PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

WHY CATHOLIC THEOLOGY NEEDS FUTURE-TALK TODAY

The aim of my paper is to articulate and explain this one conviction. Taking seriously the future dimension present in every *now* has a great deal more to offer sound theology than has been explored and exploited heretofore. In short I am going to argue for a larger dose of sense-making future-talk in Roman Catholic theological endeavors. That means of course that I am referring to eschatology and the contribution it can make in certain crucial areas of current problematic.

First I must indicate briefly what I mean by the eschatology that I think could prove enlightening and helpful in contemporary theological dialogue. The term as I shall use it refers to a mode of understanding and discourse concerned with human needs in the present and their future fulfillment in the light of a faith. Thus I distinguish the perspective at work in eschatology from the projection that in futuristics is based on man's rational calculation and control of the present. The element of religious faith that is *directly* operative in eschatology makes the difference. And the believing I have in mind is that which was originally expressed in and now springs from the New Testament tradition as a visible phenomenon in human history, one with a beginning, a growth, and development until the present. That tradition is composed of people, their institutions, varied interrelations among both, and most of all a peculiar type of experience and language claiming to reveal the true situation of man and reality in general.[1] Precisely in this truth-claim, the

[1] The terminology is intentionally similar to that of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Cf. "Hermeneutics and Universal History" in *History and Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) p. 126; 149, note 37. By the prominence he gives to the category of event over word, Pannenberg seeks to ground revealed meaning in actual history. As a result of his conflict with the Bultmannians, a point can be made that badly needs articulation. The fundamental truth-claims of the Christian tradition do not arise solely from an interpretation given to cer-

Christian tradition of faith offers a view of human needs in the present and provides a glimpse of their fulfillment through a variety of images.[2]

Now it is an obvious fact that there are other ways of understanding man and other traditions of faith besides the Christian's. These too assess man's present needs in a perspective that makes a particular form of future fulfillment the goal toward which human existence gravitates. Marxism is one that is far too influential to be left unmentioned explicitly. The result is a dialectic on a theoretical level with profound consequences in practice. In this context Christians have an opportunity to make genuine contributions to mankind's collective efforts to achieve self-understanding and improvement. If I regard eschatology as an asset for those who see this task as important, it follows that the renewed emphasis on a future-oriented perspective in various areas of theologizing is not in my view simply another fad. It may well turn out to be no more than that for many but will hopefully be more permanent in its results than the popularized form of the death of God movement, which preceded it in this country. I shall maintain that a number of issues which have arisen in the so-called theology of hope might fruitfully be studied more in detail in various branches of theology where at times current problems are being discussed without much apparent progress. Not a few Roman Catholics find it difficult today to make up their minds *theologically* on certain crucial issues. There are so many unanswered and yet connected questions as a result of the

tain past events by privileged apostles, prophets, and visionaries. Those very events are not only indispensable but in themselves equiprimordially revelatory.

2 There have been few systematic efforts made by Roman Catholic scholars to offer principles to help in the process of distinguishing between biblical images and the future realities they foreshadow. An early essay of Karl Rahner is still the best; cf. "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions" in *Theological Investigations,* Vol. IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966) 323-46. J. Moltmann contrasts this eschatology by way of extrapolation with another type that sees the future contradicting the present rather than growing out of it. Cf. "Theology as Eschatology" in *The Future of Hope,* ed. by Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 13, note 19. I would call attention to the fact that the projection involved in futuristics and the extrapolation in Christian eschatology of the Rahnerian type differ in the direct role Christian faith plays for the latter in assessing realities of the present.

information-explosion. Any resolution of these difficulties would have to be judged by others on its own merits. But even an effort in this direction would help make a more convincing case for the importance of Christian faith and hope in the process whereby man seeks to humanize himself. Of course one can ask with good reason how maintaining the focus taken in the theology of hope can be of help in disputed theological issues of the present, issues that often seem far more concrete and pressing than future-talk indicates with all its characteristic vagueness.[3] After all, it is argued, the past is no more and the future is not yet; all that is real is in the present. Therefore talk of the future is talk of what is not. It would be better perhaps to speak of the potential, drive, or process leading to something more and different from the present; but that is still present-based discourse. Such objections the eschatologist must expect to hear time and again. Perhaps the best way one can reply to them is by doing so in the context of concrete problems theologians confront at present.

Eschatology and the Resurrection

Let us consider first the enigma of death and its finality. Few prospects disconcert men more today even though the resulting questionableness of human self-sufficiency is often brushed aside.[4] Current interest in para-psychic phenomena and the near cult of the occult bear witness to a strong preoccupation of a significant segment of the population with the mystery of the hereafter for the individual.

It is too facile a way out to say that the whole matter of death and personal survival is better bracketed by the theologian until other manageable problems are dealt with more satisfactorily. Pros-

[3] Langdon Gilkey has rightly criticized the vagueness inherent in future talk which asserts that God will be rather than that he is. Cf. "The Universal and Immediate Presence of God" in *The Future of Hope, op. cit.*, 89-91.

[4] For a sharp contrast on the credibility of personal survival, cf. Milton McC. Gatch, *Death—Meaning and Mortality in Christian Thought and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) p. 184; and Ignace Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) p. 186.

pects of a better future after this life did at times distract Christians from the task of building a better earth. This Marxist charge is impossible to gainsay honestly even if it is often grossly exaggerated. Similarly if no more than the desire for happiness motivates conduct, this will destroy altruism and heroism exercised for the sake of one's neighbor without thought of gain. Still desire and fear are not to be totally excluded as factors of rational motivation; they can and often do originate from *healthy* concern for self, regardless of religious confession or its lack. Deliberately employed and prudently evoked, they are recognized as capable of leading to a socially more desirable situation, one with little or any real resemblance to Walden II. But fear and desire make no sense in this context without reference to the future. On these grounds I suggest that theology should not hesitate to introduce both much more explicitly in the discussion of death and its import for individual and collective responsibility for the future of man and his world before God.

Medieval theology made at times pretentious claims to know *clearly and in detail* what possible alternatives lie beyond the grave. But this is not as serious a danger for sound Roman Catholic theology today. The reason is that a much more critical look has been taken at the principle of revealed analogy, which was the warranty for one's transposing some conditions of this life by way of extrapolation to the next.[5] Helping build a better future and imaging God on the face of the earth are concerns that must form the subject matter for sound theology. Therefore attention must be given to the types

[5] Heinrich Ott has reasserted the importance of studying both eternity in relation to time and the interim-situation of the dead; cf. "Philosophical Theology as Confrontation" in *The Future of Philosophical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971) 164-65. John Macquarrie thinks the term *eternal life* deserves more attention from eschatologists; cf. "Eschatology and Time" in *The Future of Hope, op. cit.*, p. 123. This does not imply for either a direct admission of the principle of revealed analogy, however reduced in application. It does however indicate that Christian systematicians are now more ready than once seemed to be the case to consider what is meant by being "with the Lord" after death. For a repetition of old objections to the use of this principle, see the recent English translation of Helmut Thielicke's *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 195-202; 213-17.

of motivation that will inspire generosity and heroism, especially when these are accompanied with the danger of shortened life spans or even imminent death itself.

Can the ultimate meaning of human life and history be understood even by faith without an explicit introduction of the fact of human mortality? With Jürgen Moltmann I would argue that it cannot.[6] On this point his criticism of Ernst Bloch is well taken and correct. Both of them agree that the future is not simply a figment of man's imagination or a projection of what man can now do through his powers of calculation and manipulation. In other words the future is in their view a powerful dimension man confronts in every *now*, knowingly or not, and one he ought to take into account when attempting to assess the meaning *of* and *in* history.[7] Faith seeking understanding must take great care to avoid confusing biblical images of the future with the reality they point to and truth they mediate. But if eternal life and death are ignored or treated as side issues, the future is not given its rightful place in Christian thought, life and worship. To break that relative silence about the future of the individual after death, I submit there is a need for a theology less concerned that in so doing its practitioners may by some be dismissed as unscientific and pre-modern. The non-Christian has a right to decide for himself with regard to the challenge Christian faith poses in terms of self-understanding and world-view.[8] But if he is to have a fair chance to exercise that right, a Christian must be more explicit and positive in facing the issue of life after death.

Man will likely continue to concern himself with the prospect and meaning of death whether Christians speak of them or not in

[6] Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and Confidence: A Conversation with Ernst Bloch" in *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Chas. Scribners Sons, 1969) p. 163.

[7] In the Gifford Lectures of 1955, Rudolf Bultmann tried to help man find meaning *in* history even though frustrated in any effort to grasp the meaning *of* history as a whole. Cf. *History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1962) 154-55. Both should be possible for man in some true sense if the resurrection of Jesus is regarded as proleptic.

[8] Both possibility of self-understanding and world view are needed categories if the revelation mediated by the New Testament tradition is to be correctly described from the perspective of its present recipient. It is not a case of a complete disjunction between Rudolf Bultmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

the light of the resurrection of Jesus. Humanity, however, will be deprived of the contribution Christians can make to the undertaking unless the perspective of Christian eschatology is brought to bear more positively and credibly.[9] It is not enough, on the other hand, to speak of the meaning of history and dismiss completely future-talk of the type formerly designated by the term "The Last Things." There are no convincing signs that man has advanced so far beyond the religiosity of the Psalms and other Wisdom literature as to need this discourse no longer. Similarly the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians still provides a perspective in which the Christian is to hope for the future.

Who is man and what is the meaning of his existence? This question underlies much of contemporary culture with all its tension. Who am I and what does my life mean? This is the root of the questionableness all experience from time to time in the depth of their psyche. The certainty of death and simultaneous uncertainty as to its time and circumstances characterize man's quest for identity.[10] This anxiety shared by Christians and non-Christians alike provides a theology more sensitized to eschatological concerns one of its best chances to speak to the felt needs and concerns of mankind at the present moment. Here the faith called forth by the Christian tradition with its challenge to view man in a relation of dependence on God finds resonance in the quest for self-understanding that characterizes all human spirits. Can one with good reason freely decide to view the personal fate of Jesus of Nazareth in death and resurrection as a paradigm for all men? In answering this question affirmatively Christian anthropology and eschatology meet. There are many topics that could fittingly be discussed by Christians and secular humanists. Death and resurrection as affording a view of

[9] For a helpful treatment of both the meaning and the verifiability of religious discourse, cf. Raeburne Heimbeck, *Theology and Meaning: a Critique of Metatheological Scepticism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1969). Eschatology will not automatically be seen as significant or credibly grounded. To make a reasonable case for its being both is a task challenging Christian theologians of the present.

[10] Carl Braaten describes the resurrection as an answer to the question of man's more adequate self-definition. Cf. *Christ and Counter-Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) p. 52.

history with a goal anticipated in Jesus Christ—this is an element in such a dialogue that deserves to be placed in the forefront of discussion. For as Jürgen Moltmann has pointed out, it has a unique way of bringing the presuppositions of both groups directly to the surface.[11]

My line of reasoning takes it for granted that there are perspectives required for a view of man and reality to be Christian. This is not the same as holding that there are specifically Christian tenets of faith and morals. I am convinced there are such but that is not the point.[12] Here I simply submit that the identification of the future destiny of man with the fate of Jesus cannot be dispensed with in a world-view that wishes to be faithful to the only historical tradition that gave rise to the adjective Christian in the first place. What follows will argue that an eschatological perspective helps when one is confronted with certain unresolved questions connected with the fate of Jesus in death and resurrection.

There is a well-known difference of opinion when it comes to stating what precisely the term resurrection means in the case of Jesus. Does it imply at least an empty tomb to ground the kernel of historicity in the accounts of Easter faith or at least to assure that the psychological conditions for the possibility of Jesus' followers' even thinking of a resurrection were fulfilled? The answer of some is in the affirmative.[13] But for others things are notably different. Resurrection is still conceived of and affirmed in faith without the felt necessity of affirming any change in the dead body of Jesus.[14]

For both sides the issue involves trying to say what the resurrection of Jesus means in language that not only believers can understand. At stake is the relation of believing faith and historical sci-

[11] J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 174-75.

[12] I have attempted to indicate some of the grounds for this conviction elsewhere; cf. "Does Faith Call for the Church? An Answer to the Critique" in the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 25 (1970) 212-17.

[13] Raymond Brown, "The Resurrection and Biblical Criticism" in *God, Jesus, and Spirit* (edited by D. Callahan; New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) p. 118.

[14] B. van Iersel, "The Resurrection of Jesus—Information or Interpretation?" in *Concilium* 60 (1970) p. 66.

ence. Christian theologians, Roman Catholics no less than others, are not in agreement as to what a lack of contradiction between the two in this case actually implies.

It would be naive to assume that the controversy will be resolved by the introduction of eschatological assertions. But what is in question and what is not might thereby be notably clarified. That would involve an articulation of a faith held in common. And that faith comes to this. The power, benevolence, and trustworthiness of the future, that is God, took hold of Jesus in such a way and influenced his person in such wise that even in death it did not let go. He was rather preserved through death in a new life that amounted to more than being thought about by his followers and much more than a sort of personal immortality for himself alone. For in that life he was and is confessed to be the source of hope for others through and after their death. Now such faith arises from a free decision, but its credibility is something the theologians involved in the dispute are actually striving to bring out more adequately. Still in holding to it they can do so with conviction and yet indicate the serious, unresolved questions regarding the historicity of accounts, biological dilemmas, etc. that necessarily arise as soon as the implications of this confession are reflected on. Often expression of belief in the resurrection is followed by an embarrassed silence on the part of hearers. But if the future is always seen as exerting a strong hold on the present, then a resurrection with the unresolved question of an empty tomb is still clearly recognizable as both an article of faith and as a perspective in which man's destiny is presented for understanding by believer and non-believer alike. Christian and especially Roman Catholic theology should be more than a reflection of the prevailing culture or counter-culture. In the present context that implies one thing. After the confusion inevitably arising from the information explosion it must state as clearly as it can the minimum its practitioners are convinced it means when it says "He rose on the third day in accord with the Scriptures," for which reason believers look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age. A more perceptive and serious consideration of what today goes by the name of Christian eschatology has yet much to teach with regard to the way of going about this. It is however another one of those

tasks that is unfinished and more incomplete than most cases of faith and hope seeking contemporary understanding.

There is as well another illustration of this same general contention. It is one that seems particularly appropriate in this context. If the reality affirmed by belief in the resurrection is not simply the continued existence and life of Jesus, it is rather his centrality in inspiring hope for life on the part of all humans. Once again the focus of attention is on death and survival.

Ignace Lepp has pointed to an analogy between other forms of animal life and man in terms of the latter's desire for survival on a personal level. He expresses the presumption of some sort of continuity between the historically observable success of the evolutionary drive in other forms of life and the credibility of man's survival after death in some form of individuality.[15] Here precisely the difficulty arises.

Theologians have not been able to reach a consensus as to what resurrection means in the case of the individual human being who hopes for it in Christ. Is survival akin to the immortality that many philosophers have often accorded to man as a spiritual being? To Oscar Cullmann it is clearly not.[16] But James Barr may likewise be right precisely in arguing that immortality would indeed have been intelligible and cannot as a consequence be excluded *a priori* from the thought forms of the original heralds of the resurrection.[17] Referring once more to what I previously designated the principle of revealed analogy applying some conditions holding here to the hereafter, Johannes Metz thinks the Christian view of the future may differ from others precisely in that it knows less rather than more in terms of comparisons with other philosophies of history.[18] Nor can one forget the Rahnerian view of death as removing the obstacles to a cosmic relation between the human being and the rest of matter.[19]

[15] Ignace Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries, op. cit.*, p. 186.

[16] Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

[17] James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962) 146-47.

[18] Johannes Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 96-97.

[19] Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).

While these questions remain unresolved, there is a real possibility that the faith underlying Christian theological endeavors (as distinct from religious studies in general) may be needlessly obscured. The historical and philosophical implications of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come are not an area where theologians agree today. Roman Catholics are no exception. But trying to make a more convincing case for any of the opposing sets of convictions on this matter is not the work of scientific understanding alone but of faith as well. If the eschatological moment of that faith is expressed more distinctly and positively, then something else has a better chance of standing out as well. And that is this: the personal future that is God can preserve human being in and through death. Or to put it somewhat differently, such salvation is a common conviction of faith despite the serious difficulties this confession gives rise to as well as differences in the way of understanding what that survival actually entails.

If the future is real as a dimension of man's present existence, then it is not simply a projection of his unconscious or subconscious. Nor does it result purely and unqualifiedly from a sense of alienation of man from his own personal dignity, however profound that alienation may actually be at present. The future is rather to be conceived of as the power, benevolence, and personal trustworthiness of the not-yet in human existence and purposeful conduct. The hold of that future on man in the present is a legitimate, indeed an imperative subject matter for theological investigation and scrutiny—one with at least as much claim to be heard as any past tradition. Now what that future communicated in offering itself to all men by way of promise in Jesus is what Christians believe and hope will be the fate open to each man beacuse of Jesus—this despite the fact that all die. Eschatology without consideration of the existence of God is all too easily a utopian escapism.[20] But in what sense does the Christian eschatologist assert the existence of God? I would reply that he does so in this manner.

He systematically and methodically relates man's existence in the here and now, in particular man's present needs, to the not-yet.

[20] Similarly Christian eschatology needs sound biblical exegesis; otherwise the temptation will be too strong and man will project a Father of Jesus Christ in his own image and likeness.

But what does this compound adverb turned substantive have as referent? It points to a dimension of the present: a power irreducible to the potentialities of man and nature, and a benevolent horizon toward which man moves as he lives in trust, acts, and suffers. To put it positively, in this context God is the future as the incalculable and uncontrollable reality that summons man in every now to the process of humanization and offers itself as the grounds for hope of any success. Because of its call to trust, that future in its transcendence is accepted and addressed as "You" rather than "It."[21] In the view of Christian faith that personal future communicated itself to man by way of promise and foretaste in Jesus and his Spirit. The influence of these two forms a milieu in which man lives and from which he draws strength in his purposeful conduct and endurance. But that milieu arises precisely because of the hold exercised by a powerful, benevolent, trustworthy future on man presently. And that hold, because of the promise made in Jesus, is believed to be strong enough to bring man through the gates of death without annihilation or loss of personal identity.

A future perspective for viewing man's mortality and survival does not in any way remove the need for faith in accepting a hope of life everlasting through Jesus Christ. It does however offer the possibility of asserting a conviction in language that those bothered by the adequacy of any image from this side of the grave can adopt without abandoning either their faith or theological uncertainty and hesitancy. In this sense an eschatological perspective has a great deal to commend it. For it should help theology appear as a serious human discipline proceeding from an identifiable faith and seeking understanding such that others without that faith can grasp both what is being asserted and what is being hoped for.

The power of language to express what needs to come to speech is a conviction of Heidegger that he made abundantly clear already in *Sein und Zeit* and one that has been repeated with even more consistency in later works. This is a point on which both he and an otherwise radically opposed school of linguistic analysis are clearly

21 Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "The Future as New Paradigm of Transcendence" in *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Chas. Scribners Sons, 1969) 177-99.

in agreement. Sometimes in the midst of theological controversy the very terms in which the lack of consensus is expressed keep either side from finding a perspective in which a solution is likely or even possible. In my view the New Hermeneutic is not simply another phenomenon without lessons that theologians should learn as they grope with very concrete problems like death and resurrection.[22] Eschatological language, aside from echoing that of the New Testament, has the additional value of transposing the terms of debate concerning man's destiny into a common horizon of the future embracing both the participants and their discourse. To the demands of that horizon the language of all camps could re-order itself with the hope of making better sense within the confines of conventional theological dialogue. There might as well be a side effect that should not by any means be overlooked. Talk of death and resurrection in that horizon is of a kind the non-Christian might have a chance of recognizing as challenging, far from self-evident, and remarkably comprehensive in all that it implies and stands for. In short, such talk might well be taken more seriously.

Eschatology and the Church

There is a second major area of contemporary problematic that merits consideration—that of ecclesiology. In this context as well current disagreement of considerable proportion would, I think, take on a new and more hopeful dimension if eschatological concerns were brought more effectively to bear on the issues involved.

One of the significant advances in Roman Catholic theology during the past decade has involved taking another look at the reality of the Church. The construct "People of God" was introduced into systematic theology and popularized with great effect. As a result hitherto unnoticed nearsightedness and pride were brought clearly into focus in the lives and thought forms of a tradition that had identified the Church of Jesus Christ with itself in far too unnuanced a fashion. In the United States it is to the credit of ecclesi-

22 For a helpful study of this theological movement, cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

ologists like Avery Dulles[23] and Richard McBrien[24] that the recognition of the ecclesial character of other Christian confessional groups was pursued and developed in a valuable contribution to Catholic theologizing. But what is perhaps even more noteworthy is the distinction made repeatedly in the past years since the Council between the Church and the Kingdom of God.

There was an unfortunate tendency to identify the two or at least a failure to distinguish them on the warranty of the biblical word. This can be attested to in Roman Catholic theology and practice. It was no small feat to make this distinction one that educated Catholics are becoming much more familiar with today. Those who have worked toward this goal are deserving of real credit. Nor can their efforts be relaxed. Paul Tillich[25] and others who recall the Protestant principle are right in this. Only too often the nimbus of the divine blinds one to the inevitable sinful defects of the Church, especially in its pastoral practice. There is in fact a real danger of idolatry in accepting as divine what is in fact not merely human but sinfully so. The real distinction between election to the Church and election to God's Kingdom can hardly be repeated too often.[26] Its implications have only begun to be drawn out as the inchoate character of a theology of dissent indicates only too clearly.[27] A cry of dismay is still raised when the distinction is made in some circles. This indicates the deep roots that the contrary view had in the minds and hearts of at least a notable segment of the Roman Catholic community in this country. It was renewed contact with biblical studies that led to seeing the distinction once again.

Perhaps however a biblically based eschatology has something more to offer to the contemporary theological scene as Christians

23 Avery Dulles, "Church, Churches, Catholic Church" in *Theological Studies* 33 (1972) 199-234.

24 Richard McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

25 Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957).

26 It is a point made most effectively by Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

27 Cf. Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Not What Catholic Hospitals Ordered" in *America* 125 (1971) 510-13; and Paul E. McKeever, "New Hospital Code Ignores Reality of Theological Dissent" in *The Long Island Catholic* 10 (1971) pp. 1, 9.

strive to express more adequately their belief concerning the Church. If idolatry is a perversion so too is blasphemy. If a failure to recognize the finite and even morally wrong as worlds different from the infinity of God and his goodness is a temptation, so too is a failure to acknowledge his active presence where it is realized. That presence and submission to it are not found solely in communities of Christian believers and much less in all of the individual members thereof. The Kingdom of God with full obedience to it is yet future but the Church exists to point to that coming victory of God and to do so effectively. Indeed the faith and hope that the promise of God's reign generates and seeks to intensify, purify, and multiply in the Church are already a foreshadowing of his Kingdom. To put it in the form of a question, does God already, even though imperfectly because of sin, exercise his reign in the lives of believers not simply as individuals but as a community? The answer is affirmative. This does not imply that he finds obedience nowhere else or that at times he must not work over against the sin of the Church itself. The consequence is that a close bond must be recognized between the Kingdom of God in the future and the Church of the present. This is not, I take it, a truism readily admitted by all theologians today.

Perhaps clarity at least will be enhanced by putting the matter in the following way. A crucial problem facing any eschatologist is this. If the future which must become the focus of attention in hope is so different from the present, does that future in any way influence the present? Is it in any true sense transcendent or is it reducible to a projection of present human and natural powers, some recognized and some as yet undetected? The Christian eschatologist, be he of the type of Jürgen Moltmann or Karl Rahner, argues that the future is more than man and the powers the latter now possesses or can come up with later.[28] But granted that, does that future exert a guiding influence on the present that should somehow be able to be detected even if not fully calculated? Both answer "Yes" over against the efforts of Ernst Bloch, for whom the future points out endless possibilities to man without serving as a source of direction

[28] For a clear exposition of the contrast between the two, cf. Carl Braaten, *Christ and Counter-Christ, op. cit.*, p. 21.

toward one rather than another. If the future which is God's acts as a source of attraction at present, it casts its shadow ahead of itself and has a hold or influence on the present. That future acts on those who do not advert to it, but it influences as well in a crucial way those who do recognize it in the faith and hope evoked by Jesus. If the power, benevolence, and trustworthiness of the future call to man in a special way in the Church proclaiming the Gospel, then that Church already shares something of God's tomorrow today. Indeed to see nothing of the divine operative in the Church as leading to the Kingdom is as blasphemous as failure to distinguish the two is idolatrous.

If one wishes to assess the relation between the call to God's Kingdom and the Church's mission, it is imperative to view the nexus in the context of what Christians believe regarding both. What needs to be brought out is how the Church is viewed by believing theologians as related to the future of the world to come. How in other words is the Church related to one's believing in God's Kingdom? Does the Church enter into what is believed? Concretely what does it mean to *believe in the Church* as Christians say they do in the creed?

The question seemed not so difficult when Roman Catholics distinguished far less radically in their theology between Kingdom and Church. But are the two related in such a way that the Church stands in the relation of *needed* promoter of God's Kingdom in the present? I would answer affirmatively without hesitation. The need for a distinct sabbath and a distinct Church will remain as long as the Kingdom of God calls for man's recognition of the provisionality of the present order.[29] That Kingdom requires the Church if secular society is not to "absolutize its institutions, abandon its secularity, and exercise a tyranny over mankind."[30] Far from failing to take into account the sinfulness and infidelity of the Church in its leaders and other members, this position with its eschatological perspective implies or brings with it a sense of urgency to overcome complacency with present defects. But the defects assume an importance only

[29] Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 92.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

because of the nexus between Church and Kingdom. And that nexus is a reality of faith rather than evident reflection of facts.

In this I am pointing to one element that must be present in belief that is integrally Christian. Faith involves the acceptance of persons and events as more than they can apodictically demonstrate themselves to be. Those persons and events are historical but not simply in the sense that they are out of the past or expected in the future. They are to be found in the present likewise. Man's need of liberation from sin and death is one grounded in the humanity individuals possess and encounter. Faith makes truth-claims not merely of what has happened for men and what will happen on their behalf. It claims as well to offer a view of the here and now as influenced by Jesus Christ in his present sphere of sovereignty. In the latter he deals with the world through word, sacrament, and the sending forth of Christians and in it too he finds obedience even before his Parousia.[31] Faith presents events and persons of the present as on their way to a future they will share with the Risen Christ. But any attempt to remove sinful humanity of the present (and therefore a Church in need of conversion), from the realm of realities presented for belief in a definite salvific perspective by Christian faith is inconsistent. The reason is that it was for us and our salvation that the events giving rise to Christian faith in the first place are believed to have taken place. The Church is to foster that tradition of faith and hope. It thus strives in its weakness to challenge mankind and not simply to be challenged. As such it is presented not by itself but by the author of faith for belief. This means it is presented as more than a community of the baptized who believe in the Lordship of Jesus. It claims a God-given mission to challenge the rest of mankind to consider the lot of humanity as one that because of Jesus Christ is not limited to the span of time between birth and death.

The Christian does not believe God's Kingdom comes independently of the preaching of the Gospel. It is one thing to expect the Kingdom exclusively through the Church's operation; belief in such a case does confuse Church and Kingdom. It is quite another

31 Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (London: SCM Press, 1971) p. 117.

to reverse the scales and anticipate the Kingdom as coming altogether or even primarily despite the Church's efforts.

Many are understandably appalled at the opportunities the Christian churches have failed to take advantage of for the sake of furthering Christ's reign in the past. Others are discouraged at what seems to them to be little better performance in the present. But there is a theological question that deserves to be posed at this point. Does the Christian believe that the Church under God is conducive to the coming Kingdom or not?

I take it the answer must be an affirmative. I wish however to indicate what seem to be the major reasons for hesitating to include this among other truths accepted in faith despite its inclusion in the creed. These are the human character, or the sinful state, or the historical nature of the Church. None of these three offers grounds in my view for justifying a refusal to accept the Church as more than it can demonstrate itself to be—a special agent or instrument of Christ in promoting the Kingdom of God.

Christians believe that the human existence of the man Jesus was more than it appeared and that in it a challenge came from God Himself to accept the servant as one who would be Lord. Neither his historicity in time and space nor his human character precludes his being as man a saving object of belief (however much he was originally and must become over and over again a subject meeting the believer).[32] Faith in the communion of saints implies that the men and women one sees are accepted as more than what they evidently seem to be. To regard all men of good will as somehow God's people and not simply gracious neighbors one must go beyond appearances though remaining in the present. As a result of these and other similar considerations belief in the Church should not be viewed as necessarily inimical to the divine character of the object of revelation and faith. Indeed failure to accept the Church in the saving truth of Jesus cannot in the long run do other than hinder the effectiveness of the believing community's witness to the God who is

[32] Karl Barth pointed out how important it is for theologians to recall that the object of their investigation is the subject encountered in faith. Cf. "Ein Briefwechsel mit Adolf von Harnack" in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten: Gesammelte Vorträge,* III (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957) p. 10.

to come. An eschatological perspective views the Church at times despite itself but nevertheless really as God's saving community and not simply as a community of the saved or at times a community blocking the salvation of others. I suggest that realistic ecclesiology will be better off with that perspective and feel Roman Catholic theologians at present less inclined to deny this than to neglect it.[33]

Eschatology and Dogmatic Formulae

Yet a third area can be located in contemporary theological problematic where a more serious and consistent application of an eschatological perspective should prove useful. I refer to the ongoing discussion regarding the nature and limits of dogmatic formulations. Historical consciousness was the discovery of the nineteenth century researchers into the nature of hermeneutics and interpretation.[34] For a long time it appeared as the *enfant terrible* capable of being ignored in Roman Catholic circles because of a conviction that faith's articulation in dogma possesses a cultural transcendence allowing one to speak with very little qualification or hesitation about immutable revealed truths. The impact of the ascendency of history as a discipline in our country has changed this to a marked degree. The theological system accustomed to articulate its conviction and understanding in terms assumed to be transcendent and invariable with time is reeling under the blows.[35]

Now historical consciousness indicates an awareness on man's part that any human observer is as such limited by his own background, environment, presuppositions and perspectives in his view of the real. This restraining influence is no less exercised, albeit

[33] It was by and large neglected in the four papers that dealt with the mission of the Church in the twenty-fifth convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America; cf. *Proceedings of the CTSA* 25 (1970) for treatments by Gregory Baum, Killian McDonnell, Carl Peter, and Richard McBrien.

[34] For a helpful survey of the development of this conviction, cf. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1969).

[35] A most perceptive analysis from the point of view of a Christian philosopher has been published by John Smolko; cf. "The Hermeneutic Event: Philosophy and Theology" in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 44 (1970) 31-54.

often unreflectively, when one deals with the real in a context claiming to be revelatory of man's basic condition. As a result the understanding of such an observer is contextual and imperfect. Conversely, historical consciousness refers as well to the understood, insofar as the latter is grasped more as what is in the process of becoming than as an individual member of a category of being that remains unchanged. In other words with varying degrees of explicitness, historians and philosophers of the present century have emphasized at very least how cautious one must be when ideas and judgments are proposed as universally intelligible and verifiable.

It is in this context that the most respected practitioners of theology feel obliged to write of the survival of dogma and pose questions regarding the historical consciousness present in and needed for all subsequent interpretation of dogmatic formulae.[36] In a similar but different vein others explain why in their view conciliar or papal definitions of faith cannot be infallible, and the reason is not merely that all human agents are limited whatever their office but as well that no language can as a matter of fact convey infallible truth. And the latter means truth that will never need to be contradicted in a changing future for the sake of the Gospel. To such considerations many members of the Roman Catholic community react in favor of a literalism demanding a return to the Baltimore Catechism with very little deviation.

The foregoing is a description of a real phenomenon. One group identifies dogmatic formulae, much as fundamentalists do in the case of the written Scriptures, with the Word of God pure and simple. The other makes a clear distinction between the Word of God and the formulae in which it is expressed.[37] The difference has to do with the reality that both believe sustains the Church as agent promoting the Kingdom. One has to have a fair degree of optimism to call what is taking place creative tension. Perhaps a better evaluation is that

[36] Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

[37] Of course Pope John XXIII did as well in his opening address to the Second Vatican Council; cf. *AAS* 54 (1962) 792. This position receives strong support from T. M. Schoof in *A Survey of Catholic Theology: 1800-1970* (Glen Rock: Newman, 1970).

it is a pain, suffering and alienation out of which alone understanding is at times possible.[38]

I do not argue that both sides are equally matched. Nor do I presume to decide which alone belongs to or in the Church. Both are in my view necessary correctives of possible factionalism much worse than now prevails. Eschatology will not completely resolve the issue and its attendant strife. But it can and should help. I do not claim that no Catholics have suggested this before. But I do maintain that Catholic theologians have not as yet sufficiently put eschatology to the test in concrete areas of dispute within their Church today.

Any language, but especially that of a religious tradition like Christianity, has an important past as well as a present. It is the power of that past which a tradition mediates and which it challenges man to experience. For the Christian, that power does not crush. It rather enables one to understand himself and the whole world. That power in short is God making his promises in Jesus Christ.

What historical consciousness implies is that individuals at any moment of that past, whatever their ecclesiastical office or title, were limited in perspective. This is beyond question despite the fact that it is often questioned in some supposed service to dogma. That the same individuals, given this limitation, did not hear God's word speaking in power, benevolence and trustworthiness is even on a purely logical level of discourse an unwarranted inference. H. Richard Niebuhr pointed this out very convincingly long years ago.[39] Being conditioned does not exclude the fact that what one experiences is real and not a figment of his imagination. Nor does it exclude that the experienced may well have universal implications for others, who are equally conditioned in their freedom but in a different fashion. Neither the fact nor the validity of a claim from the past

[38] Christians as well as Marxists have a right to look for understanding emanating from suffering and alienation because the cross-resurrection pattern is the law of history.

[39] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 13-14. Although this reference is to the sixth printing of the 1960 paperback edition, the original was published in 1941.

is thereby vindicated. But their non-exclusion on these grounds is something well worth injecting into the present discussion among Roman Catholics.

For it is important to remove needless obstacles to faith's having a fair chance when men are challenged to believe in One whose call reaches them through historically conditioned language. In that sense such considerations as these are a positive contribution to efforts on behalf of a new quest of credibility called for if Christian faith is to be as responsibly free as its Author intends. But it is not just that historical conditioning is no conclusive argument against the truth-claims of a conditioned tradition. There is more.

From a linguistic tradition and not primarily or exclusively despite it, Christians today seek direction. Otherwise they run the needless risk of projecting a Utopian future rather than awaiting and working for the Kingdom of God operative already in the here and now.

Eschatology can help theological hermeneutics (which is after all what is being practiced in the debate regarding the binding character of past dogmatic formulae) in this sense. It can call attention to the fact that any formula with the claim of abiding truth can only be understood in relation to world history and that means to its own future.[40] Because of its power and incalculability notwithstanding its trustworthiness, because in short it is God's and God, that future makes the present questionable and scientific views in the present likewise. These defending the adequacy of dogmatic formulae forget this too readily. So often do others who argue against the ability of those same formulae to serve as guides that cannot prove fundamentally false in the future or need to be contradicted for the sake of the Gospel. Taken to the extreme, of course, this caution I am recommending would indicate that because of the unknown future nothing can be scientifically verified or falsified. That however is a perversion of eschatological awareness. In itself the latter is simply a healthy corrective to tendencies to accept tentative conclusions too quickly. Future-talk in this case recalls something that needs to be

[40] On this I share the position taken by Wolfhart Pannenberg in "Hermeneutics and Universal History" *op. cit.*, p. 149.

asserted more positively and credibly after the information explosion. That is this.

The God who is man's future is one whose word speaks historically out of the past into the here and now. His powerful presence and incalculable saving activity in Jesus and the Spirit are mediated in a language that is at once the indispensable and unfailing bearer of truth and as well the limited medium of human communication. Eschatology should keep theologians from feeling constrained to choose one or the other of these characteristics of the Christian linguistic tradition and help them live critically but really with both. In this sense it has far more to commend it than has hitherto been realized and offers hope of a theological future better than the present or past.

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