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## The Transformative Impact of Eschatological Narratives: A Reflection on the Theology of History

**Abstract:** This article discusses three XX century theologians, one Catholic, Gaston Fessard, one Protestant, Jürgen Moltmann and one Orthodox, Ioannis Zizioulas, who have in common an inverse reading of the timeline: not from past to future, but the other way around, from the future to the present and the past. According to them, it is our eschatological future that makes us what we are today, shaping also our past. All three theologians explain how the eschatological narrative causes behaviours, how the act of imaging the eschaton transforms the present by enlightening our decisions, giving us hope or by the real presence of eschatology in history. On this material, I will argue that the eschatological turn in theology and the rediscovery of the importance of the theology of history imply certain existentialist consequences. Thus, the article explains how living in the eschatological horizon makes it possible to escape the materialist mechanical timeframe, where the past causes the present and the present causes the future.

**Keywords:** eschatology, ontology, Zizioulas, Moltmann, Fessard, theology of history

A Jewish story about a traveller walking through a village in Eastern Europe tells how the traveller finds a watchman in the village. Thinking that the village is too poor to afford to pay the guard, the traveller asks him what is he doing. The answer is surprising: “I’m watching for the Messiah!”. Years later, the same traveller comes back and finds the same guardian. He asks him whether he finds his job boring. “Yes”, replies the messianic watchman, “but think of the job security” (Landes 2011,7). Leaving the joke aside, one can definitely speak of a theology of watching, bringing together watching and praying. In the biblical text, praying and watching go together praying is not a mystical inner feeling, but a search for the presence of God. The one who is waiting for the Messiah lives in God’s advent, in expectation of the coming of the One (Moltmann 2016, 173).

Shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition, but nowadays independent of its religious origin, the eschatological framework models our relationship with the future. Of course, this relationship with the future differs according

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to whether the Kingdom is perceived as being near (as in the early years of the Church) or as a remote and transcendent reality. Eschatology provides a rich set of resources for imagining a better world and therefore influences behaviour in the present one. There are many extremely interesting aspects of eschatology, but in this paper, I will focus only on the relationship between time and its end, and how this final point of history influences the way we conceive the past, the present and the future.

In the last decades, a number of studies have demonstrated how the eschatological imagination plays a role in shaping daily-life realities. A notable book that established a new paradigm in the field was Karl Lowith's *Meaning in History* (Lowith 1949). Written by a German Jew who was a refugee during World War Two, the book offers an explanation of why people still believe in historical progress, in spite of the extremely violent history of the twentieth century was. Lowith argues that the belief in progress in present-day society is no more than the secularized belief in Paradise. When people stopped believing in Paradise, the promise of a better world became the promise of a better tomorrow. For Lowith, belief in progress is not sustained by facts. There can certainly be some scientific progress, but one cannot generalize this kind of progress over other aspects of human life. According to Lowith, the Judeo-Christian eschatological narrative provided a new understanding of time. The future became more important than the present or the past.

Awaiting and watching became categories for thinking and acting, while modern philosophy of history relies on the Christian theology of history and its eschatological orientation.

In the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful "preparation" for the future. (Lowith 1949,4-5).

This is not only true for Christianity: Judaism is maybe the most prophetic religion of all, with the expectation of Messiah at its core. The watchman from the story can be a Jew waiting for the First coming, or a Christian waiting for the Second coming. The specificity of Judaism is the Messianic moment that interrupts the linear course of history and therefore challenges all habits; consequently, the breaking of time delegitimizes all powers in the world. Christian eschatology is different in that the incarnation breaks the unity between the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom (Delecroix 2016, 255), and therefore Christians needs to give a sense to the time that remains, the time between the moment of the incarnation and the end of the world, the time that one normally calls history. Christian eschatology shift between *already here*, a realized eschatology, and *not yet*, a future eschatology. This prefiguration in

history has important theological consequences, but I will not focus on this aspect.

One is apt to think that the past influences the present and the present influences the future. But even though for us time flows in this particular direction, comprehension doesn't follow the same path. Meaning emerges from the future into the present. Even in the structure of language, a sentence achieves its meaning at the moment when the speaker finishes it. In a similar manner, in Christian eschatology, History will achieve its meaning through the final revelation.

At the core of the Christian tradition is the sacrament of confession. Confession should not be interpreted from an ethical perspective only: confession is not just the act of atoning for the evil one has done, but more importantly, for its existential consequences. The act of confessing a sin of the past, as well as the present resolution not to repeat the sin in the future transform the confessing subject from a sinner into a repentant. For those believing that confession is a sacrament, this means that a decision concerning future acts is working today as a changing vector. What is happening here is that something that is *not yet*, our future ego, transforms both the present and the past, so that the future will be more ontological consistent than present and past (Zizioulas 2016, 262).

In this paper, I will argue that the eschatological turn in theology and the rediscovery of the importance of the theology of history imply certain existentialist consequences. In my analysis, I will take into account two aspects: modifications of the timeline and the ontological consequences of these modifications. I will discuss three theologians, one Catholic, one Protestant and one Orthodox, who have in common an inverse reading of the timeline: not from past to future, but the other way around, from the future to the present and the past. Believing in the end of History followed by the Kingdom to come structures our comprehension of history.

The first author is a French Jesuit who built a philosophy of history mainly influenced by the Hegelian tradition and the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Gaston Fessard's main project is to offer a guide for people living in troubled periods (he fought in the First World War and was in the Resistance against the Nazi in the second). Following this project, a *Christian theology of politics* (Fessard 1976, 1) was born. This theology aims to use faith to shed light on the concrete political situations, but without offering a ready-made action handbook. According to Fessard, faith should help Christians to guide their own liberty in history. He proposes a technique of spiritual discernment founded in Ignatian spiritual exercises adjusted for political issues. Discernments of Spirits is a spiritual practice rooted in a 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic tradition, with very clear and specific rules (Loyola 1991, 257-268) that can help Christians to embody and live the truth theoretically confessed (Fessard 1956, 10). The purpose of these

exercises is that each person might better understand God's will and consequently orient his or her existential choices. Embodying Christians values is important especially for those living in today's world, where having a religious identity isn't just about an abstract belief in God and going to Sunday mass. Having a religious identity today entails a certain ethical and social behaviour.

At the core of this decision process is a thought experiment. We should imagine the Judgement Day, the second coming of Christ. This is the event that can brighten our future (Fessard 1960, 66). Making a good decision in the present moment involves the use of eschatological imagery in order to produce a certain behaviour. Eschatology provides a rich set of resources for imagining a better world and therefore can influence our behaviour in the present one. Consequently, for Fessard a Christian political theology draws spiritual lines for making the optimal political decisions:

Eschatology can make clear the real meaning of events. Not in the sense that it permits us to prophesize about a determined future allowing us to affirm that capitalism or communism will prevail tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. But it offers us a better strategy: Transposing us at the term of our great journey, it allows us to judge our own judgements, projecting them in Parousia's light, in order to separate, starting from now, truth from false and right from wrong, only the End of History can show the truth meaning of events. (Fessard 1960, 423)

Supernatural history should inform any decision taken in the political, economic, national or international level, at least for Christians (Fessard 1956, 10). Imagining ourselves before the judging seat of Christ helps the decision making process. More than the last chapter of theology books, eschatology becomes a hermeneutical tool for reading the signs of times. The present moment is seen as the stage of God-human dialogue, a meeting point between God's freedom and human freedom.

The second author I want to discuss here is the famous Protestant theologian, author of the *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann. He situates eschatology at the centre of his reflections, and so for him the main issue of theology is the future of God, the coming of God. That is why the place of eschatology should not be end of one reflections, but its beginning, Christian doctrine should start by reflecting on the promise of the Kingdom. For Moltmann, to think eschatologically means, generally speaking, thinking somethings through the end, the end of all things. This means considering life, human history and natural history in the light of Christ's resurrection. A Christian should imagine the Future of eternal life and live his or her entire life in the light of the promise of the creation of all things (Moltmann, 2014,189). Furthermore, Christianity is creative expectation, anticipation of the future in its core eschatology, forward looking and forward moving, and consequently it also transforms the present. (Moltmann 1965, 3).

Conversion and the rebirth to a new life change time and the experience of time, for they make present the ultimate in the penultimate, and the future of time in the midst of time... *the future made present* creates new conditions for possibilities in history (Moltmann, 1996, 22).

Moltmann has brought back into Christian reflection the category of hope. By hope he doesn't mean like Bloch, a resource for a better tomorrow; rather, hope means living the Christian life in the light of the promise of the Kingdom, in the expectation and in anticipation of the joy of the Kingdom. In this sense, making present "the ultimate in the penultimate" has an ontological meaning. It reminds us that there is more than we can experience in the present time. Promise, as well as hope, is a bridge between the present moment and the eschatological future. To Live in hope means to be open to something else than the present: to remember the past and to anticipate the future. Through the power of remembrance, we save the past and through the power of the imagination hope we save the future (Moltmann 2014, 187-188).

First, this perspective has consequences for our everyday behaviour, because imagining the future in the light of the promise of God opens new possibilities for action in the present. Secondly, this relationship between what is not there anymore, the history of the people of God, told in the Bible, for example, and what is not there yet, the coming of the Kingdom, is lived by the community of the believers. This reality experienced by remembering and anticipation changes not only our present behaviour but also our relationship with time. The believer becomes in a certain way, as Kierkegaard has put it, a contemporary not only with Christ, but also with the events of salvation history.

Finally, the Greek Orthodox bishop John Zizioulas is arguing that our current ontology is protological instead of eschatological and that an eschatological ontology will be much more compatible with Christian faith and freedom. His idea is rather innovative at a philosophical level, while being an offspring of the theological tradition. The Orthodox theologian begins by asking a question: how can something be said to truly be, if this being will one day eventually cease to be? In our current ontology, something or someone is or has been, if it is present or has been present in the past. From this perspective, the future doesn't yet have any being, but it will acquire being when it will become a reality that can be enclosed in the past. Nevertheless, until this condition will be fulfilled, the future is only in our imagination. Our past shapes and determines our present and future, we are what we have been, rather than what we shall be (Zizioulas 2016, 259-278). Being very critical to an ontological system that privileges the past, Zizioulas proposes another perspective centred on Christ's presence in the Eucharist now and forever and ever.

At the core of this vision is the paradox of the Eucharist that brings eschatology into history, while extract out of time an historical event. Offering a glimpse of the Kingdom, the Eucharist makes people experience ultimate realities. The past and the future, the present and eternity are all reconciled in the Eucharist (Zizioulas 1996, 204). For this reason, the Church should not privilege the past over the future. If the reconciliation is already there when celebrating the Eucharist, it means that the future reality of communion enters into our present, divided communities and transform them (Zizioulas 2009, 157). This means that the reconciliation achieved at the eschaton is already working in history. The eschatological future is the one, which determines the present. Zizioulas's perspective represents a reversal of the philosophical idea of causality as well as of our common sense rationality, according to which the cause precedes the effect chronologically as well as logically.

What we experience in the divine Eucharist is the end times making itself present to us now. The Eucharist is not a repetition or continuation of the past, or just one event among others, but it's the penetration of the future into time (Zizioulas 2009, 155).

For Zizioulas, anticipation is not a psychological act, an act of hope and waiting, but a fulfilment of the promise, a real presence of the *hinc et nunc* of the eschaton (Zizioulas 2009, 202). In this case, the tension between *already here-not yet* seems to be resolved through the *already here*.

Zizioulas urges us to liberate ourselves from the past and discover that our truth resides in our future, that is, in resurrection. The existential consequence is that whereas in a protological ontology, a criminal is a murderer, in an eschatological ontology, a repentant murder is not a murder anymore. A criminal's being is determined by what he will be in the end. Our future is not in death as in Heidegger's perspective, but in resurrection. Eschatology should not be conceived as an end nor as an eternal present, as in Greek philosophy, but as a temporal moment in the future that will come to save history from its most disturbing possibility: death.

### **Conclusions: the chronological order and the order of the spirit**

All the three theologians discussed here suggest that one should read our current time line differently. According to them, it is our eschatological future that makes us what we are today, shaping also our past. This way of reading history brings meaning to all events in the light of the eschaton and saves the memories of the past. The present moment, even though it remains important for the history of redemption because it is the moment of decision, loses its ontological priority. Living in the eschatological

horizon makes it possible to escape the materialist mechanical timeframe, where the past causes the present and the present causes the future.

All three theologians explain how the eschatological narrative causes behaviours, how the act of imaging the eschaton transforms the present by enlightening our decisions, giving us hope or by the real presence of eschatology in history through the Eucharist. The eschatological perspective supposes more than just rediscovering the hope of the Kingdom and acting today with this hope in heart and mind; it represents the beginning of the time of reconciliation promised for the end of time. The future starts in the present because the future has started in the past, in the resurrection moment. Even though salvation history takes place in the linear order of creation, incarnation, resurrection and eschaton, this chronological order co-exists with the teleological order of the Holy Spirit, where the eschatological end gives meaning to the resurrection, the incarnation, and even to creation.

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