

ESCHATOLOGY-PNEUMATOLOGY-THEOCRACY

Let me start off by briefly describing how these three topics were treated during my theological seminary days in the early 1950s.

Eschatology:

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines eschatology as “a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind.” Eschatology is the doctrine about the “last things.” The focus is on the future—life after death, heaven and hell, the final judgment. How the doctrine is treated in the theological curriculum tends to depend on what the professors pretend to know about the imminence of that future and the details of the apocalyptic events that are supposed to surround it.

In some theological seminaries it is not uncommon for the “last things” to come up too late in an increasingly crowded schedule to be part of one’s theological training as a separate course before graduation. My own studies in systematic theology a little over half a century ago, started with the doctrine of revelation and the crucial importance of inerrant original manuscripts that no one had ever seen. Then we moved on to the doctrine of God and an analysis of the divine attributes, creation *versus* evolution, various aspects of christology and theories of atonement, and finally the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the fruits of sanctification. The growing pressures to introduce courses of a more “practical” nature (a little psychology, a little sociology, etc.) postponed reflection on eschatology till one had entered the pastorate. In this approach, there is a tendency to relate eschatology almost exclusively to a distant future that is not seen as affecting what is happening in the here and now in any significant way.

In other theological schools issues raised by the above mentioned topics may still be studied with a sense of urgency, but all in the framework of an eschatology that focuses passionately on the intricacies of the millenium, Armageddon, and the Rapture that may be right around the corner. In this approach, the “now” tends to be viewed as an apocalyptic moment that is treated with such sensational fervor that it leaves little room for a broad historical perspective.

Pneumatology

In the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the emphasis is usually put more on the heartfelt “now” and personal experience than on the historical moment. In other words, most of the theological literature talks about the Holy Spirit in terms of the divine-human relationship, and frequently with a highly personalistic and individualistic slant. The Spirit of God inspires people, as exemplified particularly in the case of the writers of the Holy Scriptures. The Spirit also worked charismatically among those gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and continues to touch human lives through a process of re-birth, sanctification, and nurturing to holy living. In short, the emphasis tends to be

on conversion rather than on the transforming power of the Spirit in the historical arena, including in societies and their cultures.

In recent decades, as during earlier periods in history, charismatic phenomena such as speaking in tongues, healing ministries, and the dynamics of Pentecostal churches have created a more intense interest in pneumatology. These developments are often accompanied by strong eschatological expectations that, as already noted earlier, find their main inspiration in the apocalyptic segments of the biblical literature. The doctrinal loci of eschatology and pneumatology are then related by virtue of the fact that end-time prophecy preachers engage in a good deal of speculation about the cataclysmic end of history. The element of catastrophe is maximized while the dimension of continuity is minimized.

We hope to show that both the “cool” and the “hot” approaches to the interaction between *eschaton* and history fall short of the biblical vision, but first a word about our third topic: theocracy.

Theocracy

The predominant reaction to this concept is one of contempt, both in Christian-theological circles and among secular commentators. For the latter, it has become a convenient term to condemn everything that they believe to be wrong with the so-called “Religious Right.” For some, one way to add to the accusatory effect of their critique is to use the term “Christocrats.”

The distaste of any theocratic notion in Christian theological circles is a different story and somewhat puzzling, because an emphasis on the reign/kingdom of God has gained quite a bit in popularity over the past decades. But isn't that precisely the core meaning of the word “theocracy?” Bad historical memories can explain resistance to the term, just as was once the case in some circles with the word “Catholic,” and is happening today with the word “liberal.” But, to confuse semantics with substance is not likely to lead to enlightenment. Of course, by spiritualizing the idea of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus said he was sent to proclaim (Luke 4:43), and which his earliest followers did indeed proclaim (Acts 8:12), the dilemma can be “resolved.” Unfortunately, however, in the process one will then also dissolve a good deal of the good news that is embodied in the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

From the perspectives outlined above, our three topics may seem a strange trio to form an integrated theological position. What, however, if we change the perspective? What if there is a more biblical perspective, one suggesting that we have torn asunder that which God in his revelation has united? To that possibility we must now turn.

Biblical research in the last century has shown that eschatology is not just the climactic end of the story, but permeates the whole story. In other words, the biblical

drama has an eschatological orientation from beginning to end, from the creation to the re-creation of all things. The end (*eschaton*) is more than the ultimate finale; it is a vision that becomes a driving force in history. God is making *all things* new (Revelation 21:1), transforming this age into the New Age of the coming Kingdom of God—the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth. The whole creation, according to the Bible, is longing for that to happen (Romans 8:22). Paul Tillich has suggested that “it would be quite possible to begin a systematic theology with the eschatological question” (*Systematic Theology*, III, 298). That might be worth exploring. But even when one chooses another theological *locus* as one’s starting point, the eschatological dimension should always be an essential element in the discussion.

All the “Acts” in the divine redemptive drama point to and push to that end: Abraham and the promise for the nations; the election of Israel and the gift of Torah; the prophetic visions; the incarnation and the messianic ministry of Jesus; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the apostolate of the Church as a history and society shaping force, they all have an eschatological dimension. In essence, they are breakthroughs of God’s future into our time, establishing signs of the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit. The future as presence of the coming Kingdom draws and drives the soul. There is a *missio Dei*. With the eyes of faith we perceive the mighty deeds of the Lord—the *magnalia Dei*, motivating us to become coworkers with God.

History, understood as a movement toward a *telos*, is a Hebrew “invention,” born of God’s revelation through word and deed in the midst of Israel. Not the cycles of the planets in the firmament, nor the tyranny of fate, but God’s future give us hope and the courage for life. We embrace the earth and the whole wide world in the faith-knowledge that the Lord has not forsaken his creation.

The Holy Spirit works personally, corporately, and historically. Through the Spirit’s presence, human beings are transformed into a dwelling place of the Almighty (I Corinthians 3:16). Also, through the power of the Spirit the Church becomes an apostolic community— “proclaiming the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus” (Acts 8:12) as partner in the world-transforming *missio Dei*. The miracle of Pentecost is the creation of a cosmopolitan community on a “mission impossible” to change the Roman Empire. Holy Spirit events are more than human success stories; they are living parables of “the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day” (Acts 2:20). A change of heart (conversion) and a changed culture are equally part of the biblical vision.

The mission (apostolate) of the Church is not rooted in our benevolent spirit, nor should it be done in pursuit of spiritual-intellectual conquest—one of the worst forms of Christian triumphalism. Rather, mission constitutes the very *being* of the Church and its role is “Christ-shaped” (N. T. Wright)—sharing in the sufferings of humankind. The Church exists in order to be used by God in God’s eschatological-pneumatological dealings with the nations of the world. Once again, the context is the Kingdom of God. Before the *eschaton* arrives, “this good news of the Kingdom will be proclaimed through

the world” (Matthew 24:14), and this will be done in the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:10-11). The Word becomes flesh as event! Biblical eschatology and pneumatology are intricately interwoven with a “theology of history.” When scripture speaks of “signs of the Kingdom,” it means nothing less than that there are powerful manifestations of the coming New Age in the historical moment of our day. Through the Spirit, history and the *eschaton* exist in a correlative relationship. The movement of history is drawn by the promised future, and the vision of universal *shalom* casts its light with power into the present.

The Church proclaims the vision and the presence of the Kingdom of God, and through that mission cultures are shaped and continents are changed. It is happening before our very eyes, particularly in Africa, South America, and Asia. Theologians have argued about a Word-revelation versus a Reality-revelation. The question is asked whether we cannot give the Word/Logos more substance by adding a greater sacramental dimension to our theology of history? This issue is part of the continuing debate between Protestantism and the Catholic/Orthodox/Anglican traditions. The former, it is charged, has shifted the emphasis too much away from the incarnation toward the doctrine of atonement. The incarnation, we are told, is the goal and crown of the creation; the Church is viewed as the continuation of the incarnation, and sacramental grace issuing from the Paschal Mystery is believed to have world-transforming power. Christ (the hypostatic union), not the Kingdom of God, is confessed as the climax of nature and history. Some of the terminology used begins to sound more metaphysical than historical: the incarnation as “the exaltation of human nature and the consummation of the Universe (Aquinas); the “perpetual incarnation” in the Church and “the deification of the creation” through sacramental grace (Bulgakow), all embodied in a “christocentric metaphysics” (Temple).

The above shorthand description obviously needs much fuller treatment (as I have done in my book *Redemption and Historical Reality*), but for now let me just say that the accusation of a lack of Reality-revelation strikes me as based on a misinterpretation of biblical pneumatology. The Spirit works mystically, sacramentally, ecclesiastically, apostolically, prophetically and even politically. In all cases we are dealing with a Reality-revelation. The Word/Spirit dynamic does not produce abstract theories, but new and concrete realities—movements that move history toward the *telos* of all things.

Jesus did great things. Through his ministry powerful manifestations of the Kingdom occurred in the midst of Israel (Luke 11:20). We, declared Jesus, can do greater things through faith in him (John 14:12). The Church, used as an instrument of God, uses other instruments provided by the culture. For instance, if used in the power of the Holy Spirit, science and technology open up immense new potentials for our service in the *missio Dei*. The Reign of God is real, not in the sense that it is realized by us, but in the sense that there are manifestations of a realizing eschatology.

If we believe that the Reign of God is more than a bit of poetic license, then we would have to admit that, wherever the gospel of the Kingdom is proclaimed with prophetic

power, one will find theocratic “signs.” There are relative and very fragmentary but real embodiments of the presence of God’s New Age in our midst. We may prefer to avoid the word “theocracy” because it might seem counter-productive, but the thing-itself is there. The term “*prophetic* theocracy” may convey more clearly what we have in mind. We are not talking about clerical rule and power games. We are talking about the way a biblical witness works in the world. We do not have a direct line to God, although some may talk and act as if they do. What we have is the prophetic-apostolic Word and the promise of the Spirit. Through them God is present and acts in the historical arena.

The Spirit blows where it wills. We do not control the outcome, nor do we determine how the Word works in other cultures—a sometimes painful lesson the modern missionary movement had to learn. There always have been various forms of “Christendom,” imperfect embodiments of Christian beliefs and values in a sinful world. Sanctification is not the *eschaton*. That will be glorification. Sanctification preserves the world for God’s future against all the forces of chaos and “nothingness,” called “principalities and powers” in the “New Testament.” To reject all forms of “Christendom” because of perceived “Constantinian” sins of the past, may in some cases provide a needed counter-cultural witness, as has also often been true in the case of sectarian movements, but will in the end not do justice to the biblical vision of the *eschaton*.

Islam is not ashamed to present itself as a theocratic faith, nor is the Muslim world afraid of being seen as an aggressively missionary movement. Among Muslims we may find differences in practice, but there is consensus on the substance, i.e. the authoritative role of *Shari’a* law in society. History confronts us with a constant flux of scenery and challenges. Fifty years ago, Communism and its potential threat to U.S. national security was the big issue, and in the heat of the moment careful distinctions between advocates of social reform were not always made, with the result that injustices were done. Today, militant Islam and terrorism are considered the great threat to national security and, again, the temptation is to pay little attention to distinctions and thus to do injustice.

Yet, to ignore the confrontation between Christianity and Islam with its theological implications for whole societies on different continents would be foolish indeed. On the opposite pole of a theocratic Islam, the Church faces a West that is increasingly secularized. The Church is not only sent into the world for the purpose of serving the world, but also to challenge both religious and secular status quos, even if that may have unpleasant consequences. By publicly embracing Magdi Allam, a high profile Catholic convert from Islam, Pope Benedict XVI sent a strong signal to the Muslim world that, as far as Rome is concerned, inter-religious conversation and occasional cooperation do not mean the abandonment of evangelization. That stance, according to certain reports, is even resisted by circles within the Vatican. The obstacles are enormous. We have a global message for a global world. We also have a sadly divided global church with feeble efforts to demonstrate the unity we have in Christ. Still, the scriptures know of only one *ecclesia catholica*

Things do not look favorable for a quick success. In that sense, our situation seems quite similar to the conditions under which Israel's prophets and the Church's apostles proclaimed the good news about the Kingdom of God. Christians are not called to be romantic idealists, but children of God who have been born anew to a living hope (I Peter 1:3), vehicles of the Spirit and channels of the *viva vox Dei*.