APOCALYPTIC

Patterns in

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

Fiction

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*Ultimate Issues in Apocalyptic Literature*

Although Karl Barth found during his graduate studies that eschatology was merely “a harmless little chapter at the end of dogmatic theology,” he was one of several modern theologians who made the study of last things one of the first things in Christian thought. Yet he and other twentieth-century thinkers do not talk much about fire and trumpets and judgment seats on a final day. Instead, they concentrate on a complex affirmation of the resurrection of Christ which unfolds into an eschatology that is individual, collective, and cosmic. In this shift from a physical picture-thinking study of the last days to an anthropological, Christ-centered eschatology, theologians have tried to bring into harmony a series of tensions that began with the Christian Scriptures. For in the New Testament, the early Church moved from an earlier concern with the imminent return of Jesus to an open-ended preparation of the “Kingdom of God” in all aspects of people’s lives, both in the present and in the ultimate future. Following this double concern with the “already” and the “not yet” of this Kingdom, the New Testament authors laid the foundation for several tensions that have become the focus of modern eschatological thinking:

The tension between the “realized” eschatology of Christ as the fulfillment of history, and the “future” eschatology of his second coming. (C. H. Dodd vs. Albert Schweitzer.)

The tension between the traditional cosmic eschatology and the existentialist relevance of Christ for each individual in making life-decisions in the present. (Oscar Cullman vs. Rudolf Bultmann.)
Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction

The tension between a metaphysical study of eschatological events and a political understanding and response to the ongoing eschatological situation. (J. B. Metz, Liberation theologians, Catherine Keller.)

The tension between an optimistic incarnational focus on the Kingdom of God built by human culture now and the more pessimistic eschatological focus on the gift aspect of the Kingdom as a future grace of God. (Teilhard de Chardin vs. Danielou; Pannenberg vs. Moltmann.)

A tension between the final transformation as a spiritual fulfillment at the end of history vs. the more historically grounded transformation that includes a material fulfillment through the resurrection of the body and the cosmos. (Pannenberg, Rahner, Ratzinger.)

None of these thinkers, however, has focused on the external “signs of the endtime.” They no longer debate, as did Tertullian, Origen, Peter Lombard, and even Aquinas, the exact status of the place and time of the final judgment or the physical problems occasioned by the resurrection of the body. In fact, Rahner said that to focus on imagining such details is to create a “false apocalypse.” For him, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, even though it may have been the best-selling book in the world during the 1970s, or the “Left Behind” novels of the 1990s would be an exercise in a futile literalism that attempted to combine an imaginative hermeneutics with a politics of fear.

In an attempt to understand the ultimate meaning of modern apocalyptic fiction within the context of these tensions of theology, I will extend and apply the philosophical insights into eschatology developed by philosopher John Davenport (“Essence of Eschatology”). My study will show how contemporary novelists have created, on the concrete imaginative level of literary narrative, various images of apocalyptic final acts in the drama of human history. Implicit within these narratives are several conceptions of time, eternity, and ultimate reality, but these can all be related to the four types of eschatological reality described by Davenport. So, let us begin our study by reviewing these four types of eschatological concepts. We will then define the meaning of “apocalyptic” literature within the study of eschatology and describe its common traits and themes. Third, we will summarize
Introduction

the biblical, historical, and modern systematic features of the most comprehensive examples of eschatological narratives.

Eschatology: Four Types

Davenport’s study attempts to break new ground in the philosophy of ultimacy by showing that “the very notion of ultimacy is originally eschatological, and thus the concept of finality explicitly involved in many conceptions of URAM [Ultimate Reality and Meaning] is derivative from the original, distinctive meaning of eschatological finality” (“Essence” 207). By examining the eschatological nature of URAM, he claims to have gone beyond the “foundationalist” philosophical notion of ultimacy (which is based on metaphors of space and on levels of being) by exploring the “hereafterness” latent in metaphors of time/eternity and stages of becoming, which are accessible only to a combination of philosophical and theological methodologies. Although much of Davenport’s study covers the historical development of eschatology from the mythological period through the axial period of the ancient world, he concludes with a helpful outline of four basic concepts of the temporally and metaphysically ultimate (“Essence” 231–32):

1. **Prehistorical protoeschatology**: Ultimate reality as continually re-enacted primordial “Time,” a cosmogonic . . . reality “above” profane existence, which is not allowed to become “time” in the sense of profane linear history. The ultimate reality thus has no position in historical time in our sense at all: it is the transcendent hierophany that infuses profane existence with the “plenitude of a present that contains no trace of history” (Eliade 76). [E.g., many ancient myths; Percy’s portrait of hippie life.]

2. **Ahistorical soteriological eschatology**: Ultimate reality as an implicitly eschatological escape from profane time now conceived as cyclic, an irreversible release from the evil of profane existence into the sacred reality identified as an ultimate good for the individual. Ultimate reality . . . serves only a soteriological function for the individual: it leaves “the everyday” world cyclic and ahistorical. [E.g., many Buddhist tales; Lessing’s fables.]
3. **Fully apocalyptic eschatology:** Ultimate reality now has both a soteriological function as the ultimate good for the individual and a hierophantic function for the cosmos, by becoming a *temporal* “end” that makes profane time into *history*, a meaningful irreversible sequence. This also makes primordial Time into a *historical* “beginning,” from which linear time can be given historical meaning in the narrative shape of traditions. [E.g., many Islamic and Zoroastrian narratives of the afterlife; some African-American novels.]

4. **Radically historical eschatology:** The “hereafter” has both soteriological and hierophantic functions but is *not a return* to the primordial Time. The *soteriological* sacred of the ultimate end is not identical with, but *teleologically* related to, the sacred at the beginning, which is the source of values and norms. The sacred as a whole thus becomes equivocal and hierarchically differentiated: the eschatological sacred as *Endzeit* transcends the archetypal sacred as primordial *Urzeit*. [E.g., Christian eschatological narratives of a final resurrection; C. S. Lewis trilogy or Percy novels.]

In these concepts of the ultimate state, Davenport discovers four central features that result from the interaction of the Good and the Real, which is the central tension in apocalyptic narratives. The ultimate state is (a) open to alternative possibilities (thus allowing for divine and human freedom); (b) an absolute breach in time (thus expressing the radical difference between the sacred and the profane); (c) radically double (thus allowing a choice for or against the ultimate Good); and (d) directly accessible in time (thus making the present life crucial to future life hereafter). Each of these features of eschatological narratives, we will see, will appear in various ways in modern fiction, just as each of the four types of eschatological concepts has spawned narratives of the apocalypse.

**Apocalyptic Literature: Definitions and Examples**

The term *apocalypse* has taken on many connotations in recent popular culture—from the violent conclusions in the film *Apocalypse Now* about
the Vietnam War; to the catastrophic expectations around the year 2000; to the radical upheavals in race, culture, and society in many contemporary novels; to science fiction fantasies about the end of the world. As a biblical literary genre, however, apocalyptic emerged within the tradition of Jewish religious eschatology by distinguishing itself from prophecy. After 500 B.C., in Judaism prophetic literature by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel began to be distinguished from apocalyptic writing in the book of Daniel. Prophetic literature was marked by its national scope, its basis in tradition and realistic experience, its human authorship, its use of human instruments, its testing by fulfillment, and its origin in preaching and action. Apocalyptic literature, in contrast, was marked by its cosmic scope, its basis in universal history, its use of visionary symbols, its anonymous authorship, its lack of human instruments and dependence on direct divine action, its greater emphasis on promise than on fulfillment, and its origin in writing (see Stuhlmueller 343; Kreuziger ch. 4). From this distinction, scholars have come up with the following definition of apocalyptic literature:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (Reddish 20; cited by Zimbaro xi)

Texts meeting this definition of apocalypse often show a range of common traits and recurrent themes. Among the themes of apocalyptic literature from Daniel to Percy are an imminent end-time, a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil (sometimes personified in angels and demons), a desire for an ultimate paradise (often parallel to an original paradise), the transitional help of God or a messiah, and a final judgment and manifestation of the ultimate. Narratives with these thematic elements often contain the following formal traits: visions or dreams by seers or guides, characters in spiritual turmoil, pseudonymous authorship, mythic imagery, a composite text, a crisis situation, a sense of ultimate hope, and signs of an end-time.
Apocalyptic Literature: Biblical Texts

The primary biblical examples of apocalyptic literature are the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures and the book of Revelation in the Christian New Testament. The book of Daniel, written around 165 B.C., contains its apocalyptic portion in chapters 7–12, following the story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, in a series of visions experienced by Daniel. These visions include the Four Beasts, the Goat and the Ram, the Seventy Weeks, and the Time of Wrath and Ending. Written during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes as a symbolic protest giving hope in the time of persecution, the book was an effort to support the faith of the postexilic Jews in Yahweh and the law by calling them to look forward to the rule of a “Son of Man” figure during an end-time in which the faithful would triumph over evil through God’s intervention. What is new and original about this text, according to modern commentators, are the following characteristics: first, it moves from a situation in time to a hereafter beyond time; second, it uses angels as intermediaries; third, it reveals the hidden plan of God working in history; fourth, it includes not only Jews but all nations as its audience; fifth, it expresses belief in a resurrection to eternal life, which may include happiness or punishment. This book also echoes earlier apocalyptic passages from several prophets, such as Isaiah 24–26, 53, or Ezekiel 37–44.

Although it contains almost three hundred references to the Hebrew Scriptures, including the book of Daniel, the New Testament book of Revelation, as we shall see in the next chapter, transforms itself into a new version of apocalypse, written with a strand of prophecy and in an epistolary format. Composed late in the first century A.D. (probably simultaneously with the apocryphal 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch), the text contains the usual traits of apocalyptic literature: a vision mediated by angels, the use of symbolic language and numbers, the situation portrayed of crisis and persecution, an ultimate battle between the divine and the demonic, and a movement from the old to the New Jerusalem. What is distinctive, however, is that the author is no longer anonymous but is given the name of John (probably not the evangelist) and a situation on the island of Patmos; that the text is written to all the churches of the era; and that its theology is thoroughly Christocentric. To convey its series of transcendent and politically relevant truths,
the book employs a series of symbols as signs of the divine mystery at work in human history, both contemporary and future. For example, the most famous symbols are the woman clothed like the sun (perhaps suggesting both a city and a people), a horn and trumpet (suggesting power and divine origin), white robes, palms, and crowns (implying transcendent glory and happiness), the sea (associated with evil and death), eyes (suggesting knowledge), and various numbers (e.g., 7 = fullness; 12 = tribes, perfection; 4 = universality). These and other symbols are woven into a narrative text that moves into the eschatological future while warning the contemporary world of the complex struggle for survival and Christian life. After the opening seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, this narrative runs from chapter 4 through 22 and includes the Seven Seals, the Seven Trumpets, the Seven Signs, the Seven Bowls, and the Seven Sights, concluding with the fall of Babylon and the rise of the New Jerusalem. Among the Seven Sights are the exultation of the Church, the victory over the Beast and Dragon, the thousand years' reign, and the final judgment. From the endless research and commentary given to these apocalyptic narratives, theologians attest to several basic doctrinal themes: the certainty of divine judgment for all, Christ’s oneness with the Church and equality with Yahweh, God’s absolute transcendence and providence, the ultimate rewarding of the just and punishment of evil, the ongoing power of the Redemption and need for hope (see Heibt; Perkins). This final book of the Christian Scriptures contains little acknowledgment of the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels (Mk 13, Mt 24–25, Lk 21) or the letters of St. Paul (1 Thes 4; 2 Thes 1–2; 1 Cor 13 and 15).

Apocalyptic Literature: Ancient Nonbiblical Texts

Examples of non-Western apocalyptic literature can be found in Hindu, Buddhist, Persian, and Islamic classics. Among the Hindu myths, the story of Rudra (c. 2000–1000 B.C.) stands out. As the storm god, Rudra emerges from Vishnu at the end of the Four Ages. At that time, the earth will be exhausted and Rudra will bring about a century of drought and send the sun to dry up all terrestrial waters. After the purification of the planet, Rudra will bring down rain for a millennium until Brahma sends a wind to prepare a primordial place for a new world. Thus, the Hindu cyclic theology
of creation, sustenance, and destruction is expressed through this symbolic narrative within its apocalyptic literature (Bierlein 238; Zimbaro 12).

Buddhist apocalyptic derives from Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* but provides no clear apocalyptic narrative. The closest to apocalyptic is the myth of Maitreya (c. 500–600 B.C.), which takes place far in the future during a time of peace and prosperity under the reign of Shankha, a Buddha who will teach enlightenment throughout the world. He will prepare people for the final Buddha, whose name will be Maitreya, to arrive and teach through contemplation the basic Buddhist ideas of the illusoriness of all finite reality. He and his followers will then hear the voice of Brahma, the Eternal God, who will lead them into enlightenment, ethical living, celibacy, and Dharma, the eternal law. After preaching for sixty thousand years, Maitreya will depart for his Nirvana, or “absolute union with God,” while his followers will practice Dharma for another ten thousand years until all achieve Nirvana (Bierlein 246; Zimbaro 11–12).

In Zoroastrianism, during the sixth century B.C. Zoroaster had a vision of the end of the world which is written down in his *Avesta*. In this vision, the Wise Lord reveals some of the details of the Last Judgment and the way to avoid perdition by rejecting the Evil One and becoming a sharer in “divine fellowship.” Before this final time, three saviors will be sent to earth: The first is Anshedar, who will come at the end of the Iron Age, born of a virgin during a shower of stars, to fight the Evil One. A second savior, Aushedarmah, will later come to subdue but not eliminate evil and suffering, give a call for vegetarianism, and occasion a battle between the evil dragon and Keresaspa, a resurrected hero-god. After this battle, all souls will be brought together for final judgment, in which the Evil One will be sent to eternal punishment, and all suffering and death will be replaced by an earthly paradise to be enjoyed forever by the blessed (Bierlein 239–40; Zimbaro 14–15).

It is worth noting, in accord with Davenport’s article, that these three apocalyptic narratives originate during the axial period around 500 B.C., approximately simultaneous with that of the Hebrew prophets, the Greek tragedians and philosophers, and the Chinese sages. It is also noteworthy that the later Christian transformation of the Hebrew apocalyptic into the book of Revelation has a rough counterpart in the Islamic text of the Qur’an, believed to be a direct revelation to Muhammad by Allah in the seventh

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The vision of the Last Days for Islam begins with earthquakes and destruction as all people are called to appear before Allah for separation into three groups: the blessed, the damned, and the righteous. The damned will be sent to a fiery hell to be punished and to learn a lesson; the blessed will enjoy the fulfillment of all desires in the presence of God; the righteous (or great souls from the past) will enjoy special pleasures, also in the divine presence. In a later text from an oral tradition, the Hadith, details of this final judgment are given in greater detail: people will stop studying the Qur’an and pursue money and pleasure, then they will be shaken up by worldwide disasters leading up to the appearance of the Antichrist, who will battle Jesus. Jesus will destroy the Beast and inaugurate a reign of peace for eighty-seven years, after which other monsters will be set free to destroy civilization. Then two angels will call the righteous to eternal rest and the wicked to punishment: one will blow a trumpet sounding the end of the world when all the souls of the righteous will be reunited with their bodies; finally, another trumpet will announce the return of Muhammad and the final gathering of all. (See Bierlein 242–45; Zimbaro 12–14.)

Major Apocalyptic Texts from 400 to 1900

Most texts dealing with the apocalypse in Western theology range from literal interpretations of the book of Revelation to reinterpretations of that work that attempt to spiritualize or interiorize it. In most cases, the occasion for the new apocalyptic texts is some historical crisis, such as persecution, plague, social conflict, or Church corruption. During the Roman persecution of the second century, for example, the Montanist movement preached that the Second Coming of Christ would take place in Phrygia in a.d. 156. Although attracted to Montanus’s piety, the Western theologian Tertullian (d. 220) disagreed with his literal imminent apocalyptic teachings, leading the way to their condemnation by Pope Zephyrinus (d. 217). However, the millennial kingdom prophesied by Old Testament apocalypse and the battle with the Antichrist were taught by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Lactantius in the third century. The first major theologian to challenge the literal interpretation and application to history of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic scriptures was Origen (d. 254), who argued that most eschatological events would take place spiritually within the individual soul, a
doctrine that would later influence Thomas Aquinas in his demythologiz-
ing of some of the details of the Second Coming.

The most influential text in Western Christianity to reject literal mil-
lennialism was Augustine’s *City of God* (413–26), which asserted that the
beginning of the eschatological kingdom took place with the birth of Christ
and was continued in the growth of the Church. Within history, however,
the Kingdom of God is not identical with the visible Church, for August-
ine interpreted history as a struggle between the City of God and the City
of Man. In his famous sentence, “Two loves therefore have given origin to
these two cities, self-love in contempt of God unto the earthly, love of God
in contempt of one’s self to the heavenly.” These two “cities” exist together
in history not identified with any particular place or person, but as two con-
flicting principles at war with each other within individuals and institutions.
Augustine developed a theology of history that broke with the ancient cycli-
cal eschatology and affirmed a linear history of salvation, beginning with
the creation by the Father, the intervention in the Incarnation by the Son,
and the ongoing sanctification by the Holy Spirit. All history since Christ
consists of the struggle between the “cities” until the triumph of love in
the City of God at the end of time. Although Augustine admits the positive
achievements of human history (e.g., in science, politics, etc.) to be part of
this struggle, thus laying the groundwork for future notions of “progress,”
he is primarily interested in religious history as guided by divine provi-
dence. Although he also divides history into six epochs, with the present
time that of the last epoch (from the birth of Christ to the Second Coming),
Augustine dismisses any predictions about details of the future or of the
end-time. While accepting the book of Revelation, he refuses to pin down
its symbolic significance to particular historical times and places. However,
the *City of God* concludes with several chapters affirming the eschatologi-
cal doctrines of the New Testament—for example, the Second Coming, the
Last Judgment, the possibility of gaining or losing eternal life, and so on
(see chs. 20–22). In chapter 20, Augustine interprets the Last Judgment as
a divinely produced instantaneous “intuition” by each person of his or her
own relationship for or against God.

During the medieval period after Augustine, commentaries on the
book of Revelation were common—for example, those by Bede, Anselm,
Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Albertus Magnus, and Aquinas. The latter,
however, followed Origen, Augustine, and Albertus by using a spiritualized interpretation of the symbolic details of the Last Judgment (e.g., allegorizing the time, space, and other physical details of the judgment scenes from the New Testament). Unfortunately, Aquinas never completed the parts of the *Summa Theologiae* dealing with the last things, but in his earlier works he clearly rejected any literal interpretation of the millennium or the Antichrist as applied to contemporary history. In this regard, however, Aquinas did not lack opponents, in particular the notorious Joachim de Fiore (1130–1201), whose eschatological speculations in his *Expositio in Apocalypsum* and *Liber Figurarum* were to become the standard food for millennial and apocalyptic imaginative literature for five hundred years. Joachim, a Cistercian reformer of avowed piety, like Augustine envisioned history in three trinitarian epochs. But for Joachim, the epoch of the Son ended with the first Christian millennium, leaving human history to become the Age of the Holy Spirit beginning around 1260. In this final epoch, love and freedom would dominate, thus eliminating the need for a visible Church or an active life, and leading to a millennium of universal benevolence until the end of time. Although his visions were condemned by Pope Alexander IV in 1256, they had great influence on precursors to the Reformation, for example the Free Spiritual Franciscans of the thirteenth and the Hussites and Taborites of the fourteenth century, with the latter rejecting the pope as Antichrist and living in readiness for the Second Coming (see Cohn).

Perhaps the most famous literary texts dealing with eschatology during the medieval period were Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its epic journey through the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, and the various mystery plays dealing with the day of doom. Dante's work, although the best of many medieval efforts to visualize the afterlife as a contemporary journey through the ultimate state, did not directly make use of the apocalyptic tradition or attempt to portray the last days. Like similar visions attributed to St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Gregory, St. Brendan, or St. Patrick, the *Commedia* calls for a separate study of its implicit apocalyptic theology (see Gardner; and Herzman, in Emmerson and McGinn 398–413). More influential in the popular imagination were the numerous stagings of the Doomsday mystery play during the later Middle Ages. These were produced in villages throughout England and the Continent as the final act in a weeklong series of dramatizations of salvation history. These plays attempt to portray the events...
of the Second Coming, the resurrection of the body, the Last Judgment, and the final states through methods that express an awareness of the nonhistorical nature of the time, place, and action at the margin of eternity. They use a variety of symbolic techniques, which differ from country to country, to enact in imaginative form events that unite past, present, and future in an “apocalyptic allegory.” Using personifications and symbolic details (some created, others from the New Testament), these plays strain to portray the transcendent by means of the limited, the absolute by the relative, the eternal by the temporal. While using concrete details, they feel free to imagine the events with a freedom implicit in the allegorical interpretations of the last things by Aquinas and other contemporary theologians and preachers. They are the final step in a movement within the history of drama from mystery plays (based on Scripture) to morality plays (based on philosophy and theology) (see Leigh, “The Doomsday Mystery Play”).

The use of apocalyptic literature in theology exploded with the Reformation, especially within its more radical and political manifestations. Once again, there was a tension between those who interpreted the scriptural apocalypse within a central traditional eschatology (e.g., Luther, Calvin), whose efforts led to several historical identifications, such as that of the pope as Antichrist, and those who interpreted the same texts within a heterodox millennialism (e.g., Thomas Munzer and the Anabaptists). For the Anabaptists and others, the millennium called for the revolution of the poor against the rich, both in society and the Church, a prophecy enacted in the Peasants War of 1525. For his opposition to this movement, Luther was called the Antichrist by Munzer! A central point of debate among the more radical groups was whether the Second Coming was imminent or delayed by the millennium, which was often identified with their own political rule, such as the “reign of the saints” in the Commonwealth under Cromwell in England in the 1650s. These apocalyptic movements, however, produced many pamphlet wars, volumes of sermons, and endless tracts, but little literature of note. Perhaps the most famous literature to come out of the Reformation in England was John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress (1678), an excellent allegorical journey through an imaginative world of danger and fantasy by a Christian pilgrim which ends with a final scene suggesting through traditional symbols the final movement into the heavenly New Jerusalem.
In this narrative, the moral allegory with realistic details of the early part of *Pilgrim’s Progress* becomes in its final section an eschatological transformation story that uses many of the earlier images but on an anagogical level. For example, the city, the river, the hill, and the gate of the first part of the journey now reappear as the Celestial City beyond the River of Death leading to the Mighty Hill topped by a Heavenly Gate. Here the earlier visions of the goal become the Vision of God which brings about the final transfiguration of the sinner into the saved. But his imagination becomes blocked both by the ineffability of the vision and the fear of going beyond biblical imagery. The most the narrator can say is “Oh! By what tongue or pen can their glorious joy be expressed?” (Bunyan 161). The only comparable literature of the last things of the seventeenth century was the very popular descriptive poem by Michael Wigglesworth, “The Day of Doom” (1662), an expression in somewhat singsong verse of the Puritan imagination in colonial America.

With the rise of rationalism in the Enlightenment came two new forms of the apocalyptic imagination: the rational utopia and the rational satire. In the former, from Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1617) to Burnet’s *Theory of the Earth* (1690) to the millennial doctrines of the Cambridge Platonists and the eighteenth-century deists, one finds the beginning of a major shift from religious vision of the future to rational description of the present, from supernatural apocalypse by divine power to secular transformation by science (see Tuveson, *Millennium*; Nisbet). While not denying the doctrine of the Fall, these rationalist thinkers, most of them also Christians, developed a theory of progress toward a millennium in nature and in history. As Burnet says, “When the End of all Things approaches, Truth, being revived, may shine with double Lustre, as the Prelude of a future Renovation” (in Tuveson, *Millennium* 236). Burnet attempts to show the scientific basis for the events of the Last Days in the New Testament—for example, the earthly sources for a universal conflagration—thus completing the shift from an external Providence working through miracles to an immanent divine clockmaker working through nature. Thus is expressed the earlier form of a radically new vision of secular progress through science to a new heaven and a new earth. In citing passages from eighteenth-century thinkers like Thomas Sherlock, William Worthington, and Edmund Law linking
Providence with scientific progress, Tuveson concludes: “Thus it was that the Apocalypse, which at the beginning of the Reformation seemed only to augur a dark future for humanity, became, with the assistance of a new scientific philosophy of universal law, and encouraged by the great advances in knowledge of nature, the very guarantee and assurance of progress” (152). Besides, and against, these utopian visions were the rational satires of the great writers of the eighteenth century: Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad*, and Voltaire’s *Candide*. Of these three, Pope’s mock epic satire on the excesses of writing, imagination, education, and philosophy in his century makes explicit use of the book of Revelation to show the self-destructive power of the irrational use of reason. The conclusion of his *Dunciad* inverts the imagery of the Second Coming to show the ultimate apocalyptic excesses and cataclysmic contradictions of the new religion of progress (see Leigh, “Alexander Pope”).

Throughout the eighteenth century in England, the motif of the “Last Day” appeared in poetry following the American Wigglesworth’s “The Day of Doom” (1662), in, for example, Edward Young’s “The Last Day” (1714), preparing the way for similar themes in Romantic literature, such as Byron’s Gothic “Darkness” (1816) and Thomas Hood’s humorous “The Last Man” (1826). Such apocalyptic patterns have been traced by M. H. Abrams and others critics back to major poems of the Renaissance—such as the first book of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—and up through Dryden’s odes (c. 1683), James Thompson’s *The Season*, Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and William Cowper’s *The Task* (1784). Abrams also found that an apocalyptic “vision of a new world,” whether heavenly or earthly, was still at the center of poetry during the Romantic period. What he found to be most original was that this Romantic vision of a new world was, in line with that of the utopian rationalists of the previous century, primarily secular. In fact, his main conclusion was:

Faith in an apocalypse by revelation had been replaced by faith in an apocalypse by revolution, and this now gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition.... The mind of man confronts the old heaven and earth and possesses within itself the power... to transform them into a new heaven and a new earth, by means of a total revolution of consciousness. (Abrams, *Supernaturalism* 334)
According to Abrams, the Romantic poets at first identified this new earth with the ideals of the French Revolution, then, disillusioned by the Reign of Terror and the dominance of Napoleon, they identified the new earth with a new consciousness brought about by the creative imagination in their poetry. Abrams gives examples of early political apocalypse in Blake’s *French Revolution*, the end of Wordsworth’s *Descriptive Sketches*, and Shelley’s *Queen Mab*. (This political apocalypse was to be continued, ironically, by what Tuveson calls the “millenarian structure” of the *Communist Manifesto*, composed by Marx in England in 1848). The later imaginative apocalypse appeared in the “Prospectus” of Wordsworth which introduced his longer poems (“Paradise and groves / Elysian, Fortunate Fields . . . / For the discerning intellect of Man / When wedded to this goody universe / In love and hold passion, shall find these / A simple produce of the common day”). Similar sentiments in favor of an inner apocalypse through the imagination can be found in Coleridge’s “France” or “Dejection,” Blake’s *Jerusalem*, and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*.

During the Romantic period in France and England, the motif of the “Last Day” also made its way into the novel. In France, Jean-Baptiste Grenville wrote *Le Denier Homme* in 1805, which may have been one source for Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826). Just as her *Frankenstein* established the myth of the scientifically created monster, so *The Last Man* began the tradition in English fiction of “the Last Day.” Despite its convoluted plot and turgid style, the novel provided the century with a mythic image of the last survivors of a terrestrial apocalypse brought about by war and plague. Modeled on Percy Shelley, Byron, Clairmont, and Mary Shelley herself, the story ends with only Verney-Shelley alive as the last man on earth, living alone in his “wild dreams” and searching for eternal life: “Around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the death, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney—the last man” (Shelley 342). As W. Warren Wagar has shown, Shelley’s novel led to numerous stories and novels of apocalyptic setting and conflict during the rest of the nineteenth century. Perhaps best known are Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (1842, 1839), W. H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887), and William Morris’s utopian *News from Nowhere* (1891). More significant as the founding author of modern science
fiction is H. G. Wells, whose earliest novels were truly apocalyptic warning tales for a secular world, *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) (see Wagar ch. 2).

**A Theological Framework for the Study of Apocalyptic Literature**

**A Catholic Eschatology**

Within the four types of eschatalogical concepts provided by John Davenport, both Catholic and Protestant thinkers have recently attempted to make more intelligible the leading symbolic narratives of the Last Days within the Bible. Zachary Hayes’s *Visions of the Future* and Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Coming of God* both subtitle their works “Christian eschatology” and incorporate ideas that span Davenport’s third category of “apocalyptic” and fourth category of “radically historical” eschatology. Both explore the scriptural narratives, but only the Catholic Hayes provides an explicit philosophical basis for his systematic theological approach. He centers his philosophy on the notion of “human transcendence,” which derives from the human person’s status as a creature of God with an orientation to the Absolute beyond self, worldly goals, and death. Following the existentialists and Ernst Bloch, Hayes sees humans emerging from freedom in relation to other persons with hope for the future and as historically immersed in building the future. As a human, the person is born into a quest for meaning in time that is both objectively verifiable and subjectively open. Such a person uses symbolic and metaphorical language from the past and present to anticipate the absolute future in narrative form. Such an eschatological story is a “hopeful projection” but not literal knowledge of future details. The norm for such language for the Christian philosopher is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and its ground is hope in God’s absolutely certain promise.

Hayes divides his theological reflections on the biblical data and the philosophy of self-transcendence into four dimensions of eschatology: personal, historical, end of history, and the final condition. *Personal* eschatology deals with issues of death and encounter with the Absolute. Death in this theology is simultaneously experienced as a sign of sin, as the end of
personal history and the transformation to a new type of life, and as a final life choice in freedom that is meant to be a “final self-surrender” to the divine Mystery (based on hope in the death and resurrection of Christ). This final encounter with God in dying includes a definitive judgment (based on one’s life and divine mercy), leading to purgation and integration that are a preparation for final union, always with the possibility of human choice against God.

*Historical* eschatology provides a theology of history, politics, and radical hope for the human community. Hayes integrates a dialectical view of history that is incarnational, in which the positive progress of human history becomes part of the Kingdom of God, with a view that is also eschatological, in which history includes aspects of the “not yet” Otherness in the Kingdom, shown in the breakdowns of historical progress and the signs of the Cross. He discusses various theologies of politics, such as the early Moltmann (for revolution), Gilkey and Ratzinger (for reform), Pannenberg (the risen Christ is the “end of history”), and liberation theology, but merely points out the strengths and limits of each. His own approach tries to combine the categorical hope for the future of the political theologians with the radical hope of an absolute future of Rahner and Pannenberg, with its basis in the resurrection of Jesus inaugurating the Kingdom of God. Such an approach calls for a continued hope in human dignity and human effort (assisted by divine grace) to build a “community of loving persons” both on earth and in heaven, without absolutizing any human system. His symbol of such a vision is history as a spiral of hope.

The *end of history* deals with a theological understanding of the Parousia, the millennium, and the apocalyptic signs from the Bible. For Hayes, the central teaching is that the Parousia (or Second Coming) is a symbol of the end of history, as final moment, goal and purpose, and fulfillment, in which occurs in Christ the “self-transcendence of history into eternity.” Thus, the apocalyptic event is the “final breaking through of the victorious presence of divine grace that has been present throughout history . . . since the death and resurrection of Christ” (162). Following Catholic tradition, Hayes affirms that the final resurrection will include both a continuity of grace and person but also a radical break from the earthly past. The signs and the millennium are symbolic expressions of the unity of creation, history, and God in one providence that allows for both human and divine
freedom and in which the final judgments are loving encounters of human freedom with divine affirmation. Specific apocalyptic signs from Scripture (e.g., the Antichrist, the cosmic changes, persecution, etc.) are not to be interpreted as literal indicators of specific historical events but as suggesting perennial conflicts between Christian and anti-Christian forces, thus calling not for detailed predictions but for vigilance.

The **final condition** of salvation history includes the possibility of a definitive human choice against God, but the purpose of creation and salvation is the universal salvation of all people, which Christians are called to hope for. The essence of the final condition is eternal life in union with God and other persons within a transformed cosmos. Symbols of this final condition (e.g., kingdom, feast, wedding, paradise, new city, fullness of life, reconciliation, homecoming, etc.) point toward a transcendent interpersonal state that is communion, richness of life, and inclusiveness of all persons. Such a condition begins in the present life and is based on God’s personal love for all. Final union will include knowledge, love, and joy in all aspects of the human person, including a cosmic dimension in which God will be “all in all.” As both Christological and Trinitarian, such final happiness means that the risen Christ is present to all things.

**A Protestant Eschatology**

Jürgen Moltmann, the most famous Protestant theologian of hope and the last things, summarized his approach and systematic thoughts in *The Coming of God*. His approach differs from Hayes’s Catholic method by engaging more often in theological controversies but without a necessary link with a central tradition. He compares Christian concepts with various philosophical analogues, such as those of Hegel, but relies on no particular philosophy, except in places on Whitehead’s process notion of God. Moltmann’s main doctrine is that eschatology deals not so much with “last things” or “apocalyptic events,” but with “the new creation of all things . . . the remembered hope of the raising of the crucified Christ” and the “cosmic dwelling of God in creation” (xi). He rejects efforts to collapse eschatology into a study of only the present moment or of eternity. In fact, his primary focus in eschatology is God, as the God who is coming through promise and the Holy Spirit in the future as “eternal life and eternal time” (23) and who
freely “calls to life the history of new human becoming” (24). This God-centered approach does not neglect history but insists that history is becoming a “new thing” or “surprise” as God’s promise in the resurrection of Christ is fulfilled, a sort of “redemption of the future from the power of history” (45).

Like Hayes, Moltmann divides his study of eschatology into four dimensions, but two of them differ significantly from the former scholar’s categories: personal, historical, cosmic, and divine eschatology. Personal eschatology deals with the eternal life of the individual, not as merely a soul but as a whole person with hope in the Resurrection. Such a transformation is healing, completing, and reconciling, brought about through the Resurrection of Christ and leading to “entry into a life that is eternal” and to entry into a “new earth . . . the cosmic new creation of all things” (70). The death process for Moltmann is a complex phenomenon: as a natural event, it is part of being a creature in time; as the experience of sinners, it also includes the painful consequences of personal and structural sin. All human beings die in solidarity with creatures “waiting for redemption” by Christ, who vicariously died for all persons to bring about divine reconciliation and eternal life. Rejecting the notion of a purgative state or resurrection within the dying process as nonbiblical speculations, Moltmann affirms the movement after death into eternity in fellowship with the risen Christ.

Historical eschatology for Moltmann centers on the Kingdom of God, which begins in human history but must always be understood in relationship to divine freedom and initiative. Thus, Moltmann reviews at length various understandings of apocalypticism, messianism, and millenarianism which he rejects as limiting or nonbiblical. For him, apocalyptic scenes are primarily “mythical extrapolations and compensations for present experiences of strife and suffering,” not literal previews of the future (139). He also rejects any attempt to divide up history into epochs that would limit divine providence, allowing only a general overview of history from a Christian perspective as moving from “nature” to “grace” to “glory.” He critiques the political millenarianism of the Holy Roman Empire or of America as the “redeemer nation,” and the ecclesiastical millenarianism of Tridentine Catholicism, which he calls “over-realized eschatology” (184), and the epochal millenarianism of secular Enlightenment utopias. In answer to the question “Is millenarianism necessary?” he states that merely historical millennial
thinking is not necessary. But he affirms the power of eschatological mil-
lenarianism—if it is founded in Christ and his coming, if it builds hope in
resistance during suffering for the end-time, and if it is within the “com-
munity of Christ” struggling in hope. Thus, the Kingdom of God begins
now but is completed hereafter in the resurrection of the dead and the new
creation. All of this takes place not by merely human effort but through the
presence of God in time, moving from the presence of Christ now in the
Spirit and later in the resurrection of the body. When Moltmann asks, “Is
apocalypticism necessary?” the reply is that a secular apocalyptic of doom
is not Christian, but that a hopeful religious apocalypse centered on Christ
is necessary for theology. Such an apocalypse focuses on the word as mean-
ing “revelation” (not destruction) and as leading to hopeful resistance to
despair and to worldly power, always based on God’s promises in Christ.
As he summarizes, “Apocalypticism means that the whole creation partici-
pates in Christ’s tribulation . . . so that it may be drawn up into the cosmic
resurrection” (233). Thus, for Moltmann Christ’s Second Coming brings
about the end and fulfillment of the world (not vice versa), a final judgment
in which Christians have hope that all will be saved.

**Cosmic** eschatology studies the future of Creation as leading from
simple Creation through the Fall to a new Creation, which is characterized
by a new presence of God as “indwelling” in space and time, thus bringing
about a “new earth” in the image of God and a mutual interpenetration of
the divine and the creation. Through God’s eternal presence “in” the time
of creation is brought about a created participation in God’s eternity, which
makes the essence of time to be futurity, an openness to the indwelling of
God in the present. The *kairos* of the present moment is distinguished from
the eschatological moment, which is an exit from time into eternity, an end
and consummation of history, and divine indwelling in creation. Similarly
the cosmic *eschaton* will bring about the “end” of space in the presence of
God, whereby God will dwell in a “new heaven and a new earth.” Thus ev-
everything will exist “in God” without losing its identity through a mysterious
mutual indwelling. Historically, this final indwelling was foreshadowed by
God’s presence in the people and temple in the Jewish tradition, then in
the incarnate Christ both in history and in cosmos. In the ultimate future,
“creation loses its space outside God and attains to a place in God” (307).
This will call on God’s part for a sort of *divine* eschatological state, called

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“glory.” Glory is not merely God’s own self-glorification but is an interaction between God and human persons which is personal and Trinitarian. This final state of the “fullness” of God is best expressed in symbol or metaphor—for example, in images of wedding feasts or cosmic liturgies or the creative imagination of God or “the laughter of the universe” (339).