

The Decline of Progress and the Prospects for Christian Hope

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New Testament 'apocalyptic' and the Roman imperial eschatology

In a passage which is one of his most 'apocalyptic' (in the traditional scholarly sense of this word), Paul writes: 'When they say, "There is peace and security," then

sudden destruction will come upon them' (1 Thess. 5:3a). This statement and its context (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11) have commonly been called 'apocalyptic' in the sense that they express a certain sort of eschatology, the kind of eschatology to be found in the Jewish apocalypses (both canonical and non-canonical). In this

sense, 'apocalyptic' eschatology is the expectation of a transcendent divine intervention, radically discontinuous with the present course of history. In contrast with the present, perceived as evil and getting worse, the final intervention of God will set all things to rights and transform the creation into a new world beyond the reach of evil and glorified in God's presence. This hope for an 'apocalyptic' end is for a final resolution of history, which entails, of course, judgment for those who oppose God's good purpose as well as vindication and deliverance for God's people who suffer and hope. Eschatology of this kind is in fact simply the eschatology of early Judaism (before and during the New Testament period). It can be found in most Jewish literature from the mid-second century B.C. onwards, and is by no means confined to the apocalypses, though it is these which expound most fully the content of the eschatological hope. This kind of eschatology is presupposed and reiterated by the New Testament writers. It is a necessary presupposition for their accounts of the significance of the life, death, resurrection and future coming of the Messiah Jesus, while the latter also determines the specifically Christian ways in which they develop and reformulate the Jewish eschatological hope. What is usually called 'apocalyptic' eschatology is therefore simply the eschatology of early Judaism and early Christianity, and it is questionable whether we need to use the term 'apocalyptic' for it. Later we shall suggest a use of this term which avoids the terminological confusion that too promiscuous a use of the word 'apocalyptic' has caused.

At this point, however, we should also notice that the sentence quoted above from 1 Thessalonians is also 'apocalyptic' in a popular, contemporary sense of the world. In this sense, expectation of a disaster of universal proportions — nuclear holocaust, ecological catastrophe, chaotic breakdown of all social order — is termed 'apocalyptic'. The term can be used of secular expectations of this kind as well as those which take a religious perspective on the coming doomsday (itself a Christian eschatological term now used much more loosely). Moreover, in contemporary parlance (and in a usage quite different from that scholars of biblical or historical eschatology) the disaster itself, if sufficiently final, can be called 'the apocalypse'. Thus, for example, the *Rough Guide to The Millennium* begins its brief historical survey of millenarianism thus: 'Preoccupations with the end of the world (the apocalypse) and universal transformation are clear manifestations of the millennial myth.'¹ The survey goes on to use such phrases as 'the imminent arrival of the apocalypse' frequently. It is notable that the term 'apocalypse' has in this usage come to refer to the negative side of end-time expectations, the cataclysm or judgment which will bring the present order of things to an end. The 'universal transformation' or the 'new dawn' which all true millenarians

also expect in some form or other, the positive which the negative enables, is not, in this usage, included in the term 'apocalypse'. Thus both 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse' have acquired thoroughly negative connotations, evoking the danger or the threat of total catastrophe, whether this expresses a despairing pessimism about the future of the world or an ultimate optimism which expects a new order through the destruction of the present order.

This contemporary sense of 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse' presumably derives not so much from the scholarly discussions of apocalyptic eschatology in early Judaism or Christianity, but rather from a superficial impression of the Book of Revelation which has been current in the modern period. On first impression the book may well seem to be almost wholly focused on judgments consisting of horrendous natural and human catastrophes on a universal scale. Of course, all modern use of the word 'apocalypse' derives from this book's title, in which the Greek word *apokalupsis* has been translated both as Revelation and as Apocalypse. While the former has often been contorted into 'Revelations' in modern popular use, the latter has come to refer, not to the kind of literature the book is nor to the notion of a revelation given by God, but to the eschatological events described in the book, more precisely the end of the world (or of the world as we know it). There is no point in wishing this now very well entrenched usage of the words 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse' would go away, but it is important not to project the purely negative connotations they have acquired onto their use either in the title of John's prophecy (Rev. 1:1: 'The revelation [*apokalupsis*] of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place') or in discussion of early Jewish and early Christian eschatology.

Paul is no despairing pessimist, but the sentence we have quoted, taken in itself, certainly expresses the negative side of the eschatological hope: 'When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them' (1 Thess. 5:3a). However, what usually goes unnoticed in comments on this statement is that it is not just a general characterization of the way judgment will come unexpectedly — like a thief in the night (v. 2) — upon those who are complacently oblivious of divine retribution. It is also a precisely aimed political and cultural critique. Those who say, 'There is peace and security,' are those who propagate and those who are taken in by the Roman imperial claim to have given the world peace and security, the famous *Pax Romana*. Within the borders of the empire there was indeed relative peace and prosperity, but it was a peace based on violent conquest and brutal repression of dissent, maintained by constant warfare on the frontiers and beyond, voracious for more conquest, bringing unprecedented wealth to the city of Rome itself and the local elites who collaborated with Rome, but at the

expense of exploiting the provinces. It was 'peace with bloodshed', in the Roman historian Tacitus's phrase (*Annals* 1.10.4), and security for those who grew rich from violence and oppression. In echoing the slogan 'peace and security', Paul applies to the empire's self-promoting propaganda the critique that the prophets of Israel had hurled at illusory reassurances of peace:

They have treated the wound of my people
 carelessly,
 saying, 'Peace, peace,'
 when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14; 8:15)
 . . . [The false prophets] have misled my people,
 saying, 'Peace,'
 when there is no peace;
 and . . ., when the people build a wall,
 these prophets smear whitewash on it (Ezek. 13:10,
 cf. 16).

Prophecies of judgment regularly in Scripture function to expose the ideology and the delusions that mask the evils of the present and justify a situation ripe for judgment. But Paul's anticipation of the eschatological judgment in 1 Thessalonians does more. It critiques a rival eschatology. The emperors, beginning with Augustus, were seen in the imperial propaganda and the adulation of those who benefited from their rule, as having re-established the fabled age of gold. They had been sent from the gods with the divine gift of peace for the whole world, and Rome's universal dominion, exercised with divine right, was therefore to be eternal. After Paul's time, when the empire seemed to be descending into truly 'apocalyptic' (in the popular modern sense) chaos in the year 66, the Flavian emperors of the later first century were seen as those who had brought civilization back from the brink of the abyss and re-established the *Pax Romana* on an even more assured basis. In critiquing this false peace, Paul refers implicitly to the true peace which is to be the gift of God's eschatological rule and which is one way of describing the Gospel he preached:

How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of the messenger who announces
 peace,
 who brings good news,
 who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' (Isa. 52:7; cf.
 Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15).

This is the peace which Christ brought (Eph. 2:14, 17–18) and which already rules in the hearts of those he has reconciled (Col. 3:15), in their community together (Rom. 14:19; Eph. 4:3) and in their dealings with others (Heb. 12:14). The term has, of course, the richly positive content of true security and prosperity, harmony and well-being which the Old Testament prophecies of the blessings of God's coming rule gave it (e.g.

Isa. 9:6–7; Ezek. 34:25; Zech 8:12). That Paul is indeed opposing the true peace of God's rule through Christ to the false peace proclaimed by the allegedly divine emperors is confirmed by the fact that Paul's depiction of the parousia, a few verses earlier (1 Thess. 4:16–17), imagines it as the state visit of a king, whose grateful subjects go out to meet him and welcome him to their city (see Ben Witherington's article). This is the arrival of the Prince of Peace whose rule is the true alternative to the false peace of the *Pax Romana*.

Thus Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 counters the delusion of a false eschatology, which masks the real evils of Roman rule. The hope of the coming rule of God, with the true peace it promises, enables Paul and his readers to see through the pretence in which Rome and many of her subjects collude. What Paul merely indicates here is seen in expansive visions by John of Patmos in the book of Revelation.² The two are by no means so far apart, in the political attitudes their eschatology entails, as is often supposed. But, in turning to Revelation, we must first revisit the issue of the meaning of the term 'apocalypse.' A recent trend in biblical studies has been to seek a way out of the terminological confusion in the use of 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' by insisting that these words are properly used with reference to a literary genre—the Jewish and Christian apocalypses, of which the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation are the two canonical examples. Such a usage highlights the obvious affinities between Revelation and the Jewish apocalypses, but need not deny the continuity between Revelation and Old Testament prophecy. It is clear that John intends to write in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, to whose work he constantly alludes. It seems also that he presents his work as the climax of the prophetic tradition, interpreting and gathering up the oracles of the prophets before him into a fresh vision of the way they are finally to be fulfilled. Such a continuity with the prophets is quite consistent with the extent to which the book belongs to the genre of apocalypse, since John will have seen apocalypse not as something quite different from prophecy, as some modern scholars have done, but as a form of prophecy. Hence the book of Revelation is unequivocally 'prophecy' (Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19).

The apocalyptic genre is well suited to John's prophetic purpose because it developed as a vehicle for the disclosure of heavenly truth. The Greek word *apokalupsis*, as John uses it (Rev. 1:1), means revelation or disclosure. John's message is a disclosure made to him by Jesus Christ (1:1) in the form of a vision in which he is taken up to God's heavenly throne-room to learn the secrets of the divine purpose for the world. He is, as it were, taken out of this world in order to see it differently. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of the time and place he shares with his first

readers in the seven churches of Asia. In other words, he sees the world from God's heavenly perspective and so enables his readers to do the same. He is also transported in vision into the final future, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God's ultimate purpose for his creation. The effect of the visions, one might say, is to expand the readers' world, both spatially (into heaven) and temporally (into the eschatological future), or, to put it another way, to open their world to divine transcendence. The bounds which Roman power and ideology set to the first readers' world are broken open and that world is seen as open to the greater purpose of its transcendent Creator and Lord. What John really sees in symbolic visionary form is not another world, but this world in heavenly and eschatological perspective. This visionary perception counters the Roman vision of the world with which the first readers were constantly confronted in powerful visual images (architectural, ritual, artistic) and which they were certainly tempted to share. Revelation offers an alternative to the dominant ideology.

The Roman eschatology of the *Pax Romana*, to which Paul alludes in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, therefore appears in much fuller form in Revelation, together with the unmasking of its delusions which John's vision of God's present and coming rule makes possible. Revelation portrays the Roman empire as a system both of political tyranny and of economic exploitation, the former represented by the beast (chapters 13 and 17), the latter by the harlot of Babylon (chapters 17–18). But it was not so recognized by many of its subjects, who were persuaded to accept and even to welcome Rome's rule by the imperial ideology. In Revelation's portrayal this has two aspects, corresponding to the two images of the beast and the harlot. To take the latter first: although the harlot lives well at her clients' expense, she also offers them something (17:4) — the supposed benefits of the *Pax Romana*. As the self-proclaimed eternal city (18:7), Rome offers her subjects security, while her own dazzling wealth seems like a prosperity her subjects can share. But John's vision penetrates the surface attraction of this ideology. It is the wine with which the harlot intoxicates the nations, offered in the cup whose exterior is golden, but which contains abominations (17:2, 4). Rome's eschatological pretensions of eternal dominion are mocked in the light of the end that is coming to her (18:7–8). Her end is entailed by John's alternative eschatology, for from the heavenly and eschatological perspective of his vision it is clear that God is the only eternal one who reigns over all in heaven and who is coming to this world to establish his reign for ever (4:2–8; 11:15; 18:6).

The other aspect of the Roman ideology, portrayed in chapter 13, is the worship of power. The beast has received a mortal wound and recovered. This is most

plausibly understood as a reference to the chaotic 'year of the four emperors' (66), in which the empire looked as though it might disintegrate, but from which the imperial power recovered. From the brink of collapse it emerged as apparently invincible, so that, according to the vision, the whole world cried, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' (13:4). The words parody the celebration of God's power in his victory over the armies of Egypt at the Red Sea (Exod. 15:11). They point to the absolutizing of political and military power which was expressed in the worship of the Roman emperors and the Roman gods. The amazement of the world (13:3) is the truly religious awe with which the apparently invincible power of Rome was greeted. Having once risen from the dead, the imperial power must surely reign for ever. Christians too must have been sorely tempted to think that, at least for all practical purposes, Rome was indeed unshakeably supreme. But John's vision shows them otherwise. From the heavenly and eschatological perspective of the rule of God, Rome's power is an arrogant usurpation of divine rule, illusory and transient. To those so taken in by the Roman vision of the world that they see military might and political violence as the true reality of things, of course Rome's putting to death of Christians appears to be victory (13:7). But from the perspective of God's rule, which lies in the hands of the slaughtered Lamb, it is the martyrs who conquer the beast (15:2).

The vocation of Christians is 'to bear the witness of Jesus' (Rev. 12:17; 19:10), i.e. the witness Jesus himself, 'the faithful witness' (1:5; 3:14), bore to God and God's rule in his life and death. Witness in the face of the Roman imperial idolatry meant faithful witness in suffering and as far as death if necessary. In the witness of the martyrs in Revelation one eschatology — the Christian expectation of God's coming rule — encounters another — the Roman ideology. The primary function of the visions in Revelation is to enable and to empower such witness by a vision of the world in which the pretensions and delusions of Rome are exposed and God's rule seen to be what is truly ultimate and eternal. From this perspective the death of the martyrs is victory over the beast because in it the martyrs hold to the truth of God's kingdom in spite of all that the beast's kingdom can do to them. They hold to the truth which will in the end become unavoidably clear to all.

In the book of Revelation, then, as in 1 Thessalonians, Christian eschatology confronts a rival eschatology, which in the claims it made seemed deceptively similar to those of the Christian hope. It is important to note that this was a 'realized' eschatology. The emperors had already established the golden age of peace and prosperity which, under Rome's rule, would extend universally and endure for ever. This kind of realized eschatology functioned as a political ideology, justifying and masking the military violence on which

Rome's rule was based and the economic exploitation for which it was maintained. Such is always the case with claims to realize the ultimate and eternal divine rule in the power structures of present-day political realities. Claims that some political system is the kingdom of God are always oppressive as well as idolatrous. Even medieval Christendom came very close to this fatal error. Something of the Roman eschatology passed into Christian thinking after Constantine.

The modern eschatology of historical progressivism

In the modern period, another rival eschatology has dominated western society.³ This is the idea or myth of progress. It reads human history as a progressive advance from barbarism to utopia, an advance in which the modern age has already made the decisive historical step into a process either of unending progress or of incremental achievement of the final utopia. This is the myth by which the whole modern age, from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century onwards, has lived. It is the myth which has fired the great projects of modern western humanity: education, science, technology, imperialism, democracy, unlimited economic growth. All the continuous and constantly increasing changes of modern western society over two hundred years have been sustained by this myth. We have lived with them and lived through them, optimistically, enthusiastically, taking the rough with the smooth because we believed them to be the route to utopia. It has not been easy for the Christian churches to recognize this as a delusory and oppressive eschatology, partly because the idea of progress in some sense developed out of the Christian eschatological tradition, with its hope for the future of the world, and partly because much that has been taken to be the evidence and results of progress are clearly real goods, which Christians have naturally welcomed. Christian eschatology has therefore suffered various degrees of assimilation to the modern idea of progress.

Probably we can now safely pronounce the myth of progress dead, though its influence persists. The ghost of progress still haunts us, especially in the corridors of power and in scientific laboratories, but it is the ghost of a dead ideology. It lingers in people's minds — not least Christian people's minds — more as an unexamined assumption than as a working faith. Shortly we shall ask why it has declined so much in our century.

First we should consider how, as an eschatology, it compares and contrasts with the Christian one. I will make two points. (1) Eschatology in the myth of progress is immanent eschatology, in the sense that salvation emerges from the process of human history. It is

history itself which contains the dynamic and the resources for a steady advance towards utopia, and the goal of the process, whether this is envisaged as a final utopian condition, a post-historical age, or as simply endless improvement without limit, is a product of the process itself. By contrast, biblical and traditional Christian eschatology placed its hope for the final future of the world in the transcendent God, who is beyond the world and its history as well as within it, the God from whose transcendent possibilities the world was first created and whose power to renew his creation far transcends the immanent capacities of creation itself. In the Christian view the new creation in which all things will find their goal will not be the product of human history, but the fresh creative act of the transcendent God, who, of course, fulfils the possibilities inherent in creation but also far surpasses them.

(2) If, for the myth of progress, human history is the sole *vehicle* of salvation, the principal *means* of salvation is the technological domination of nature. Progress means (not only but especially) humanity's progressive liberation of ourselves from nature and the progressive refashioning of nature into a world we have made to serve our ends. The whole scientific-technological project of the modern age has been a kind of new creation, a re-creating of the world by its godlike human masters. What happened in the development of the myth of progress was really that the Christian hope for eschatological salvation, the coming of God's kingdom in all creation, was reduced to human history, with its limited scope and capacities, while at the same time the historical process was invested with much of the transcendent expectations of the Christian hope. Human history was burdened with the impossible dream of achieving a new creation. Such a dream was always bound to founder fatally on the real limits of the present creation, which is all it has to work with.

Why has the myth of progress declined from its heyday in the nineteenth century to its slow death in the later twentieth century? The course of events in our century has simply refuted it. There are above all the horrors of twentieth-century history — 'the most bestial period in recorded history', as George Steiner calls it.⁴ The two World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalin's reign of terror, Vietnam, and the killing-fields of Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo are merely the better known, representative instances of the massively unprecedented scale of human violence in which literally hundreds of millions have died. These horrors do more than demonstrate the lack of progress. They make it impossible to view the evils and sufferings of history as justified by history's goal. If these horrors — children burned alive in Auschwitz or buried alive in Cambodia — are the price of progress, then progress is not progress. What utopia could ever compensate for these?

But there is more. Not only has the technology on which progress depends been deeply implicated in these horrors — as well as even worse in prospect: nuclear weapons and ever more sophisticated biological weapons. Not only has the myth of progress itself been the justification for some of the horrors, justifying the eggs broken for the sake of the utopian omelette to come. Even many of the changes which seem most unequivocally beneficial for human life have come to threaten human life, not to mention the rest of life. Coming up against the ecological limits of life on this planet, for which the modern project with its godlike aspirations never sufficiently allowed, progress has turned against us. Yet its momentum — technological and economic — seems unstoppable. The myth of progress has worked its way so deeply into the warp and woof of our society — and more or less the whole world now — that whether we believe in it or not seems to make little difference to its now destructive course. It is the idol that once created holds its creators in thrall.

Was the idea of progress bound to lead to such an impasse? In a very important sense, yes it was. There have been more and less benign versions of the myth of progress, more and less promethean versions. Perhaps the real benefits of the modern project could have been had with fewer of its calamities. But the disastrous error lay in the concept of a utopian goal immanent in human history. The critical question is: Can human history be itself the source and vehicle of salvation? Can human history in and of itself overcome the experienced evils of life and fulfil the aspirations of humanity for a qualitatively better life? A negative answer is required if we take on board the following three criticisms of the modern myth of progress, essentially criticisms made from postmodern and green (not necessarily Christian) perspectives:

(1) In practice, the myth of progress, despite its association with egalitarian and democratic ideologies, turns out to be elitist. It identifies progress with particular cultural projects — those of the modern west — and benefits only those in the vanguard of historical progress so defined. The dead are forgotten. Those who suffered the evils of the past have paid the price for a possible utopia only their descendants can enjoy. Even those whose suffering now is beyond help must be left aside. The myth of progress takes a necessarily hard-hearted view of the dead and the wretched of the earth, turning resolutely away from them lest its bright-eyed optimism be dimmed. For an immanent progressivist eschatology, this must be the case.

(2) Therefore the myth of progress has functioned as an ideology of domination. This is the postmodern critique, sometimes exaggerated but unquestionably true to a significant degree. The myth of progress has served to legitimate the exercise of power: imperial and communist regimes until recently, now primarily the west's

economic domination over the third world, the power of the affluent over the poor, even the power of men over women. Since progress is identified with the values of some, the domination of these over others is justified. Progress is an ideology justifying history's victors, neglecting history's victims. For an immanent progressivist eschatology, this must be the case.

(3) Finally, the myth of progress has also meant the destructive domination of nature. Nature is subjugated and absorbed into history. Its only role is to be the raw material from which human history fashions its utopia. Again, for an immanent progressivist eschatology, this must be the case.

Loss of hope at the turn of the millennium

Attitudes to the approach of the new millennium are a useful test of the extent to which our society has lost the dogmatic optimism of modern western society in the heyday of the idea of progressism. Rather than taking the opportunity of the turn of the millennium to celebrate the progress we have made and to look eagerly forward to the even better future that assuredly awaits us, people at the end of the second millennium seem to view the future of society and the world with anxiety or even a sort of resigned pessimism. Information technology fanatics and bio-technology optimists apart, there does not seem to be much enthusiasm for the future. Opinion polls suggest that, when asked, most people think life for their children will be worse than it has been for them. This does not necessarily mean that they think much about the future at all, but it contrasts strikingly with the sense of moving steadily forward into an alluring and exciting new future, which characterized the mood of our society not so long ago.

One recent book that took the approach of the year 2000 as an occasion for assessing our society's prospects for the future was called *The Age of Anxiety*. It aimed to encounter the 'millennial anxiety', the fear of the future which its authors see as characteristic of British society in the 1990s. The authors themselves offer varying degrees, none too extreme, of optimism and pessimism. They take the anxiety seriously, and none proposes a return to the ebullient optimism of the nineteenth-century myth, on which the editors comment: 'For perfectibility read corruptibility, for belief in progress read naiveté.'⁵ But it is surely no accident that the scientist among the authors retains more than his co-authors do of the nineteenth-century's faith in progress, science-based as that was to a large extent. He ends by exhorting us, 'if the going gets *really* anxious', to try to believe that science reassures.⁶ But he would probably not be surprised if most of his readers failed to believe this. Increasingly, in public opinion, scientists are no longer benevolent magicians, but sorcerers'

apprentices letting loose forces they cannot control and whose effects they cannot predict. The public attitude to genetically modified foods is an impressive indication.

Thus, despite the media and commercial hype of the year 2000, it does not look likely that its arrival will be greeted with an outburst of optimism. But nor is pre-millennial foreboding — what the media call fear of the imminent apocalypse — especially noticeable, at least on the surface of our society. Perhaps, as Marina Benjamin suggests, ‘we now live in a “panic society” — everywhere unease wells up in the gaps of our fragmented lives.’⁷ But, as she recognizes, this unease is not only expressed in fears about the future, but is also the source of a cultural attempt to escape the linear movement of historical time in which modern progressivism put so much trust and to live in a ‘post-historical’ present. This is an attempt ‘to turn time into a medium without direction in the hope that somewhere along the way the end will simply get lost’.⁸ It is arguable that, whereas pre-modern (traditional) societies gave priority to the past and modern (progressive) society gave priority to the future, with the decline of the idea of progress a postmodern society is emerging in which priority is given to the present. In contemporary western society, with its throwaway culture, its emphasis on the immediate and the instantaneous, its feverish drive to squeeze as much as possible into time as a limited commodity, its fragmentation of time into allocated quantities, and its obsessive organization of time, we live increasingly in the present and its prolongation. The ideology of progress was, in one respect, a means of enabling people to cope with accelerating change by the assurance that the new would usually be better. While change continues to escalate, such assurance is less readily available. (Attitudes to bio-technology are, once again, a striking recent illustration.) Hence, perhaps, the postmodern embrace of the transient. Whereas for modernity the principal good was cumulative achievement along the upward sloping line of time, for postmodernity the principal good is accumulating experiences, continually plunging into the discontinuous moment, in search not of eternity but of ecstatic momentariness. For life as progress read life as tourism.

Postmodernity is above all the age of consumerism. Consumerism is both an ideology by which our society to a considerable extent lives and the engine of a global economic system. It is what the myth of progress in its technological and economic forms has come down to. It reduces hope to what can be immediately gratified by purchase. From the hopelessness of the world, from fear of the corporate future, it turns to such consolations as money can buy in the private present of the individual. But the postmodernist celebration of the transient depends on prosperity and is not available to the poor. In the end, postmodern consumerism is implicated in a story that cannot be resolved into an

unending present. This is no longer the utopian story of the modern age, but the dystopian transformation of that story, the road that leads to ecological disaster, disintegrating social order and rising violence, the ever-growing disparity between the world’s poor and the privileged elite whose privilege must therefore be increasingly embattled, the fearfully unpredictable consequences of bio-technology, the eventual use of new generations of nuclear and biological weapons. Consumerism is inescapably implicated in the dystopian prospect. So its offer of an extended present in compensation for a lost future is illusory. Living happily without hope — the postmodern ideal — is fatally vulnerable to the fear of the future that, however repressed, undermines it from below. It is also vulnerable to the irrepressible human instinct for compassion and concern — recently seen, for example, in attitudes to the tragedy of Kosovo or in the Jubilee 2000 campaign — and to the ineradicable human need for hope, without which compassion and concern cannot be sustained.

Retrieving biblical Christian eschatology today

The hope generated by utopian progressivism has all but spent its force, victim of its own self-refutation. The postmodern, consumerist dream of living purely in and for the present is itself implicated in the continuing destructive after-effects of progressivism. At this historical and cultural juncture, may not the Christian hope, recovered in its own integrity, disentangled from the myth of progress with which it has so often in the modern period been entwined, come into its own as the one realistic form of hope for the world? It will be helpful to turn back to the secular eschatology of progress and to focus on the ways in which it distinguished itself from the Christian eschatological tradition to which it was in some sense heir. Two decisive novelties radically distinguished it. They will remind us, by contrast, of decisive features of the Christian hope whose retrieval is urgently needed.

The first of the two novelties was the rejection of transcendence and the reduction of eschatology to the immanent goal of human history. In the Christian tradition the end of history and the new creation had not been considered the end-product of the historical process, a goal which history itself can achieve, but a fresh creative act of the transcendent God who will thus make of his creation what it had no immanent capacity to be. And while the Christian tradition had envisaged the activity of the Spirit of God at work in the world and already anticipating the new creation within history, this had not been seen as a cumulative process bringing the world gradually into the perfection of the kingdom

of God. Moreover, the coming kingdom of God was not understood as merely the final period of history, to be reached at the end of a continuous temporal line stretching into the future. The end of history is to happen to the whole of history, entailing the resurrection and the judgment of all the dead. This is the eschatological transcendence which disappeared with God when Enlightenment humanity replaced God by taking the reins of history into their own hands.

In doing so they took over far more of the Christian eschatological hope than mere history without transcendence could bear. By means of education and technology human beings were perfectible and the world was infinitely adaptable to human needs. Education replaced grace and technology replaced creation. Together they would re-make the world, as though humans had the creative power of God and the creative wisdom of God. This was promethean eschatology which crucially failed to recognize the limits of this world. In assuming limitless power over a limitless future of unlimited resources, humanity reached for the eschatological freedom of God and is now discovering the limits only as we risk catastrophe in colliding against them.

The end of this secular eschatology of modernity is the end of eschatology without transcendence. Christian eschatology, by contrast, trusts the final future to God the creator and lord of all things. Therefore it can sustain hope and inspire action without needing these to be underpinned by the myth of incremental progress towards a utopian goal. Christian hope neither attempts what can only come from God nor neglects what is humanly possible. Sustained by the hope of everything from God, it attempts what is possible within the limits of each present. It does not overreach itself in striving for a post-historical goal. It does not value what can be done only as a step in a linear progress to a goal. It does what can be done for its own sake, here and now, confident that every present will find itself, redeemed and fulfilled, in God's new creation of all things.

The idea of progress differed from Christian eschatology in rejecting transcendence; it also, secondly, differed in its attitude to the evils of history. The myth of progress in its heyday was a kind of immanent theodicy or justification of history. All the pains and losses were justified by the goal. This is the sense, as we have already noticed, in which Auschwitz negates the myth of progress. In the face of Auschwitz, no one can say that the evils of history are a price worth paying for a better future. But if they are not, then progress can do nothing but leave them behind. Progress can only forget the victims of history. The victims of progress itself indeed *must* be forgotten if progress is not to be exposed as a sham. One has only to contemplate with open eyes the tragedies and horrors of the past to realize that history cries out for a redemption which progress cannot provide.

Unlike the myth of progress, Christian eschatology does not privilege future history over past history. The end of history will happen to all of history. In the resurrection all the dead of all history will rise to judgment and life in the new creation. There is no danger that people in the past or the present be considered mere means to the greater good of people in the future. The countless victims of history, those whose lives were torture and those who scarcely lived at all, are not to be forgotten, but remembered in hope of the resurrection. And not only the dead, but also those of the living for whom there can be no more hope in this world, those who can neither assist nor benefit from the onward march of progress — the desperately and incurably sick, the dying, the wretched of the earth — must not be left behind, but cherished with the special care God has for the most hopeless. The future we cannot give them is promised them by God.

New Testament 'apocalyptic' and the postmodern condition

We may now return to our text: 'When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them' (1 Thess. 5:3a). It is surely an apt description of the 'apocalyptic' (in the popular modern sense) danger in which our contemporary world now stands. Consumerism and its allies — the harlot of Babylon and the beasts she rides in our time — promise, 'Peace and security', endlessly increasing prosperity, all we need for living in the extended present oblivious of any future that might be different. The promise is as delusory as that of the Roman imperial eschatology. The future will undoubtedly be different, and we have all the information to realize this. But to face that future with hope, to keep awake, as Paul puts it, not to escape into drunken stupor (1 Thess. 5:6–7), we need the apocalypse in its original sense. In other words, we need that disclosure of the truth of things, the world seen from the transcendent perspective of God's kingdom, which the New Testament offers and the book of Revelation in particular lays before us with penetrating power to unmask the ideological illusions and deceits of the world.

There is a further trap in common uses of the word 'apocalyptic' which we need carefully to avoid. Apocalyptic literature, we are told, reassures the faithful by promising them escape from the destruction to which the rest of humanity is doomed. It is the ideology of sectarian withdrawal and I'm-all-right-Jack otherworldliness. The various versions of pre-tribulation rapture expectation which infect so much of conservative American eschatology lend considerable plausibility to this caricature, even

though at the same time they disturb the sociological model by their popularity among the prosperous and the patriotic, rather than the persecuted and marginalized. Mere apocalyptic consolation is pardonable in the latter, self-indulgent at best in the former. But the book of Revelation itself does not fit the model at all. It is oriented to the coming of God's kingdom in the whole of creation and calls its Christian readers to active participation in the coming of the kingdom. They are called out of the complacency in which some of the seven churches languished into courageous prophetic witness in the public, political world where they must withstand the idolatrous ideology of the beast and the seductive attractions of the harlot. Their prophetic critique of contemporary delusions about the world and their faithful testimony to the truth of God's rule, as the one truly ultimate and eternal truth of both the present and the future, provide the opportunity for repentance and hope.

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Footnotes

- 1 N. Hanna, *The Millennium: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1998), 201.
- 2 For what follows on the book of Revelation, see also my fuller treatment in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 3 On the idea of progress, its decline and a Christian eschatological critique of it, see further R. Bauckham and T. Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- 4 G. Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 103.
- 5 S. Dunant and R. Porter ed., *The Age of Anxiety* (London: Virago, 2nd edition 1997), xv.
- 6 G. Watts, 'Can Science Reassure?', in Dunant and Porter ed., *The Age of Anxiety*, 187.
- 7 M. Benjamin, *Living at the End of the World* (London: Picador, 1998), 25. The phrase 'panic society' is quoted from A. Kroker.
- 8 Benjamin, *Living at the End of the World*, 222.