 90,1120C.

faith and hope will not exist for ever, but love will never cease to exist (13, 8-13).

Now, between Plato and Paul there is a common mind as to the eternity of love but there is also a fundamental difference in orientation. Plato looks for the ἀεὶ, the eternity of love, in what has always been the same, namely the world of Ideas, whereas Paul speaks of it in terms of *the future*. Plato approaches love *protologically* whereas Paul understands it *eschatologically*. This difference will put its mark very strongly on the Christian tradition, particularly after the impact Platonic thought will make on it in the early centuries. This will happen forcefully with the influence of Origenism on patristic thought to which St. Maximus reacted by placing the Truth in the future, as we notice in the *Scholion* mentioned above.

But the problem of the relation of Truth to the future does not appear for the first time with St. Maximus. It emerged already in the second century, and it is worth looking closely at what happened at that time before we attempt to understand and appreciate the theological and philosophical implications of the *Scholion*.

The problem which made its acute appearance already in the second century was how to make sense of the fact that the New Testament superseded the Old without destroying it. Some of the theologians of the second century, such as Ps. Barnabas and St. Justin the martyr, thought that certain provisions of the Old Testament, such as the sacrifices of animals, circumcision etc. were abolished by the New Testament simply because they were not "true" or "good" – but then why were they instituted by God? Can God order something false or bad? It was not until Melito of Sardis and St. Irenaeus that a satisfactory answer to this question was given. And the answer consisted in the following position: the Old Testament provisions were not true in themselves but only *in view of* the coming of the New, i.e. of Christ. They were not true in themselves but only as pointers to what was to come. Their abolishment was due to the fact that their meaning, their "truth" resided in their future. The shadow of a person arriving from the future precedes him and automatically disappears when this person arrives. But this disappearance proves its truth, i.e. that it was the true shadow of a true person.[6]

Now, the coming of Christ in the historical Incarnation was also to be followed by a second coming, the eschatological *Parousia*. This was the fundamental truth of the New Testament. Should then the New Testament

[6] See the discussion of the problem in J. Daniélou, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique*, 1961, p. 183 f. Also his "Figure et événement chez Meliton de Sardes", *Neotestamentica et patristica* (Freundesgabe Oscar Cullmann), 1962, pp. 282-92.

have the fate of the Old one in the future state? Will it be finally treated as "shadow" to be abolished?

The language used in the Maximinian statement quoted at the beginning is carefully chosen: the things of the New Testament are not described as "shadow" but as *eikon*. What is the difference?

Some of the Greek Fathers mainly those of the Origenistic trend (Eusebius of Caesarea, etc.) would use the terms σκιά and εἰκών almost as synonyms. This is not the case with St. Maximus and the trend leading into the defenders of the holy icons. The second coming does not abolish the first one; it verifies and confirms it *by affirming its historical and material substance* submitting it, however, to *judgment* as a kind of *purification* from whatever in history involves an obstruction of the Truth. In this sense the future state can be called "the Truth" in that it is *free from all elements that can falsify the Truth*, such as those we find in history owing to evil and death which are operative in it. "Iconic" ontology draws its truth from the eschatological state it represents. Unlike the case of the "shadow", however, the "icon" is not abolished by the one who comes in the future because "he that cometh (ὁ ἐρχόμενος)" is no one else but ὁ ἐλθών, the historical Christ. He that cometh will come to purify the "icon" from the effects of the mortality which prevails in history, such as the natural corruptibility of the Eucharistic elements or of the matter of the holy icons of Christ and the saints. It is because of the faith in the second coming that we believe the sacraments to be "truth" and not a shadow to be abolished. The future state provides the "iconic" existence with ontological content. History and Reality are "true" only to the extent that they reflect the future, the "eschatological state".

The definition of Truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus* goes back to the Middle Ages (Thomas Aquinas). In fact it can be traced to Plato himself in the form of *correspondence* between what we say and the idea to which it corresponds. For Plato Truth is unconcealment, a recollection and a remembrance of what is already there (in our souls and the world of ideas). Truth does not come from the future but from the past, indeed from a timeless past, an eternity that has always been there. History cannot be the ground of the revelation of Truth; it rather hinders its appearance as it contains instability and, therefore doubt, uncertainty, deliberation and γνώμη. Truth requires fixity, permanence and certainty, and history cannot provide any of these.

This Platonic view of the Truth as correspondence between language or concept and idea undergoes a fundamental change in the Middle Ages. The debate between Realism and Nominalism which dominates the philosophical discussions of that time presupposes a transformation of classical concepts,

such as φύσις etc. in the direction of the *concrete*, the *fixed* and, in a sense, the *objective*. *Res* is a notion that expresses all these things at once. The Western mind loved certainty and found in the concept of *reality* a way of securing it. *Idea* was pushed into the subject's mind. The debate between Realism and Nominalism was thus inevitable and so was the structure "subject-object" which dominated Western philosophy, particularly since Descartes.

The unfortunate result – I would call it catastrophic- was the loss of *iconic language and ontology*. Historical and natural realities became totally unconnected ontologically from the transcendent. When the iconoclastic controversy upset the Church, the West through the decisions of the Carolingian Councils of the 8th century pronounced itself in support of the worship of icons, but with the clear understanding that the icon serves as a means of reminding the worshiper of the imaged person, and not in any sense of the *real presence* of this person in its icon. This was very different from the way the icons were approached and venerated in the East.

It is clear from a study of St. Maximus that even before iconoclasm appeared the East thought in terms of what we may call an *iconic ontology*. Maximus views everything, the whole creation, as a reality penetrated by the transcendent. Everything is a *symbol* and an "icon" of something else. Instead of an *analogia entis* between creation and God Maximus would speak of a *presence* of God in creation, including the Trinitarian structure of God's being. The cosmos is a liturgy in which the material and the spiritual intermingle. The Eucharist is a form of divine presence, not simply a reminder of God or his actions. There is no such a thing as "Creation *and* God"; there is only "creation *with* God".

The world is permeated with divine energies, as St. Gregory Palamas would put it later following Dionysius the Areopagite. But for St. Maximus, who also recognizes the penetration of creation by divine energies, the approach was marked heavily with *Christology*, and therefore with *history*. Creation is not only full of divine energies; it is also structured as a multiplicity of *logoi* which are kept united in the second person of the Trinity, the divine Logos. It is through these *logoi* and, therefore, through the Logos that creation is sustained and can be "known" and intelligible. The point of contact and the revelation of the truth of whatever exists is the presence of the Logos in creation.

This was already emphasized by St. Athanasius and is an idea to be found in Origen. But with Maximus it acquires a nuance that leads directly into the subject of history: the world is intelligible not just because of the presence of the Logos in it but *because of the involvement of the Incarnate Logos, Christ*. It is

the *historical* Logos that reveals the meaning of creation and, therefore of anything that exists. *History, thus, is the realm of Truth* – a very un-Greek idea indeed. This makes Maximus a *biblical* theologian with all that this implies.

The implication of all this for the purpose of this paper is that Truth must be sought in history. The events of the Incarnation are not just "real", they are also "true". No escape from history can lead us to the Truth. But they are true *not because they contain a past event*. If the Incarnation was simply an historical event of the past it would have nothing to offer to ontology, for it would be itself subject to disappearance. The ontological significance of the Incarnation lies in the fact that it contains at its very centre the *Resurrection*, not simply as an *historical* but as an *eschatological* event. It is the final abolition of death for all creation that gives ontological significance to the Resurrection of Christ. This is what St. Paul means with his provocative statement in I Cor. 15, 13: "If there is no resurrection of the dead then neither Christ was risen". This is remarkable indeed: it is the future, the eschaton, that gives truth to history. *Even the truth of Christ's historical resurrection depends on the general resurrection in the future*!

But why history cannot be true in itself but only in relation to the eschata? The answer lies in the fact that history (and reality) is permeated by *death*. Death turns "realities" into "passed", i.e. "gone," events, into a *past*. Historical events can survive only in our memory, i.e. psychologically, not ontologically. They can survive only as long as there is someone to remember them; their "existence" is *parasitic* on being.

Eschatology, therefore, is the state of Truth only because it involves the abolishment of death, the Resurrection. Historical realities are true only in so far as they can pass the ontological test of immortality. It is not without reason that Christian eschatology has been associated from the beginning with *apocalyptic*. History must undergo *judgment*, reality needs purification. This has been usually conceived in moral and juridical terms, but its deeper meaning is ontological: historical "reality" consists of events that due to their ontological significance, can and will survive eternally, such as love (I Cor. 13,8), the acceptance and affirmation of the other, no matter how "little" he or she is (Matt. 25,31ff.) etc. But it also contains the opposite: acts and events that deny and reject being, such as hatred and evil in all its forms, which the Greek Fathers, interestingly enough, describe as "non being".[7] History, therefore, must be "judged" *ontologically*, i.e. purified and freed from "evil" which is "non being" i.e. from everything that leads to and involves the rejection of being, to the kingdom of death.

[7] E.g. Maximus Conf. *Ad. Thal*. Pref. PG 90, 253AC.

Owing to the Incarnation history is no longer a "shadow" to be abolished but an "icon" of the truth ("εἰκών τά τῆς Καινῆς Διαθήκης»). By bringing and incorporating into historical reality the affirmation of being in the form of love Christ in and through His Cross and, above all, his Resurrection provided history with the presence of the eschatological truth. At the same time he became the *Judge of History*, providing the *measure* by which the eschatological truth will purify history from whatever involves a rejection of being. Eschatology, therefore, does not involve a denial of history. It is, on the contrary, meant to affirm whatever is ontologically significant in history, to open up historical facts to eternal significance through the injection into them of the "future state".

Eschatology and Hermeneutics

In introducing his analysis of *being –unto- death* Heidegger states that in order to understand historical life, we must understand its totality, and this requires viewing the whole from the perspective of its *end*. Without the orientation towards the ultimate there can be no understanding of our existence. There is, therefore, an essential relationship between the eschatological ontology of *being – unto- death*, the understanding of our finitude, and our *interpretation* of our involvement in the world. Interpretation is a constitutive feature of our existence because we are finite. An infinite being would understand without need of interpretation. As finite beings we require the mediation of hermeneutics to understand the world, others and ourselves.

Origin (*Herkunft*) always comes to meet us from the future (*Zukunft*). Hermeneutics presupposes eschatology in order to function. This eschatology bears for Heidegger no hope of salvation; it is an eschatology without eschaton. The end with which we interpret our origin and our existence is death and finitude. Yet, this is not a negation of history. Our futurity, our "being – unto – death", throws us back to our heritage (our past, tradition, culture etc.) not simply in order to be abandoned to it, but so that we may in an act of *freedom* renounce its pastness through a productive response to previously unrealized possibilities. "The past as authentic history is grounded in the possibility (according to which it understands the present as temporally particular) to be futural. This is the first principle of all hermeneutics" (Heidegger, *Der Bregriff der Zeit*, 1989, p. 25).

This concept of history as productive (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) will be taken over by Gadamer in the development of his hermeneutics. Starting with language and art Gadamer will arrive at the principle that there is no language which is not a "game" or a text which is not a "dialogue", or a work of art exhausted in itself. In translation the horizons of past and present are merged

in an ongoing movement, as it constitutes the very nature of understanding and interpretation (*Verstehen*). Hermeneutics is not a "method" by which we reach truth; it is truth itself.

The eschatological foundation of hermeneutics is not as clear here as in the case of Heidegger. And yet it underlies the whole concept. The already understood and the alien, the different, the other, the new, merge in a way that, although the written text does not change, the interpretive possibilities, i.e. the truth possibilities, are endless. The future affects the past and the present in a decisive way.

What is the position of theology towards philosophical hermeneutics? Orthodox theology seems to take no notice of it in its theological method, as it is evident from the way tradition is treated by modern Orthodox theologians. The slogan "back to the Fathers", which appeared at a time when historicism was thriving, was received enthusiastically by Orthodox theologians who turned dogmatics essentially into history of dogma loading it with quotations from patristic sources without any effort to interpret them in contemporary categories of thought. Any attempt at hermeneutics is usually met by "serious patristic scholarship" with the accusation of "anachronism" and "existential influence", as if the sayings of the Fathers or the historical facts could be conceived in themselves apart from their interpretation by us today. This leads to a conservatism that turns tradition into a "passed" and, therefore, dead reality with no real appropriation by the human being in its present situation.

All this happens without appreciation of the hermeneutical character of tradition itself and its connection with eschatological thought. Already in the Old Testament prophesy was essentially an act of hermeneutics: the word of God and the actual events of history were placed in the light of their future meaning. The Holy Spirit inspired the prophets by revealing to them the "last things". The early Christian communities retained the ministry of prophesy, applying it to their Christology (cf. the synoptic Gospels) and even to the Eucharist (cf. Apocalypse, the *Didache*). And when the extraordinary charismatics were absorbed by the ordinary ministers, particularly the bishop, hermeneutics did not cease to operate in the Church. Tradition always meant in the patristic period interpretation: the Council of Nicaea did not hesitate to introduce the unbiblical term ὁμοούσιος to interpret the biblical Christology; each council interpreted the previous ones in its own terms and there is not one of the Greek Fathers (with the exception *perhaps* of St. John of Damascus) who does not engage in recasting the teaching of previous fathers in a contemporary conceptual framework (St. Maximus, for example, places Chalcedon in a cosmological framework and alters to the point of correcting it on many points the teaching of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite).

All this is based on the idea that the past always needs the future to verify and confirm it as true by renewing it so that it may become *existentially relevant* in each time and place. Placed in the context of the *totality of history* (we must bear in mind that the Judeo-Christian tradition operated with a view of history as a totality) this means that there will be an ultimate and final future which will "judge" and purify history as a whole, an eschaton preceded by apocalyptic in the sense of "judgment".

The function of the Holy Spirit in the economy is to bring into history a *prolepsis* of the ultimate state so that historical existence may not be left without a guide to the truth. Since Christ, the very Truth, became an historical reality in the Incarnation, history possesses in itself the truth of the future state. But it possesses it in such a form (dressed with things transitory and perishable in their nature) that makes it *iconic. An icon is a presence of the Truth in a changeable nature*. Theology is an act of *discernment* which requires the gift of the Holy Spirit that will make it possible for us to see the eschatological truth in and through its changeable, i.e. "iconic", form. The dogmas of the Church constitute such discernments, dressed up in iconic form (words, rational statements etc.) needing themselves constantly an interpretation through discernment.

Hermeneutics, therefore, is constantly needed in theology given the "iconic" character of historical truth. Hermeneutics is not a method by which we arrive at the past through the elimination of anachronism and prejudice as historicism had claimed in the past; it is rather a way leading to the future, to the ultimate truth of the future state, through an act of discernment applied to its "iconic" form. Equally, hermeneutics is not the same as apophaticism because the latter seeks the Truth *beyond* its "iconic" form, in a "cloud of the unknown". The future truth we seek in hermeneutics is no other than the eschatological one concealed in the "iconic", the historical.

Theological hermeneutics, as distinct from the philosophical one, places the historical in the light and under the judgment of a future which is not death, as in the case of Heidegger, but life eternal, being for ever, granted by the Resurrection. The hermeneutical horizon is not temporality, and therefore finitude, but anticipation and foretaste of the *Parousia*, presence of the Kingdom in history, albeit in an "iconic" form, as it is experienced particularly in the communion of the Church at its Eucharistic gathering. Theological hermeneutics, therefore, does not lead to endless interpretation as in the case of Heidegger or Gadamer or postmodernism. Christian eschatology contains a definite "eschaton" which puts limits to the universality of the hermeneutical problem conceived by philosophical hermeneutics. The hermeneutical "horizon" is the presence of the eschatological Christ with his Kingdom, the

final overcoming of evil and death already present in history in "iconic" form and expected to come in glory in the future.

Eschatology and Ethics

If we take into consideration the "iconic" character of the relation of eschatology to history, according to which the future "visits" (Luke, 68,78) history and "dwells" (John 1,14) in it without turning it into the eschaton which is still to come (an "already and not yet" situation), the first conclusion we come to is that historical existence cannot be transformed into the Kingdom of God without an intervention from outside history.[8] Evil cannot be eliminated from history by historical forces; the "icon" of the Kingdom cannot be turned into Truth; Truth belongs to "the future state".

This dialectical relation between history and eschatology would rule out any hope for ethical progress or moral improvement for human society in the course of history. Evil will continue to permeate human life and intermingle with good making it difficult to identify any human action as morally "good" in an absolute sense. Until the eschaton comes to purify history from evil all human beings will be bound by sin no matter how morally "good" they may be regarded by ethical standards.

From the ontological point of view this must be ultimately attributed to the presence of *death* in historical existence. The conquest of death is ontologically related to the elimination of evil. Death is related to evil by the fact that both lead to non-being. There was an interesting divergence in the patristic period between the Greek (Cyril of Alexandria and others) and the Latin (mainly Augustine) fathers with regard to the interpretation of Rom. 5,12: do we die because we have sinned, or we sin because we have died (or die)? The Greek Fathers would refer to the ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον (on account of whom or which all sinned) to death and not to Adam and his fall.[9] Death and sin are interwoven and cannot be separated. They are both connected with the rise of the individual self and eventually with "love of self" (φιλαυτία), which according to St. Maximus is the mother of all sinful passions.[10]

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[8] Cf. E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 1971, p. 23: "Quand l' homme abord vraiment Autrui, il est arraché a l' histoire."

[9] See Cyril of Alexandria, *In Ep ad Rom*. PG 74, 789: we all share Adam's sin because we have all inherited the corruption and death which entered our nature through Adam's fall. Cf. the discussion in J. Meyendorff, "Ἐφ ᾧ chez Cyrille d' Alexandrie et Theodoret", *Studia Patristica*, 4, Tu 79, Berlin 1961, pp. 157-161. On the Greek Fathers in general see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 1958, p. 350f.

[10] I discuss this extensively in my book *Being as Communion*, 1985, pp. 49ff.

Eschatology eliminates evil by abolishing death through the Resurrection. Until death is conquered evil will survive. Evil, like death, is not a moral but an ontological problem. It affects the whole of creation and not just humans. Ethics, therefore, cannot eliminate evil, for it cannot tackle its ontological roots.

If there are any moral lessons to be learned from eschatological ontology and the universality of sin these can be summed up in one "virtue": *forgiveness*. It is not accidental that in the Gospels forgiveness is inseparably united with the proclamation of the Kingdom. God forgives in and by establishing His Kingdom and we, too are called to forgive as we invoke the coming of the Kingdom (Matt. 6,12 and parallels).

Now, forgiveness is not a psychological experience such as not feeling animosity towards those who hurt us, for it would be difficult to apply psychology to God's forgiveness of our sins without falling into anthropomorphism. When God declares "I shall no longer remember their sins" (Heb. 10,17, cf. Rom 4,7). He makes an ontological statement. He annihilates evil by removing it from a person's identity; He no longer identifies us by our past but by our future; He rejects protological ontology and replaces it with an eschatological one: we are not what we have been but what we will be.

Forgiveness is the "ethical" essence of eschatological ontology because it overthrows the axiom that causation comes from the past, and replaces it with the reverse: it is the future, not the past, that grants us our identity. This amounts to the negation of all protological ontology with its existential consequences which are presented so vividly in ancient Greek tragedy, where the human being is inescapably bound by its past.

Eschatological ontology, therefore, leads to an ethic fundamentally different from the prevailing one in our society which is dominated by protology. If, for example, someone committed an act of stealing or murder in the past, we say that he or she *is* a thief or a murderer: we bind this person to his or her past *ontologically*. In an eschatological ontology such an ethic would appear to be wrong: the verb *to be* cannot be used in referring to someone's past. If what one "is" is determined not by one's past, but by what one *will* be in the end, all human ethical judgment becomes irrelevant, since it can only be based on the past (the future is not available to us). An eschatological ontology would lead to a non-judgemental attitude towards our fellow men in ontological terms

such as stereotypes and permanent characterizations. Every person is entitled to a new identity, to a future.[11]

Every one is entitled to a future, yet this presupposes one's *freedom* to accept this. If one decides to enslave oneself in the past no one can force him or her not to do so – not even God. Forgiveness and liberation from the past presuppose *metanoia* (repentance) because of the importance of freedom. For this reason the announcing of the coming of the Kingdom is connected in the Gospels not only with forgiveness but also with repentance (Math. 3,2;4,17). There is always for free beings the possibility of remaining enslaved in their past even when the future takes over the ontological scene and everything becomes "new" (II Cor. 5,17). Eschatological ontology stumbles at the threshold of freedom. In Christian theology ontology cannot imply the idea of "necessary being" we encounter in medieval scholasticism in the case of personal existence, including God himself. The rejection of the future and the enslavement in the past will always remain a possibility for free beings. The mystery of *Hell* will always remain unavoidable in eschatological ontology owing to the freedom one can have to will non-being, even if non-being is not a possibility any longer.[12]

Conclusion: Redeeming the End

Eschatology is about the "end". In our experience the end signifies the cessation, the termination of being; it announces the arrival of non-being, of nothingness, finitude and death.

These negative qualities of the notion of "end" have led religious and philosophical thought to seek the solution in its abolishment and replacement with the idea of the "endless" or *eternal*. Since the end is basically and inevitably a time category, eschatology in this case had to be removed from the realm of time and be placed in an "eternal now", i.e. in a timeless kind of existence, such as the existence of God Who knows of no beginning or end in the way He exists.

This basically Platonic idea has found its way into Christian theology in the form of a wrong eschatology of "deification" which presents the Kingdom

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[11] Anastasius of Sinai (+608?) who follows the tradition of St. Maximus pertinently remains: "he who judges before Christ's coming is Antichrist, because he abrogates the position that belongs to Christ" (*Homily on the Holy Synaxis*, PG 89, 825-849).

[12] St. Maximus speaks of a conflict between nature and γνώμη in the eschata for those who choose freely not to accept God's future gift of universal resurrection (*In or. dom*. PG 90, 901C). As Florovsky put it, Grace can "force" nature but not personal will ("Creation and Creaturehood". *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 3, 1976, pp. 43-78).

of God as an eternal timeless "today" enjoyed already now by those who deserve it. In this kind of eschatology it is meaningless to speak of the "end" in temporal terms, as an event of the *future*.

This is neither biblical nor patristic eschatology. With the exception perhaps of Origen, it is absent in the Greek Fathers and is clearly opposed by St. Maximus the Confessor. Eschatology must retain its temporal character. The "end" must not be replaced by the "endless"; it must be *redeemed* from its association with death while retaining its temporality.

But how can this be conceived? How can the end be liberated from death and still be temporal? The answer seems to be found in the possibility of a logic which makes the future *cause* the past instead of being caused by it. This is the logical essence of eschatological as opposed to protological ontology. In this case the end does not abolish the beginning; it affirms it by granting it ever-being. The end becomes in this case the logical cause for the existence of the beginning. Without the end the beginning falls into non – being; it passes away; it becomes "past"; it dies. Eschatology grants meaning and truth to history. The eschaton is the affirmation of history and time, not their negation.

The great challenge that eschatology brings to our common sense logic is that it demands from us to think of an existence without death, something totally inconceivable in our common experience. The moment we accept this, i.e. as soon as we believe in the resurrection, a new logic makes its appearance according to which the "end" does not imply the cessation and termination of the beginning but its affirmation, its ever-being. Eschatological ontology does not replace protology with a futurism which annihilates the past. It only denies to protology the *causative* function which determines our existence by enslaving us with the past.

Christian eschatology, therefore, does not proclaim the cessation and termination of history but, on the contrary, it affirms the sanctification of time, as experienced, for example, in the celebration of the Eucharist. The end, redeemed from its deadly embrace with non-being[13] becomes, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa,[14] a movement from beginnings to beginnings which have no end. Instead of throwing us back to the anxiety of our finitude, as in Heideggerian eschatology, Christian eschatology opens up the finite, the historical and temporal to communion with the infinite and eternal God while maintaining and safeguarding the most distinctive characteristic of our creaturehood that makes us differ ontologically from God: *beginning and*

[13] The Greek term τέλος offers itself for this double meaning. Negatively it denotes termination, while positively it means a destination, a purpose (σκοπός).

[14] Gregory Nys. *Hom. Cont.* 8, PG 44, 941C.

temporality. Thus *theosis* as the ultimate gift of Christian eschatology joins the Chalcedonian doctrine of our communion with God not only "without division" but also, and most significantly, "without confusion" between humanity and God.

"By seeking its end the human being arrives at its beginning, which is to be found naturally in the end…It is not proper to seek the beginning, as I said, as if it has been realized in the past; but you must seek the end which lies ahead of you; so that you know the beginning you left behind through the end, since you did not know the end from the beginning…The end, therefore, is not, after the disobedience, shown from the beginning, but the beginning from the end".[15]

All I have tried to say in this paper is nothing but a modest commentary on these words of the most profound eschatological theologian of our patristic heritage.

Thank you for sharing with me the exploration of a theme that will remain inexhaustible for theological and philosophical reflection.

[15] Maximus the Confessor, *Quest. ad Thal*. 59, PG 90, 613D.