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Eschatological Apologetics

The Millennium offers a tremendous apologetic opportunity for Christians. Profound reflection on the prospects for the future of our world, by those of all faiths and none, provides a starting-point for Christians to affirm their hope for the future God has promised, in ways which connect deeply and relevantly with the concerns of others.

The state of the art

On the eve of the third millennium there is a pervasive sense that it has all got away from us; we are on a slippery slope into a future that will be the awful consequence of our folly or hubris – a future of global warming and ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, world overpopulation, poverty, famine, epidemic disease, superbugs, nuclear proliferation, genocidal hatred, ethnic cleansing – generally the degrading of human and other creaturely life if not the obliteration of it all. While we are still compelled by a techno-optimism, particularly in the area of communications technology which has enabled an exponential expansion in the rate and scope of communication and fuelled the thrust towards ever greater globalization, this expansion has meant even greater control over the individual and the community by the powerful and has resulted in an information overload which is paralysing in its effect. The other main optimism factor is, of course, economic; it is the age of consumerism: ‘pick-and-mix’ freedom to choose and purchase everything from groceries to lifestyles and religions, but in which the so-called free market manipulates the choosers and forces smaller producers and sellers to the wall. If techno-optimism suggests that we can create virtual worlds at the click of a mouse, it also paradoxically makes us wonder what is real, or if reality is only skin-deep. If econo-optimism suggests that everything has its price and can be bought, paradoxically, it breeds apathy in the feeling that anything multinational or global is simply beyond our power to change or influence.

Accordingly, on the eve of the millennium we are not only postmodern but also post-optimistic. We may be a global community in some respects but pessimism is accentuated by the way groups and communities talk past one another or, worse, find their identity over-against one another. They always did – Northern Ireland and Kosovo are not new phenomena – but we are more aware of it now due to the exponential increase in communication. There is also widespread disillusionment with the ‘myth of progress’ in the face of lack of progress in addressing the imperative to come up with solutions to limit the consequences of human indifference, greed and folly. There is a new distrust of scientific and political

authority figures – in Britain the people who reassured us about BSE¹ and genetically-modified food proved to be agents of actual or potential harm. Food scare follows food scare. Neither does the state of the nation's health fill us with confidence, with reports of poor nutrition leading to higher morbidity and reduced life expectancy among the children of the poor and always, it seems, the looming prospect of yet another superbug or carcinogen. The physicists fare no better. One minute, according to the experts, an asteroid threatens the earth and then does not; the next minute the threat is a machine invented by scientists for replicating the Big Bang but which just might create a Black Hole instead.² The experts are no longer believed, but with calamity approaching from all sides, what is the use of avoiding one fate only to fall into another?

People do not usually approach theologians or clergy with their questions, complaints, or fears about all this, with their laments of the hopelessness of it all or their own versions of 'What must we do to be saved? The Nostradamuses of our age, claiming the status of oracles that pronounce the world's destiny, including dates for its end, like their ancient Greek predecessors don't allow that we can do anything about it, or that there is such a thing as salvation or redemption. Human hubris will bring punishment by the gods. It is similarly the case with notions people hold about the Day of Judgement – not that the Church (as distinct from sects which continue to reinforce the caricature of the cartoon spectacle of the man with the 'End is Nigh' sandwich board until tragedies like Waco intervene) is perceived as having much to say about this nowadays, except perhaps in the area of sexual ethics. If the Church is not approached, it is because the Church – at least the Church of England – is not seen to address the outsider's question in connection with the outsider's perception of imminent doom ('What must we do to be saved?') with a version of the biblical answer ('Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ') that addresses that particular doom. Instead, the Church is portrayed as being concerned mainly with in-house debates on matters relating to its own internal structures, order, and morals.

Yet, in the first place, can the Church claim to have the truth about a world that is God's creation if it does not/cannot address these realities? And how is it placed to do so on the eve of the third Millennium? Despite the prevalence of apathy, escapist hedonism and 'I'm all right Jack', enough people in the Western world grasp the desperate urgency of the world's imminent or actual environmental, medical, humanitarian, economic and political crises for these to be the things that are intensely important to them. And these issues, of course, are all caught up with those of personal identity, the quest for personal fulfilment, and the meaning of it all. How is my future affected by any or all of these? The feeling of slipping helplessly into a disastrous future would carry eschatological connotations enough, even for the unchurched and theologically unread, without being compounded by the approaching end of the millennium. The millennium, however, with all its consciousness-raising hype, concentrates the mind wonderfully, supplying a God-sent apologetical opportunity both within and outside the Church for clergy and

1 Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, a disease in cattle which has led to a major health scare in Britain in recent years.

2 *The Times*, 18 July 1999.

theologians. Yet the people do not need to hear more about judgement and hell. They already know about these. They do not need an apocalyptic of doom; they already have well-developed secular versions. What they need is a theology of hope.

How might we proceed through this minefield without uttering too many pious phrases from pulpit and media that simply restate a basic position? Our talk, even to the unchurched, tends to be couched in in-house jargon. We take the context as read, but this is a post-Christendom age. What does the prayer 'Your Kingdom come' mean to the unchurched? All too often the context of interpretation is lacking, and that context is not only the biblical and doctrinal context familiar to us in the tradition; it is also the context of the hearer. Without this context our 'language of Zion' offers no information value, and therefore no hope. If Christian theology is to be able to offer an alternative and arguably more coherent and useful reading of reality at a moment when people despair of the future, this apologetical task begins with the appreciation of the dilemmas that have undermined hope. In case it be thought that this is simply a new version of the old liberal catchphrase: 'Above all be relevant!', the questions posed for the Church go right to the heart of its doctrine. They challenge the adequacy of the worldviews caught up in its doctrines at the various stages of their formulation and reformulation, and which have become their vehicles for better or for worse. As these are questions asked by Christians as well, this apologetical critique and defence of the reasonableness and usefulness of Christian doctrine is an internal as well as an external matter; apologetics is not confined to the world outside the church.

To those of us used to teaching or preaching to those we take to be the converted, apologetics may seem a back-to-front enterprise in needing first to seek common ground with those who do not share our beliefs. It is also risky in that we might, in the process, find ourselves outside our own boundaries. Yet it is essential to start with some agreement on the facts before proceeding to offer any explanation of what Christians believe about it all. This process of seeking agreement on the facts is complicated by those facts being underwritten by less familiar (because less obvious) second-order questions of knowledge and interpretation which lie behind the facts and determine what we take to be facts. Our world is language-ridden and theory-laden. We do not look at the world through a window of words; we see in a glass darkly, with some of our own reflection caught up in what we view. This 'curate's-egg' view, both partial and corrupt, means that distinctions between fact and value, mask and reality, truth and sophistry are blurred to us. Like the Pharisees, we say 'We see' when we do not (at least not as clearly as we think we do). What constitutes a fact about reality always depends to some extent on the community of knowledge and belief from which we are operating. As Mary Midgley puts it:

The faith we live by is something that you must have before you can ask whether anything is true or not. It is basic trust. It is the acceptance of a map, a perspective, a set of standards and assumptions, an enclosing vision within which facts are placed.... At the extreme of commitment, people are unaware that they are using such a map or picture at all. They feel as if they are simply looking directly at the world. This condition of unselfconsciousness about one's

concepts is very common, even among intelligent and well-informed people. It is where we all start, and we are only forced to become more critical – more aware of alternative schemes – by receiving a series of knocks from errors and conflicts which make us aware of other possibilities.³

If everything is theory-laden, it is also value-laden. Evaluations are not only *explicitly* moral. Views as to the relevance, competence, usefulness, stylishness and interestingness (as implicit virtues or otherwise) of various things, pieces of information, and activities also get attached to them as part of their being-for-us.⁴ For this reason, agreement on the facts will always involve some agreement, if not total agreement, on the rights and wrongs of the situation.

How then, as a starting point to apologetics, do we get agreement on the facts, let alone the ethics? A world that is not only language-ridden but also value-ridden must consist of a plethora of linguistic and evaluative aspects of creaturely existence, and therefore worldviews, that are as various as there are species of human and varieties of human context. What it means to be a woman in Europe at the end of the twentieth century is something very different for my Irish Catholic neighbour, mother of 17, grandmother of many more, and knitter of aran sweaters for the tourist market, than it is for me, mother of far fewer, 'alien globe-trotter', and academic. We are more likely to be aware of the impediment of the very middle-class Western-ness of our thinking when considering issues in the two-thirds world, such as conservation of endangered mammals and forests in the face of local poverty; but much closer to home, in northwest Mayo, Ireland, where I am writing this, there is the issue of whether the preservation of blanket bog in all its splendid biodiversity is more important than burning it en masse in a local power station to produce electricity for people who have only ever known struggle and hardship and who had no electricity at all until the 1970s. Different perspectives produce a conflict of goods, even when these goods are not in themselves at issue. The facts are all caught up with the ethics which are all caught up with local worldviews.

If there is to be common ground, then, there is the need to shrink the scope. While human viewpoints will always be partial and expressive of vested interests on any level, the more local the context, the more chance of agreement. Agreement is where we start. There is no point in talking past one another. Examination of motives and rationales comes later.

3 Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation*, Routledge, London 1992, p 57.

4 As Hilary Putnam puts it, 'every fact is value loaded and every one of our values loads some fact... *fact* (or truth) and *rationality* are interdependent notions. A fact is something that it is rational to believe, or, more precisely, the notion of a fact (or a true statement) is an idealization of the notion of a statement that it is rational to believe. 'Rationally acceptable' and 'true' are notions that take in each other's wash... being rational involves having criteria of

relevance as well as criteria of rational acceptability, and... all our values are involved in our criteria of relevance. The decision that a picture of the world is true (or true by our present lights, or 'as true as anything is') and *answers the relevant questions* (as well as we are able to answer them) rests on and reveals our total system of value commitments. A being with no values would have no facts either'. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p 201. See also pp 134f.

An ad hoc eschatological apologetics?

Following up a suggestion by one of the first generation of postliberal theologians, Hans Frei, about the need for Christians to advance a 'generous orthodoxy', second generation theologian and ethicist William Werpehowski develops an ad hoc approach to apologetics in which a meeting point between Christians and others on a common project addressing a particular and local practical concern (such as homelessness, poverty or violence) becomes a position from which to offer a Christian apologetic. According to Werpehowski, we do not need to find a common denominator for our beliefs and theirs in order to discuss and compare them fruitfully.

The task of apologetics... is to unearth the particular storied character of the variety of human commitments and trusts in order to disclose and appreciate how they may contain within them some witness to an all-embracing promise that is relevant to all and that is made meaningful in the solidarities of thought and action. The task has a heuristic character, in that it bears the hope of concretely engaging anew in new contexts the world that is God's, in the service of God and neighbor.⁵

There are three stages to this task as Werpehowski outlines it: first, the coming together of local individuals or groups on a point of common practical concern; second, their agreeing on a proposal while continuing implicitly to differ on the doctrinal or hermeneutical presuppositions or warrants which they construe as underpinning the proposal; then third, the discerning and discussing of these differences.

...the warrant finally adopted for the purposes of common life and action may function in different ways for Christian and non-Christian. The latter takes up the Christian's proposal without conceding its presuppositions... In that case, the non-Christian adopts what can only be an approximation of the Christian belief. If the apologetic is to proceed, conversation would have to move to another level, one concerning the warrants for the background belief just found helpfully to order our moral sensibility.⁶

While each side in the conversation will resist challenges to their respective beliefs, if disagreement fuels an apologetic debate then in the addressing of the common concern not only the face-value rationality itself but also the fruits may determine what it is rational (on the basis of that shared concern) to believe. Let the best anthropology or ethic stand up.⁷

The presupposed beliefs... lend greater coherence to the non-Christian's set of beliefs about some area of human life and may also explain the errors of other less plausible accounts. But the task of testing and revising a system of beliefs does not end at this point. One may go on to consider whether the

5 William Werpehowski, 'Ad Hoc Apologetics', *Journal of Religion* 66/3 (1986), 280-330; 300f. See also Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, ch. 7.

6 Werpehowski, 'Ad Hoc Apologetics', pp 292f.

7 Werpehowski, 'Ad Hoc Apologetics', p 298.

beliefs to be presupposed are more plausible than alternatives that also appear to support the original judgments.... At that point theological apologetics must engage in a conversation about the more ultimate Christian beliefs upon which the presupposed beliefs rests.⁸

We may agree over *what* is wrong and on what to do about it; we may not agree on *why* it is wrong and why we should do what we do. In the end, however, someone's explanation will carry more weight, offer more explanatory force than the others. A version of the question, 'What must we do to be saved' will emerge from a sense of what is wrong out there rather than from consciousness of personal sin. And then one's own responsibility for the mess and its addressing may come out of that and be seen as embedded in the general/corporate responsibility. As in liberation theology, personal and social/structural sin are seen as coinherent. The distinction between the church and the unchurched disappears on this level; we are all implicated in the state this world is in and Christianity itself is answerable for the modern legacy of an over-against attitude to the rest of creation. The distinction reappears on the level of our awareness of the full enormity of our wrong and the full scope of its redemption.

How does such an apologetic become an eschatological apologetic, and why should it? Eschatological considerations are arguably implicit in the apologetical ones for the very reasons that enable it to work as an apologetic. In the first place, the apologetic is explicitly provisional and partial; in the second, it advances an objective view of grace and salvation; the fruits will out. Third, and most fundamentally, hope is implicit in the initial basis of agreement in the apologetical approach which focuses on a common concern and what to do about it; it is agreed that something can be done. Hope is primary. Such an apologetic becomes explicitly eschatological when these considerations are explicitly identified. It then remains to be shown that Christians have access to hope that is real, complete and everlasting, that while human endeavours participate in God's redemptive or salvific work through grace so that failure in spite of best efforts is not final or total, our best efforts are not enough to bridge the gap between old and new creations. In the end our hope is in God.

To ask: on what basis do we hope? moves the apologetical process on a step from the agreement on the facts and a plan of action based on the 'what' of hope, but ideally this is a step still short of being explicitly theological. Agreement may be secured first on a further aspect of human experience, building a more solid platform on which to debate. Why from the outsider's viewpoint, must hope be primary? And what fuels our hope? In a word, discontent; 'human existence... is driven by cravings, urging, desires and strivings, all of which are essentially forms of discontent with the way things are'.⁹ Yet behind discontent lies vision. If we

8 Werpehowski, 'Ad Hoc Apologetics', pp 293f.

9 'All freedom movements, Bloch insists, are inspired and guided by daydreams, by utopian aspirations, which posit a disjunction between knowledge of how bad

the world is and "recognition of how good it could be if it were otherwise". "The pull towards what is lacking never ends... The lack of what we dream about hurts not less but more. It thus prevents us from getting used to deprivation." (Trevor Hart, in

know there is something better, it is because, like stars in the night sky, in the midst of the darkness or dullness or our lives there are momentary glimpses of heaven. These glimpses, as signs that point us to hope, as moments of grace, address the question begged by finding a shared basis of hope; that of how in the first place to persuade the hopeless that there are grounds for hope. We are only able to desire something better because we can conceive of or picture that 'something better,' or something like it that points to it. Therefore hope has an intimate connection with imagination. It is not possible without imaginative projection into the future. Trevor Hart speaks of imagination as 'a key category for making sense of this hopeful living towards God's future.' As he puts it,

One of the key functions of imagination is the presentation of the otherwise absent. In other words, we have the capacity through imagination to call to mind objects, persons or states of affairs which are other than those which appear to confront us in what, for want of a better designation, we might call our 'present actuality' (i.e. what we are currently experiencing). I do not say 'reality' precisely because the real itself may well prove to be other than what appears to be actual.¹⁰

The way we perceive and conceive things as being what they are – the whole business of discovering/construing facts about them – involves imagination because there is often more than one possible reading. The dawning on us of a new aspect of reality is like a conversion – we are converted from seeing it one way to seeing it another way. A different imagining of reality has happened which casts an entirely new light on the world, arranges the world in a different pattern.¹¹

In their ability to suggest possible worlds which are not the literal actual, present world but which nevertheless ring true, metaphors, poems, paintings and the like refer to a future, or hypothetical reality as the true reality. They show us momentary glimpses of eternity¹² – 'an eternal Now' that represents the 'intensity of life in absolute presentness.'¹³ A moment in experience that may have struck us at the time, but not revealed in its fullness, is re-lived and extended in its meaning when recalled.

'Imagination for the Kingdom of God?', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *God will be All in All: the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1999, pp. 59f. Quotations from E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, pp 95, 451).

10 Hart, 'Imagination', p 54.

11 Hart, 'Imagination', pp 54f.

12 Moltmann makes the point that this is a relative eternity, not the absolute eternity that is God's alone. See Hart, 'Imagination', pp. 54f.

13 Richard Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', in Bauckham, *God Will Be All In All*, pp. 187-90. In their capacity to usher in 'epiphanies', works of art are able to anticipate the eschatological moment in the present, as the kairos, the 'Now' of salvation. This moment of 'relative eternity' which anticipates the eschatological moment is not itself the eschatological moment: it orients us toward the eschatological future. 'Here the transcendent future casts its light into the present, rupturing the continuity of time, breaking the power of past and present to prolong themselves into the future, enabling the believer to live out the radically new possibilities of the promised future of God' (pp 188f).

The moments of happiness – not the sense of well-being,
 Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
 Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination –
 We had the experience but missed the meaning,
 And approach to the meaning restores the experience
 In a different form beyond any meaning
 We can assign to happiness.¹⁴

T. S. Eliot's own extended metaphor in 'Little Gidding' is a case in point:

When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
 The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
 In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
 Reflecting in a watery mirror
 A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon,
 And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
 Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind but pentecostal fire
 In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
 The soul's sap quivers.¹⁵

Yet the moment 'at the still point of the turning world' is embedded in time and history, in not only in the lives of those experiencing it, or those depicted, or the life of the writer or artist, but also in novels, plays and films as narrative contexts, 'even when the depiction lacks the explicit references to the moment's past and future.' Such moments are 'thick' moments of experience, 'a present of some duration containing memory and expectation, thought, unlike any such lived moment, the depicted moment's future is already known to the painter and the spectator.'¹⁶

People may be 'moments of eternity' that engender hope in a similar way. Character may be iconic in nature, summed up in a face or demeanour. There is an objectivity about saints. They are recognized as such by all and sundry, even those who detest what they stand for. In our age, people like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Gandhi have arguably provided the world with glimpses of heaven, inspiring hope for the future. 'Iconic' events such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of Apartheid have also provided these glimpses.

While the ethics may have been inseparable from the facts, so that it becomes a 'chicken and egg' argument as to which comes first, arguably vision precedes both. Although it is itself derivative of both, it has a revelatory component which comes to us from beyond. If hope relies on vision, vision in turn supports morality. As Stanley Hauerwas suggests, here the problem is 'to become as we see'.

14 T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', in *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London 1944, p 34.

15 Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets*, p 41.

16 Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', p 214.

These might be termed synchronic moments within the diachronic flow, which are themselves coinherent with the flow.

Modern moral philosophers have failed to understand that moral behaviour is an affair not primarily of choice but of vision. They see all moral agents as inhabiting the same world of facts: thus they discriminate between the different types of morality only in terms of acts and choices. But differences of moral vision or perspective may also exist. When we assess other people, we do not consider just their solutions to particular problems; we feel something much more elusive which may be called their total vision of life... Our morality is more than adherence to universalizable rules; it also encompasses our experiences, fables, beliefs, images, concepts, and inner monologues.¹⁷

In an ad hoc eschatological apologetic, a shared vision based on hope for the future, however limited, local and partial, will underpin ethical agreement. The 'ideal' of the vision anticipates its reality, so is inherently future.¹⁸ In the end, as with the Christian life, it will be pragmatically tested by our encounter with reality.¹⁹

Meanwhile, as Hauerwas points out, "To know the real rather than being in a state of illusion and fantasy is a difficult task. We do not necessarily recognize our glimpses of the real for what they are. Seeing is one thing; interpreting what we see is another. This is partly because, as already suggested, the truthfulness of our vision in one context or situation may not necessarily transfer to another – a consideration which supports the local scale of an ad hoc apologetics.²⁰ It is also to do with the corruptibility of human vision: the capacity of thoughts and imaginings to create both idols and defences against reality. Hauerwas observes that "We cannot long look directly at reality, so we use past formulations of the truth as a defense against the constant struggle to pierce through the veil."²¹ Also, there is a crucial difference between imagined possible futures and mere fantasies of the imagination.²² Garrett Green notes that imagination co-opted by sin becomes destructive, producing false images and appropriation of parts to misrepresent the whole, where the primary 'beneficiary' of this destruction is the imaginer.²³ Mistaking the parts for the whole and thereby making idols of them is particularly likely to happen in connection with such 'peak experiences' as romantic love, sexual attraction, communion with nature, or amazement at childbirth, beauty, or a new discovery, all of which may anticipate heaven but are not the whole or the end of it.²⁴

17 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1981, p 35.

18 'Hope... intuitions... a "Not-Yet-Being of an expectable kind." It "does not play around and get lost in an Empty-Possible, but psychologically anticipates a Real-Possible"'. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p 144, quoted in Hart, 'Imagination', p 60.

19 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, p 46.

20 'Contingency challenges our most assured notions of what is good.' Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, pp 36, 44.

21 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, p 32.

22 Hart, 'Imagination', p 55.

23 Garrett Green, *Imagining God*, Harper and Row, San Francisco 1989, p 90.

24 There is insufficient space in this paper to tackle some of the hard questions about partiality and corruptibility. Bauckham, for instance, wonders about intense moments of seeming eternity in present and virtual reality that do not anticipate the eschatological moment, e.g. 'being immersed in present pain, without past or future.' Their evil seems manifest, even if suffering may be redemptive. Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', p 191.

Theological Rationale

In an explicitly Christian eschatological apologetic, the discontinuity between the present creation and the future, new creation is central. This, in conjunction with God's role in the whole process, is what distinguishes a Christian eschatology from secular versions. The present 'is-ness' of things does not simply turn into their future, no matter how much we strive for and imagine that future. There is a discontinuity between the way things are and the way things will be that cannot be overcome simply by improvements or completions to the existing order. We cannot conceive a radically new creation out of our experience of the present one even though the whole history of human experience is the material which is transformed by the coming of the new creation. Corruption, as a by-product of a fallible creation, is accumulated like free radicals in the ageing human body that cannot be eliminated by continuing on with the same metabolic system that produced the free radicals in the first place. The accumulation is insurmountable by mere continuity. Therefore, this provisional present creation is not simply to be completed but also to be confirmed and remodeled. Such a future is revealed to us only in metanoic glimpses, epiphanies, incorporating and converting all in their path like Atlantic breakers sucking in the undertow of previous waves to feed their toweringness. Their anticipatory nature in pointing to the future, their metaphorical 'yes-but-no,' becomes the eschatological 'now-but-not-yet'.

Green accordingly sees imagination as 'the instrument of revelation, the means by which God makes himself known in the present life of believers' and is thus the locus of divine and human contact. It is the 'faithful imagination' that construes our own story in terms of the Scriptural one, in which God acts to reveal to us the true story of our lives.²⁵ It is also the eschatological imagination through which the 'not-yet-ness' of Jesus Christ is anticipated. The visions, glimpses, which anticipate the eschatological moment, are implicitly christological, but we do not recognize them as such when in our epiphanal moments we stand on the mountain top. Humanly we find it hard to recognize the transfigured Christ. ('We had the experience but missed the meaning.') Yet we recognize the heaven anticipated in the vision even if partially and corruptly, and become envisioned beings whose actions are driven by the vision. As our visions participate more or less in the vision that is Christ, so the extent to which our actions are driven by the vision of Christ will depend on the extent to which we recognize Christ in them. Their factuality and value are subject to judgement by ultimate reality, both ultimately, at the Eschaton, and currently by the God we 'read' in terms of the Christ who was and is and is to come.

As Jürgen Moltmann points out, the contradiction between present and promised future 'makes the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus the 'enigmatic, dialectical, identity of the risen Lord with the crucified Christ' much more than the occasion on which Christian hope is founded; it is itself a *paradigm for thinking about* the relationship of old to new creation.'²⁶ Gospel becomes a 'thick description',

25 Green, *Imagining God*, pp 106-8.

26 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian*

Eschatology, Tr. J. W. Leitch, SCM Press, London 1981, p 220, quoted in Hart 'Imagination' p 69.

containing Christ's past and future coming as embracing the whole of human history and rationality, including its eschatological judgement and fulfilment. As such it is open-ended, underdetermined.²⁷ We must recognize on the one hand – hold in tension – 'the radical newness of the new creation and its incommensurability with the present order of things, and the genuine presence of the *Novum* in the midst of the present order, drawing us forward transformatively into God's future', 'suffusing and transforming' the 'old with the power of the new.' Meanwhile, there is an 'overlap between the two orders... in the sense that the new has already begun to create its own presence in the midst of the old by assuming it and drawing it into new self-transcendent anticipations of what it will ultimately be.'²⁸

The second major aspect of an explicitly eschatological apologetic concerns the very provisionality and local particularity which frustrate human life and goals and pose difficulties for understanding. These turn out to be fundamental not only to the sort of goodness particular to this creation but also to a Christian doctrine of God.²⁹ Unlike postmodern relativism, a Christian view of reality sees this world's provisionality and partiality not as primary but as dependent upon God's correction, judgement, fulfilment and completion. 'Is-now-ness' is secondary to and included in 'will-be-ness.'³⁰ Hart observes that

Since... it is in the nature of our 'knowledge' of the future to be at best partial and provisional, a further implication of this would seem to be the questions of meaning and truth may in the interim only be considered in partial and provisional ways. The final answer to the question of the real and the true must wait for that eschatological moment when, as the apostle suggests, we shall know fully as we in turn are fully known. For now we must make do with seeing through a glass darkly, and must not allow our Western eschatological impatience to get the better of us. This ought to drive us to reassess the status not only of eschatological and theological statements, but all the statements we make about the real, and perhaps to moderate the claims which we make for those statements.³¹

27 The present 'is not a mere transition from past to present in an undifferentiated sequence of cause and effect as the purely linear image of time suggests. It has significance in itself which is not exhausted by its relationship to its immediate past and its immediate actual future. Each moment is qualitatively unique and opens towards a variety of possible futures.' Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', p 165.

28 Hart, 'Imagination', pp 71-73

29 There is a difference between affirming the essential goodness of creation as God-given and recognizing that its present reality is underdetermined, partial. Goodness does not necessarily entail completeness. There is a goodness appropriate to on-goingness. Moltmann talks about the good in

transience, in the transient sort of temporality of this creation, compared to the 'eternal temporality' of the new creation to come. Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', p 183.

30 Moltmann suggests that hope forces the reimagining/reimagining of the real, 'seeking a meaning for the present which is historical in the sense that it is teleologically determined. The present, in other words, does not contain its full meaning within itself, but only in its relatedness to what is yet to come'. Hart, 'Imagination', pp 63f. This amounts to the collapsing of the distinction between teleological and ontological in an eschatological doctrine of God and theory of reality. God as our future is equated with God as ultimate reality,

A theology which construes reality as future is the logical consequence of taking hope as primary; a worldview which starts with hope must see ultimate reality as future. The top-down theological argument matches the one from existential human need. Where the Christian worldview outreaches the human experiential one is in seeing that the future is not only a becoming out the past and present; it is also God's coming to us, the God whose reality is future who is the reality of all our futures. Thus to be free as persons means to be open to the future, rather than having our destinies determined by the past. For Moltmann, the Eschaton is 'the recovery and transformation of the whole diachronic extent of this world's time. All times will be gathered into eternity. All that is past will be brought back into an eternal compresence, participating in a creaturely way in the eternity of God.' Nothing will be lost. Every moment of value will be retrieved and 'eternalized.'³² In this way the whole history of creation, including persons understood in terms of their whole history of their lives on earth, will be redeemed and resurrected from the transience which is not only its good but also its tragedy and waste.³³ The glimpses of heaven which give us a hunger for the eternal will, therefore, be retained and confirmed as actual. It is the hunger for the eternal that makes us hope that the good of the world and of ourselves will not be lost just as it is the hope of retrieval, resurrection, redemption that makes us hunger for the eternal. What is now anticipated and hoped for as a possible world, will become in Christ by God's grace an actual world as the best of all possible worlds. What greater comfort could we offer those who are despairing of the slippage of all things into outer darkness?

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where 'ultimate' is a teleological as well as an ontological category. The result is a recasting of theistic realism as eschatological realism. For a discussion of theistic realism see Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999.

31 Hart, 'Imagination', p 64.

32 There is 'the sense in which', according to Moltmann, 'time will be reversed in the transformation of time at the Eschaton.' [*The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, Tr. M. Kohl, SCM Press, London, 1996, pp 294-298]. It is not, of course, the movement from potentiality to actuality which will be reversed, but the movement in which reality passes into the past and is no longer present reality. In other words, not time's creativity

but time's transience will be reversed. Whereas in time everything passes away and is lost, in eternity everything that has passed away will be recovered so that nothing is lost.' Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', pp 162-3.

33 Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', pp 183-5. See also p 226. As Bauckham interprets Moltmann, 'On the one hand, the fact that the present creation happens in transient time is essential to the kind of goodness it has. Nothing like it is conceivable without the irreversible flow of time. On the other hand, the continuous of loss of what is good in the present as it passes away and the ultimate loss of everything, which transience entails, would make the world deeply tragic were there not the prospect of the recovery in eternity of all that had been lost in transient time', p 183.