THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS FOR CHRISTIAN BELIEF


PROFESSOR OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

I

STARS fall. The sun and the moon are darkened. The earth quakes. Fire falls from heaven. Famine, war and pestilence are unloosed. Angels frequent the sky carrying scrolls or vials full of God's wrath or sickles with which to reap, some of them gigantic angels several miles high. Strange and terrible monsters appear from the sea or from an abyss and demand the allegiance of all men, on pain of death. From time to time the sky is opened and glimpses of heaven are obtained. Voices from this direction declare strange and sometimes unintelligible messages. Beneath, hell burns as a lake of everlasting fire. Judgement impends. History is wound up. Eternal destinies for all are decided. Demonic figures appear in a series of vignettes alternating with white-robed saints. We seem to be living partly in a dream and partly in a nightmare. The atmosphere is charged with excitement, horror, rapture and mystery, but the main impression upon our imaginations and minds is of the bizarre, the grotesque, the fantastic. Such are the passages in the Bible dealing with the Last Things, or, to use modern theologians' useful jargon, with eschatology.

There are several eschatological passages in the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel, for instance; in Joel, and in parts of the book of Isaiah; and these have contributed their share to the thought and imagery of Christian literature through the ages. But it is the eschatology of the New Testament which has, naturally and rightly, occupied the attention of theologians more fully. In one sense, almost all the literature of the New Testament is eschatological. Mark describes Jesus as coming into Galilee and declaring "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (1: 14, 15). This is a message about the

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 9th May 1979.
Last Age, the Last Time. All the thought of the New Testament is concerned with this Last Time, to which Jesus certainly in some sense related himself. Paul's message is deeply involved with the conviction that Christians are living in the overlap of two ages, the old, evil age, or "this age", on the one hand, and the "other" age, the Age to Come which has proleptically arrived with the arrival of Christ, the Messianic Age, on the other. His Christian beliefs and his ethics are conditioned by this conviction. He clearly expects this temporary period during which the two ages overlap very soon to be replaced by what he calls the *Parousia*, the Arrival, of Christ from heaven in a visible form in order to end the present age and swallow up history in the new age. In II Thessalonians he seems to expect some preliminary signs or stages before the great event, but in his Corinthian letters and in Romans these do not apparently figure prominently in his expectations. He still looks for the Day to dawn, the age to be consummated in his own lifetime or very shortly after. The same can be said of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of I Peter, though they express their expectations in rather different images and forms. It is impossible to ignore the eschatological emphasis in the New Testament. It is not just one element among others, the last in a list of doctrines; it is the framework, the basic assumption, which conditions almost everything written in the book.

The thirteenth chapter of Mark, often called the "Little Apocalypse", which was used also by Luke and Matthew, and the Revelation of St. John present this eschatological expectation in the form of a series of acts or stages in a progressive approximation of the End, Mark in miniature, and Revelation at great length. The "little apocalypse", at least at one part of it, may be intended to divide the End into three stages; first archē tôn ōdinōn (13. 8), "the beginning of pangs", next the "tribulation" (thlipsis 13. 19), and lastly the telos or "end" (13. 7) with the Coming of the Son of Man in clouds (13. 27). But the book of Revelation cannot be fitted into any such neat scheme. Its incidents are obviously not in chronological order; the sun, for instance, loses a third of its light and the stars a third of their number at 8: 12, but the sun appears to be restored to its original
heat and even to greater in 16. 8, and the dragon is able to pull
down a third of the stars again in 12: 4. The waters of rivers and
lakes seem to be turned to blood twice over, at 8: 10 and at 15. 4,
and the sea suffers the same fate twice at 8: 8 and 16: 3, a pheno-
menon of which the shipmasters and sailors mentioned at 18: 8
do not seem to be aware. But it would be a waste of time to
produce further evidence that this book cannot be intended as
an ordered account of successive future events. It is an extra-
ordinary mosaic of every sort of apocalyptic image, motif and
tradition conscripted by the genius of its author into the service
of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not an orderly description
of what the Church has traditionally called the Last Things.
The traditional doctrine of the Last Things is a schematization
of an indiscriminate mêlée of apocalyptic motifs and ideas
achieved by a process of selection and rationalization during the
first few centuries of the existence of Christianity. We can see
the process taking place in the writings of such people as Justin,
Irenaeus and Tertullian. It was by no means a straightforward
process, and the tidying-up left a good many odd ends untied,
such as the expectation of a reign of Christ with his saints on the
earth for a thousand years. This notion is called Milleniarism,
and it troubled the early Church for some time as it gradually
moved from the position of accepted orthodoxy in the minds of
Justin and Irenaeus to the status of a crazy opinion to be pushed
to the dark periphery of Christian doctrine by Eusebius of
Caesarea in the fourth century. The ablest, but also the most
blatant, attempt at rationalization of the material can perhaps
be seen in Augustine's *City of God*.

These apocalyptic images, indeed the whole atmosphere of
eschatology is, as I have indicated, alien to our way of thought.
It strikes us as unfamiliar, strange, outré. But we must recognize
that it was not at all strange to Jews and Christians from the
second century B.C. to the second century A.D. On the contrary,
it was an accepted and widely used literary form to them. The
Revelation of St. John is only the peak, arising above the waters,
of a submerged mountain range. During the twentieth century
scholars have been painstakingly recovering, piecing together and
bringing to light the buried and forgotten remains of dozens of
apocalypses, which often survive only in translations into languages spoken in backwaters or on the edges of the ancient Church, Syriac, Ethiopic, Old Sclavonic, Georgian, and so on. As a result of their labours we can see that both Jews and Christians of that period regarded the apocalypse as a literary form likely to have a wide appeal and a large readership. The Revelation of St. John still remains the most splendid example.

At the other end of the scale we may place a document written in Greek by a Christian in Rome about the year 140, Hermas’ Shepherd. This is a kind of Do-it-Yourself Apocalypse, a domestic revelation written by a member of the lower middle class who was troubled by such questions as how far sin after baptism can be forgiven and did not concern himself with world history. But he calls himself a prophet, sees visions in which heaven is opened and is visited by angels none the less. The pseudonymity of many apocalypses (which does not operate in the case of Hermas) must have been accepted as a general literary convention at the time and goes far to explain some of the pseudonymous titles of books of the New Testament. In those days there were no literary agents, no dust-jackets carrying extravagant blurbs, no advertisements in the quality papers. But it helped the circulation of a book if it was supposed to be written not by lowly unknown names such as Hermas and Polycarp but instead could boast the names of Old Testament heroes in its title, like Baruch and Isaiah or later of great men of the New Testament such as Peter. A literary form and its conventions, then, which strike us as grotesque, bizarre and extravagant was a familiar and accepted phenomenon in the years 200 B.C. to A.D. 200.

II

The first point that must be made about this, to us, curious phenomenon of apocalyptic is that it must not be taken literally. We must not imagine that its significance consists in its constituting a realistic prediction of coming events. It is not a heavily disguised programme of future world history. We are not justified in expecting the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in
the near future because Paul and the author of Hebrews and the writer of Revelation expected the *Parousia* in the near future. The reason for this is very simple. The words "the near future" mean the near future. The word "soon" means soon. If I ask a bookseller to procure a particular book for me and he writes back to say that he expects to have it in stock in the near future I do not take him to mean that the book will be available to me some time in the next two or three thousand years, though I allow that this does appear to be the policy of some booksellers. If an economist predicts a slump or a boom or a period of inflation as arriving soon he will not sound convincing if he explains that by the words "soon" he meant in a few millenia. This is indeed the explanation for the delay in the *Parousia* produced by the writer of the Second Epistle of Peter (3: 1-10). He says that in the sight of God a thousand years are but as a day. This is indeed true of God, but it is not true of us. We live in a continuum of successive moments and for us a day consists of twenty-four hours and inevitably all our ideas concerning time are conditioned by the fact that our expectation of life is three score years and ten. If either Jesus predicted that he would return again soon (which is far from certain) or the Apostles and primitive Christians expected him to return soon, then it is perfectly obvious that these predictions or expectations were disappointed. The *Parousia* did not materialize quickly, and that being so there is no more reason for us in the twentieth century to expect it to materialize than there has been for any age to expect it after the crucifixion and resurrection were some decades past. Even if we believe that Jesus did himself predict an early Return (and I have already said that I think this far from certain, perhaps not even likely), we cannot invoke his divinity as an authority for the infallible correctness of his prediction. If the words "early Return" mean what they say, then Jesus was manifestly mistaken. If Jesus meant to predict a Return some time during the next few thousand years after his death, then the primitive Church obviously misunderstood him, and the effect of his prediction is largely dissolved because its details are so vague and uncertain. A prophet or Messiah who foretells his Return at some point in the next few
The expectation, then, which has thrown so many thousands into a state of frenzy and hysteria through the ages, that events apparently predicted in the eschatological passages in the New Testament are about to be fulfilled, or are in the process of being fulfilled, is an utterly vain and illusory one. The expectations of a Syrian bishop mentioned by Eusebius who led his flock into the desert waiting for the Lord to return, and was suspected by the local Roman governor of starting a rebellion; the expectations roused by the Fall of Rome to the Goths in 410 that the predictions of the End in the Bible were now being fulfilled; the convictions of those among the Franciscans in the fourteenth century who believed in the poverty of Christ, that the Pope, as Anti-Christ, portended the imminence of the End; the hope of apocalyptic fulfilment in the events of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, in the success of Gustavus Adolphus in the seventeenth century, in the rise of Louis Napoleon in the nineteenth century, in the capture of Jerusalem by Allenby in the twentieth and most recently in the possession of Palestine and Jerusalem by the Jews, all, without exception, are self-delusion and useless dreams, a state of mind more akin to neurosis than a process of sane exegesis. Whatever other significance we find for the language about the Last Things in the Bible, we cannot allow this to be valid. That way madness lies.

Some apocalyptic writing certainly should be regarded not as prediction, even though it is cast in the form of prediction, but as theological comment upon contemporary history. The book of Daniel is comment upon the struggle for Jewish faith and culture against the policy of Antiochus Epiphanes in the mid-second century before Christ, as the pagan Porphyry saw with admirable insight in the third century A.D., and as Jerome a century later half admitted. The book of Revelation may well be commentary on the persecution of the Church in the reign of Domitian. Both books were written in the period with which they are chiefly concerned and not before it. All apocalyptic writing, like all other forms of literature, may be said to arise out of the situation contemporary with the author, and to have no
direct or significant reference to ages long after the author's
day.

It is not surprising, then, if from time to time during the
course of Christian history theologians should have proposed
the total abolition of eschatology and apocalyptic. The first
writer to do this was Origen in the third century. He did not
do so openly, avowing his intention. But in effect he removed
eschatology from the substance of the Christian faith by two
means. In the first place, wherever he could he allegorized
eschatological and apocalyptic sayings into spiritual experiences.
Christ’s Second Coming on the clouds means, for instance, his
coming in our hearts in spiritual experience now. This was a
device which he had learnt from the Gnostics. In the second
place, where he did not abolish eschatology by allegorizing it he
reduced its significance so drastically that it lost all importance.
According to his scheme, after this life in the flesh each of us,
indestructible souls that we are, will undergo an indefinite series
of discarnate existences as we gradually experience purgation
and draw closer to God till that distant moment when, overcome
by his eternity, we obey him and contemplate him fully. With
such a vast vista of existences before it, the soul need fear no
judgement, dread no hell; any future experience which in our
language might be called punishment or resurrection lost its
significance when placed in this aeonian framework.

Origen was a liberal theologian and, in the best sense of the
word, a rationalist. Apocalyptic images seemed to him ir-
Rational. Whenever since his day liberal theology has come to
the fore it has shown a tendency to abolish eschatology or to
diminish its significance. The Father of Liberal Protestantism,
Friedrich Schleiermacher, could find no serious place for
eschatology in his system. His disciples, the exponents of
Liberal Protestantism, imitated him in this, as in so much else.
They ignored the eschatological element in the teaching of Jesus
and of the writers of the New Testament until taught better by
Albert Schweitzer. W. R. Inge, who was in some respects the
prince of Liberal Protestants, tells us in his journal that when he
was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of
Cambridge he paid a visit to a parson in a Devonshire parish
who had been a pupil of his when he was a Fellow of Hertford College, Oxford. He notes two odd things about this man; he kept lizards in his drawing-room and he was interested in the eschatological ideas of the early Christians. Both traits seemed to Inge equally eccentric. Today a number of contemporary British theologians, Hick, Wiles and Lampe among them, have attacked the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity and wish to dispense with them. In some respects they appear to represent a throwback to Liberal Protestantism. They all alike entirely ignore the eschatological element in early Christianity. If therefore we were to decide to boycott eschatology and apocalyptic altogether, we would have respectable precedents in doing so.

III

Before we attempt a more positive estimate of eschatology than this, it is worth noting what happened to primitive Christian eschatology. In a word, between A.D. 100 and A.D. 200 the Church shifted the emphasis of its doctrine from eschatology to Christology. In A.D. 100 or thereabouts Christian writers as far as we can discern are still deeply concerned about the Parousia, though perhaps less anxious about it than their predecessors had been fifty years before. By A.D. 200 eschatology has been, not abolished, but pushed into the background. It is well on the way to becoming no more than the last in a series of articles of the Christian faith—"the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"—instead of being the very atmosphere which a Christian breathes, the framework within which all Christian thought moves. By A.D. 200 the main emphasis is upon the Person of Christ and his ontological relationship to God the Father. This does not mean that by A.D. 200 the classical doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity were fully formed. Far from it. Much water had still to flow under the bridges of the Tiber, the Nile and the Orontes before these could be achieved. But the interest of theologians had now shifted to Christ as the Word of God, the Pre-existent Messiah who appeared in frequent and critical epiphanies to the great figures of the Old Testament, and to the Logos of the philosophers who
solved the problem of how the absolute, the divine, the supreme reality can communicate with our world of relativism and change and decay. And this shift of interest applies equally to writers of very diverse theologies, to Justin, to Irenaeus, to Tertullian, to Clement of Alexandria, to Hippolytus.

The chief agent in this change, though not the only one, undoubtedly was the Fourth Gospel. This profound and complex document, written by a religious genius of the first order, should be regarded rather as a commentary on the significance of Jesus Christ than as a reliable record of what he did and said, though it would be unwise to exclude the possibility of its enshrining some genuine historical traditions. It does not positively exclude eschatology. In a few places it deliberately retains the language of primitive apocalyptic. I regard attempts to reject these passages on the ground that they are later interpretations as simply inept. The author of the Fourth Gospel wanted to show that he was acquainted with this sort of thought as he was acquainted, in my opinion, with so much other early Christian thought, Pauline and material of a Synoptic type if not actually taken from the Synoptists. But instead of presenting a Messiah Jesus who had preached and died and risen and who would come again, he pressed back into the earthly ministry of Jesus all that the risen and ascended Jesus meant for the Christians of his day, or was in their view destined to mean. For him Jesus is now the Way, the Life and the Truth, now the Resurrection and the Life, now the Door, the Shepherd, the Spring of Living Water, and so on. At the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel Jesus speaks as if he were already risen. In his ministry in Palestine he speaks freely, not about the Kingdom of God and God's demands upon the children of the Kingdom, as does the Synoptic Jesus, but about his own Person, his relation to the Father, his pre-existence, his relation to the Church, and so on. He speaks of a kind of Second Coming too, but it is the coming of the Paraclete, the Comforter; it is the presence of Jesus in the Church after the resurrection. Primitive eschatology has been transformed. In the brilliant expression of C. H. Dodd, this is "sublimated eschatology". Of this we may indeed say, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'histoire".
The Church took a long time to accept the Gospel according to St. John, far too long for us to imagine that the Gospel could really have been the work of an apostle. We can see traces of acquaintance with this work throughout the first half of the second century: in the fragments of Basilides the Alexandrian Gnostic of about 130; in the Gospel of Truth of the Gnostic Valentinus about 145; in various apocryphal gospels of a Gnostic cast; in the Letter to Flora of the Gnostic Ptolemy; in the Commentary on John by the Gnostic Heracleon. We do not find unmistakable acquaintance with it in Ignatius, in Hermas, in Polycarp, in Justin, in I Clement. About 160 Tatian quotes a few words from its Preface and Melito is acquainted with the gospel between 160 and 170. About 170 Theophilus of Antioch alludes to the Preface, and about a decade later Athenagoras follows him. But it is only with the great work of Irenaeus, Against All the Heresies, written perhaps between 170 and 190, that the Fourth Gospel comes into its own. Irenaeus, for whom Gnosticism was the chief enemy of Christianity, perceived that if, as had been hitherto suspected, this was a Gnostic gospel, it was a Gnostic gospel to end Gnostic gospels; its main thrust and purpose were strongly anti-Gnostic, though its vocabulary was sometimes reminiscent of Gnosticism. He hailed it as the fourth gospel in a closed list of four; he provided it with an historical pedigree and evidence of apostolic authorship which were much too good to be true. He used its theology as his main resource against Gnosticism. His example sufficed to bring St. John’s Gospel into the mainstream of Christian doctrine, where it has remained, profoundly influential, ever since. This, then, was the fate of primitive eschatology, to be pushed into the background at the advent of a Christological revolution whose chief, but not sole, agent was the Fourth Gospel.

IV

I do not think that we can either dispense with eschatology or return to the early, rapturous eschatological faith of the first century. I do not deplore nor regret the shift from eschatology to Christology which I have just sketched in outline. I think that it was inevitable, that the Church had no alternative but to
make such a shift. It was a reshuffling, a rearranging of the elements which Christians had inherited from the primitive Church. There were many ingredients in primitive Christianity, reflected for us now in the New Testament, which were moving towards a doctrine of Incarnation. The theology of Paul, of Matthew and of the Epistle to the Hebrews could well be said, diverse though they may be in detail, to imply together such a conclusion. The move to link Christ in some philosophical way with God is not so evident in the New Testament, though in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and in Paul’s concept of Christ’s pre-existence some tendency towards it is evident. But the Church, once it was clear that the *Parousia* was indefinitely delayed, could not be content with a doctrine of God which was in effect no more than an endorsement of Jewish monotheism with the added sentiment that Jesus of Nazareth was a very important person. Christian theologians were under pressure to produce a specifically Christian doctrine of God, that is to say a doctrine of God which would be significantly different from Jewish monotheism because of the career of Jesus Christ. It was not only the demands of people educated in Greek philosophy which were pushing the theologians in this direction. It was a thrust within the Christian tradition itself, manifesting itself, among other things, in the practice of worshipping Jesus Christ, of calling upon him in prayer. Christians were discovering that the significance of their Lord was greater, wider, more lasting, than the relatively narrow framework of Jewish Messianic expectation in which they had originally received the gospel about him. Development can mean discovery.

But there were certain truths which the eschatological element in Christianity guaranteed and could continue to guarantee even after the shift from eschatology to christology had been achieved. Most significant was the note of ultimacy which eschatology implied. To put the matter simply: in Jewish terms, Jesus was so important that the only significant event that could take place after his appearance was the end of the world; in Gentile terms, he must be ultimate enough to be closely related to ultimate reality, God. The concept of ultimate
authority and significance is present in both statements. This kind of restatement is very much what the author of the Fourth Gospel is intending to convey. With Jesus the final standard of judgement has arrived, the final object of faith is present, the final values are discerned. The existential demand for choice, for commitment is still being made, not because history and the world and all our known scheme of things will shortly cease to exist in some apocalyptic transformation, but because in him the final offer of reconciliation and love from God is being made. It is final in the sense that it represents the fullest disclosure of God's will and intention available for human beings in this life, final in the sense that it represents the unexpected, disturbing but endlessly hopeful move of God towards us, final in that it leaves us no alternatives except either to reject it and find ourselves fighting against God or, accepting it, to throw ourselves on God's mercy, bankrupt of any resources of our own which might enable us to approach him on equal terms or with normal human self-confidence. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was indeed set in a framework of Judaeo-Christian Messianic expectation, but it derived its urgency and appeal and power not from any expectation of a Parousia but from his conviction that the career of Jesus Christ represented nothing less than the move of God himself into the lives and the demand of God himself upon the allegiance of every person who heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. It carried an ultimacy not essentially connected with the return of a Messiah on clouds nor with a view of history which expected the world to end in a few months' or years' time. The "infinite personal concern" which it brought into the hearts of men and women was not significantly involved with the question of the date of the Parousia. Christianity was eschatological in a deeper way than that. This was the lesson which the Church had learned by the end of the second century.

Another important role played by eschatology was in ensuring discontinuity. Some theologians in the past and some in the present would regard this role as an unwelcome and undesirable one. Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the third century, one suspects, had so comprehensive a doctrine of the divine Logos working at every level in history and culture that the
Incarnation, the involvement of the Logos in compromising particularity, in a human organism and a human career, was a relatively minor incident in God's continual handling of the human race. God has always been dealing with men through his Logos. What serious difference could a short period of incarnate activity for the Logos make, if one considers the enormous, indefinite stretches of time both before and after the Incarnation during which God's dealing with human souls has been operating and will operate? And today theologians such as Wiles and Lampe are making rather similar suggestions, abandoning a doctrine of Incarnation in the interests of philosophical truth or simplicity or in order to accommodate a recognition of some measure of truth in all major world religions.

But I do not think that Christianity can afford to abandon the pattern of discontinuity in its view of God's relation to the world and to history and to mankind. I do not think that it can with impunity suppress or bye-pass the scandal of particularity. The eschatological element certainly depicts the advent of Jesus Christ in world history as an irruption, a disclosure and interruption, an unexpected reversal of values, a turning of the tables, a strange *peripeteia* in the relations of God and man. It represents the career of Jesus Christ as a revelation, as a mediation, a defeat of evil, as a working somehow of atonement which is ultimate if not cosmic. In this picture God's activity towards man is not a smooth uninterrupted flow of the impartation of divine wisdom, an unending lesson in which God is more of an educator than a judge or a saviour. It conceives of God's activity as a series of crises, of which the supreme crisis is constituted by the unexpected, indeed unheralded arrival of Jesus. Later Christian fancy would read into the record all sorts of forecasts and predictions of Christ's appearance, but in the Synoptic Gospels and in Paul's letters there is about his appearance a devastating unexpectedness. The Jews asked for signs and the Greeks expected wisdom. But what they got instead was a crucified man (1 Cor. 1:21-25). In this view of things the smooth, calculable, rational continuity of God's relationship to men is interrupted by a Cross, like a railway-line interrupted by an accident. This event was not, as the later
Church was to claim, foreseen by Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Ezra and all the prophets. But it is well in accord with the way in which the profoundest thinkers of the Old Testament conceived of God's handling of his people. It is consistent with a Heilsgeschichte, a history of salvation. And as a matter of mere empirical observation, events in history do not flow in a smooth uninterrupted course. They present a series of periods of fluidity, crisis, possibility, where decisive action is taken or decisive happenings occur, followed by a freezing or stereotyping of the situation which will remain relatively unaltered till the next crisis. This is as true, say, of the history of the career of the Emperor Constantine the Great as it is of the most recent history of Cyprus.

I suspect that the theology of the advocates of continuity as contrasted with discontinuity in thinking about the relation of God to man tend to underestimate the presence and reality of evil in human affairs. This is a weakness to which all liberal and rationalist theologians tend to be liable. Evil is the surd in human life; the irrational, incalculable, demonic element. It cannot be satisfactorily integrated into a wholly rational, smoothly continuous, intellectually symmetrical account of God's dealings with men. It is not adequate in the end to envisage God as educating men and women out of disobedience and selfishness into the way of truth and goodness. Never have the peoples of the Western world been better or more widely educated than today, but nobody could honestly claim that this education has rendered them less open to temptation to do evil. Education simply enlarges possibilities; the possibility of enlightening but also the possibility of deceiving, the means of disseminating both truth and propaganda, sound understanding and ideology. In a century which has seen two world wars and two uses of an atomic bomb, the conception of God as overcoming the power and presence of evil by education and sweet reasonableness, appealing successfully to a fundamentally rational human race without any need of a Mediator, a revelation and an atonement seems strangely inadequate, pitifully academic. And these concepts of mediation, of revelation and of atonement seem to me to be bound up with the basically eschatological doctrine of
God's new initiative, new order unexpectedly interrupting the course of human history, calling it to account, creating a supreme crisis within it.

There are some situations which can perhaps only be interpreted effectively in eschatological, even apocalyptic terms. Thirty years ago Reinhold Niebuhr suggested that the identification of the Pope as anti-Christ by the men of the sixteenth century was not completely absurd, because in their situation and for their period he did partially fulfill, take on the lineaments of, such a figure. I remember meeting the German theologian Otto Piper in the middle of the last war and, hearing him identify Hitler with anti-Christ, I could not lightly reject this idea. In that situation Hitler was behaving like, was fulfilling much of the role of, anti-Christ. Ugandan Christians might perhaps say the same today of Idi Amin. Perhaps for people of the Jewish faith today the Holocaust can only be understood, if it can be understood at all, in eschatological terms. If—which God forbid—an atomic war were to break out in the future Christians would find it impossible not to interpret this in eschatological terms. It is not without significance that in moments of revolution or unrest or crisis or disturbance Christians have always tended to take refuge in apocalyptic language; we can see this phenomenon appearing during the persecution of the early Church, during the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century. This is the category in which to speak of cataclysmic, overwhelming, revolutionary events.

I still maintain that it is a great mistake to take apocalyptic and eschatological imagery literally. When Count Zinzendorf insisted upon always keeping a horse and carriage ready for instant use on his estate so that he could go out to meet his Lord at the Second Coming at a moment's notice, he was gravely in error. The language of eschatology is mythological because perhaps only such language can speak of the events or realities which human minds can only falteringly conceive of, because such vivid imagery, inadequate though it certainly is, may be less inadequate than other language to handle the subject. Such
imagery is always in danger of being turned into straightforward literal fact on the one hand, and on the other of being allegorized or dissolved into philosophy or psychology or spirituality, or simply dismissed as meaningless. But mythological language in this case at least is not patient of such treatment, any more than poetry can be turned into prose.

Finally we must note that eschatological thought, bizarre, irrational and fantastic though it appears to us, safeguards one truth which I believe to be important for Christianity. It ensures that history is unfinished, unschematized, open, not capable of scientific or determinist analysis or explanation. As Christians we live under a "not yet". This means two things. It means that because the Last Age or the Age to Come or Age of the Messiah is inaugurated but not consummated we cannot yet grasp the fullness of Christian truth and reality. The absolute has not yet appeared and no human persons or institutions have the right to claim to represent it, no Pope, no hierarchy, no Kirk Session, no book, no inspired individual. We still walk by faith, not by sight. We are in pilgrimage, looking forward to fullness and consummation and the full realization of the Kingdom of God. This should serve, and has at times served, as a safeguard against fanaticism, dogmatism and triumphalism in ecclesiastical affairs, though the eschatological "not yet" has admittedly not operated effectively as often as it ought to have.

And this curious element of eschatology also ensures that history is open, that the future is not fixed, even though Christians have time and time again attempted on the basis of eschatological passages in the Bible to plot the course of future history, always without success. But if we take eschatology seriously we do not know when history will end, and it is not in our power to end it. We should be neither fatalistic nor Promethean about history, for eschatology excludes both attitudes. We are not helpless puppets involved in a process manipulated by God against which we are powerless to struggle. Nor are we wholly free to shape and wrest history to our will, to create the slave state governed by the Herrenvolk or the classless society or a man-made utopia of any description. Our attitude to history should
be one of faith. Faith neither deprives us of initiative and effective power of action nor leaves us with the illusion that we are wholly masters of our own destiny. The paradoxical result of retaining a doctrine of the Last Things in Christian doctrine is to make us less confident about predicting the future but perhaps more sober and realistic in facing it.