

## “SURELY THE SECOND COMING IS AT HAND”

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*And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.*

(Heb. 9:27-28)\*

Christ's "Second Coming" (*parusia*) – does nowadays anyone still truly believe in it? Literally? Do Christians of today believe that Christ will come *for the second time* to this world, at the end of salvational history (*Heilsgeschichte*), that is to say our history, which is measured in years after Christ's birth; that he will come "for salvation to those who eagerly await Him", and at the same time, of course, as the fearful judge of those who have turned away from him? Till the very end of the Middle Ages, premodern Christians have actually believed in his Second Coming – with the possible exception of few educated skeptics – for the most part literally. Images of the Last Judgment on mediaeval frescos and above the portals of cathedrals were generally understood as "realistic" depictions of eschatological events most definitely to occur at the end of historical time, even though "of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father *alone*" (Mark 13:32). The traditional interpretation of the Bible's eschatology, especially *The Revelation* as its final book, had no knowledge of certain possibilities of interpretation that can be found in contemporary exegeses, as for instance, that the Last Judgment, seen in the context of thisworldly time, could be seen as "consecutive" for each soul separately, i.e. that each soul is judged at the time of her *own* death, even though, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the judgment is "simultaneous", timeless (let us recall Christ's words spoken to the "second villain" hanging on the cross beside him: "And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43); or of the possibility that the judgment is already taking place "in this life", or even that the Last Judgment is "just a myth" which should be understood on the symbolic level. Christ's Second Coming, Judgment Day and the Resurrection of the Dead as an eschatological complex in its entirety were traditionally understood as an apocalyptic event at the end of *historical* time, as – though undefined in terms of time – the end of our profane history, and at the same time as the transition into the perfection and holiness of the eternal kingdom. This eschatological time dimension, which St. Augustine named "the Straight Path" (*via recta*), opposing it to the "vicious circle" (*circulus vitiosus*) of heathenism, was one of the essential dividing lines between the cyclical cosmos of ancient mythology, religion and philosophy, and the "linear", progressively eschatological Christian creation.

What is the connection between Christ's Second Coming and the "millennium"? Although the Bible isn't entirely explicit about it, the later "millenarians" – if millenarianism is to be understood as a belief in Christ's founding of millennial kingdom on Earth before the end of the world – appeal to a passage from *The Revelation*, where it says:

"[I saw] those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years." (Rev. 20:3-6)

This passage is prophetically unclear, which is why it makes possible various millenarian interpretations, such as the distinctions between the "premillenarianism" and "postmillenarianism" and the like; these distinctions, however, are of no essential importance to this essay. For the present moment, it is enough to acknowledge the fact that, in a broader sense, Christian millenarians believe that at the end of the millennium (or "in a millennium's time") Christ will return to Earth and nowhere else but *here* found his millenary kingdom. Today, two thousand years AD, Christianity is still – for some to a greater, for others to a lesser extent – a live religion, which means that until this moment it still *hasn't been* (not yet?) entirely reduced to a *mere* myth, which, for example, befell Greek heathenish gods or Slavic fairy creatures. And this is why for a contemporary Christian the connection between the biblical *Apocalypse* and the potential historical reality still hasn't fallen apart completely, although it is this very connection that troubles contemporary theological interpretations of *The Revelation of St. John*. The apocalyptic events that are supposed to have been revealed to Apostle John on the island of Patmos, when he was "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1:10), for the present-day knowledge of the world prove not only absolutely fantastic and incredible but also raise an *ethical* question as to how come that the benevolent God Jesus Christ allowed and even ordered such atrocities, committed in his name to the miserable fallen world by avenging angels. It is exactly this aspect that gives rise to a tendency toward a symbolic interpretation of *The Revelation*, which, however, cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the question as to where is the *dividing line* between the symbolic (metaphorical) and literal meaning of the biblical books.

A representative of contemporary Catholic theologians interprets the apocalyptic events in the following way: "Christ's Kingdom is not an event to come but a reality which has already begun. The scenario of our Lord's Second Coming and the Last Judgment is shown to us in the divine Light, and is at the same time a reflection in eternity of what has already been going on in the mystery and in the course of history. In every moment, man expresses who he belongs to and thereby determines his fate. In every moment, the genuineness of his faith is put to the test and his fate is being determined." – As regards the necessity of the "Last Things", the interpreter says the following: "The necessity in *The Book of Revelation* lies not so much in the rightly estimated timing of eschatological time limits but rather in the belief that God's design has already been revealed and has begun to realize with the Easter Event. We are already experiencing the final period."

The above interpretation, which initiates the reader-believer into an understanding of the last book of the Bible, is unsigned; however, we could argue that it is a typical example of today's exegesis and that its status is almost official or at least half official, meaning to say it expresses the "accurate" doctrine of the contemporary Catholic Church in terms of the "Last

Things”. The today’s ecclesiastical doctrine is of course the result of two thousand years of the development of Christianity, and the early Church Fathers almost definitely wouldn’t have agreed with such interpretations, and even less with the thought which can be found under the query “Christ’s Second Coming” in – again just half official – *Biblical Lexicon*:

“The anticipation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ or our Lord’s ‘*parousia*’ in his messianic divine majesty was one of the basic elements of the doctrine of the Old Church and one of the roots of a large variety of its activities. Today, this may strike us as some sort of a myth. [...] We mustn’t think that we have to take biblical statements about Christ’s Second Coming literally. Their meaning and sense are preserved if the eyes of the believer and the redeemed are turned to the future (to hope), if he lives in accord with the history of salvation (with faith in Jesus Christ) and if he takes into account the aspect of the salvation of humanity as a whole. Ruminations over the end of the world stem from the ideas originating in that time, but they have to be replaced with the ideas of today’s scientific world picture. Christ’s Second Coming takes place in history, though it is always in the future.”<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary exegete of the *Apocalypse* is therefore obliged to keep an unsteady balance between the literal and metaphorical meaning and maintain a paradoxical tension between the present and future, between “already” and “not yet”, between the actuality and potentiality:

“In short, the eschatological existence implies being aware of the fact that the future fulfillment is already present in this moment, although still hidden, so that a Christian can speak in favor of and embrace his present moment (salvation in the present) as the moment of the fulfillment of what will have been permanently. The beginning of this new dimension of our life is in Christ, in whom the fulfillment is a potential reality, which still remains unfulfilled in the anticipatory faith” (*ibid.*).

This attractive interpretation, however, leaves open a fundamental question: is such an understanding of the Second Coming and Christian eschatology in general still reconcilable with the *literal* message of the Bible? Are not such interpretations actually “heretical” distortions of the original meaning of the gospels and other canonical texts of The New Testament? This question is directly followed by another one: what is the meaning of the “literal” and what is the *original* meaning of these texts? And immediately new interpretations follow... All these questions notwithstanding, it is instructive to recall the passages in The New Testament which are of crucial importance to the doctrine of Christ’s Second Coming and eschatological events connected with it. Let us first of all bring forward a well-known statement which says that the Christian anticipation of Christ as the Savior has developed from the Jewish anticipation of the messianic king, the Messiah (“the Anointed One”), supposedly a descendant of David’s royal family, who was supposed to deliver his people from their bondage. The messianic faith of the Old Testament therefore shows no traces of the anticipation of the otherworldly Kingdom in Heaven that was to arise with the Messiah, but rather thisworldly, historical liberation; and in the Old Testament, the Judgment was conceived of primarily as a catastrophe occurring within the world, be it a punishment for the chosen people, if it violated the covenant, or a punishment for its enemies, if the people followed their Lord. Isaiah, for example, prophesized: “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty” (Isaiah 13:6), and Ezekiel: “The days draw near as well as the fulfillment of every vision” (Ezekiel 12:23). However, these words are nevertheless ambiguous, and this is why Christians can see in them apocalyptic prophecies which arguably already herald the Coming of Christ the Savior, the first one as well as the second one; the otherworldly eschatology, especially the doctrine of the Second Coming, is fully developed in the New Testament; quite some time before *The Revelation* – already in the synoptic gospels.

In *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, the oldest of synoptic writers, we can read: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”” (Mark 1:14-15). “And Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power”” (Mark 9:1). Another passage of St. Mark brings to light the manner in which the Second Coming of the Son of Man would take place:

“But in those days, after that tribulation, *the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling* from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see *the son of man coming in clouds* with great power and glory. [...] Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” (Mark, 13:24-26 and 30-31)

Jesus’ similar assurances of his imminent return can also be found in other synoptic writers, such as Matthew and Luke (e.g.: Matthew 10:23 and 25:21 ff.; Luke 21:25 ff.) – but still he *hasn’t* come for the second time “with great power and glory”, neither in the time of his contemporaries nor even later. In view of the obvious failure of *parousia*, Jesus’ promise in the gospels can be formally understood in two ways: *whether* Jesus himself hasn’t kept his word (or couldn’t keep his promise, or has changed his mind...?) *or* he was misunderstood by the evangelists (or they wanted to understand him in their own way and erred in putting down his words, copied his words differently...?) – a third option is actually out of the question. However, the dilemma is a poor one: if we accept the *whether*, we question Jesus’ divinity; if we accept the *or*, we undermine the confidence in the credibility of the Gospels as the heart of the Bible. Be that as it may, the apostles and early Christians in general were very soon thrust into a situation where there had to face the postponement of the Second Coming. The works of apostles, especially Paul’s epistles, bear evidence of this facing the reality in the shift from the imminent to “continual anticipation” of *parousia*, laying stress on the fact that “the time has been shortened” (I Cor. 7:29), for “the night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12), and thus: “Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed”( *ibid.*, 11). And then, at the end of the first century AD, the forming Church starts to speak of the *presence* of Kingdom of Heaven, of the *presence* of the Second Coming, which is supposedly announced in the youngest of the Gospels, the gospel according St. John, where it’s written: “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe *has been judged already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18; italics by M. U.); for “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

However, although the realization that it isn’t (wasn’t) true that “this generation will not pass away until all things take place“ (unless “generation” means the human race as a whole, a succession of all generations?), the Apostles, Church Fathers and other early Christians still firmly believe in the Last Judgment, cherishing a belief that “for our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Apostle Peter, the rock of the Church, wrote in his second canonic epistle:

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this

way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (II Peter 3:9-13)

Real apocalyptic orgies strike the eye of imagination in *The Revelation of St. John*. It is one of the most famous and read numinous texts, which has in the last two thousand years lived to see innumerable depictions and replicas. Without a shadow of doubt, there is something in the *Apocalypse* that irrepressibly attracts our attention. What is so attracting in this epos of angelic violence? The victory of good against evil? The punishment and reparation for injustice according to the order of time? Or do we get intoxicated and purified solely in our sadism and hatred of “others”, who are, in contrast to “us good”, evil? Is it simply a human lust for destruction? *Todestrieb*? Or is it the dissolving of fear of death in foreseeing the death of the universe? Or, on the contrary, the anxiety of the Catastrophe, the cosmic Nothingness? Or perhaps even a sublime yearning for shining pearls of the City of Heaven and for, at last, freely accessible fruit from the Tree of Eternal Life in the New Jerusalem? ... It is probably all this and much more that attracts us in the “divinely inspired” visions of St. John. There is a difference in opinion as to whether *The Revelation* and the sublime *Gospel according to St. John*, called also “the Gospel of Love”, have been written by one and the same author. In the 13th chapter of his *Answer to Job* (1952), Carl Gustav Jung analyses the apocalyptic visions of St. John and claims that they are in striking contrast to the benevolent and merciful Jesus from the Gospels. *The Revelation* is “a veritable orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury that revels in fantastic images of terror breaks out and with blood and fire overwhelms a world which Christ had just endeavoured to restore to the original state of innocence and loving communion with God”<sup>2</sup>; in the apocalyptic judgment, the main role is ascribed to the “God’s Lamb”, which opens seven seals, which implies, as Jung puts it, an irrepressible break-in of darkness from the unconscious into the “pious consciousness”, which struggles in vain to stay immaculately light, lucent and pure. “But John’s problem was not a personal one. It was not a question of his personal unconscious or of an outburst of ill humour, but of visions which came up from a far greater and more comprehensive depth, namely from the collective unconscious.”<sup>3</sup> According to Jung, the truth of apocalyptic visions lies in “the spirit of God itself, which blows through the weak mortal frame and again demands man’s *fear* of the unfathomable Godhead.”<sup>4</sup>

The role of *The Revelation of St. John* is particularly interesting within the process of the canonization of biblical books. Beside the canonical *Apocalypse*, a number of eschatological “revelations” with similar contents were preserved from the times of early Christianity; particularly worthy of mentioning here are *Shepard of Hermas*, *The Book of Enoch*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, *The Apocalypse of Mary*, and also the older Qumran scrolls *The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness* etc. (the presentation of these texts exceeds the scope of this contribution, thus only a brief notice). In his treatise “Canon and Apocalyptic” (1998), the German Biblicist Gerbern S. Oegema supplies an interesting piece of information that “especially in the East, the canonical authenticity was continuously questioned; in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century, it was still refused (by Christian saints and Church Fathers) John Chrysostom, Theodoret, Basilus, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus”<sup>5</sup>, and John’s *Revelation* was put in the same group as all the above-mentioned texts. Beside *The Revelation of St. John*, Irenaeus of Lyon (2<sup>nd</sup> century)

reckoned among the canonical books *The Shepard of Hermas*, like Origen of Alexandria (3<sup>rd</sup> century), who also added certain apocryphal (Gnostic) gospels, while Eusebius of Caesarea (3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century) thought that *The Revelation of St. John* was problematic, because it was misused by heretical Montanists as well as other millenarians.<sup>6</sup> The biblical canon, at least as regards the Western Christianity, received its final definition no sooner than with Aurelius Augustine (4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century), who in his *De doctrina Christiana*, made a list of all canonical works, and his choice was sanctified on the Synods in Hippo (393) and Cartage (397 and 417 AD). Oegema raises the question as to why even before the beginning of the 5th century the above-mentioned “apocryphal” texts were potentially canonical, and how come that later on the apocalypse of St. John was the only book to belong to the canon. He hasn't found the final answer to the question; instead, he contented himself with the assumption that it was the “inflation” of apocalypses in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the establishment of Christianity as state religion Constantine, 4<sup>th</sup> century) that roused the need for the final arrangement of the Holy Scriptures by adequately rounding up the official list. Oegema also assumes that *The Revelation of St. John*, after it had been undoubtedly accepted into the canon, with its “mysticism of numbers” (four, seven) played the role of some kind of a guide for the number of other accepted texts, for example apostolic epistles (there are seven “pastoral” epistles of St. Paul in the canon, the rest of the accepted epistles were supposed to have been “private”) and perhaps even the Gospels (four, in accordance to the four animals in the apocalypse). This, however, is already a detailed Biblicist subject matter and is of no crucial importance for our context.

It is important for the development of Christian eschatology that, within the Church, a period of *imminent* anticipation of Christ's Second Coming came to an end with Augustine. For Augustine as the founder of Christian theology and/or philosophy, the “millennium” (like “The City of God”, *civitas Dei*) meant primarily the spiritual state into which the Church as a community enters especially at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends upon it and thus elevates it to the Kingdom of God, in a sense already here, in this life. As a matter of fact, the possibility of an actual *second* coming was never explicitly rejected; but after four Christian centuries it was obviously pushed into an indeterminate, far-off, reputed future. From time to time, the idea of an imminent Second Coming was revived by heretic movements, such as the Husite Movement of Taborites, Protestant Anabaptists, Mormons, Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses and other modern millenarians, who again and again relentlessly (and so far, thank God, mistakenly) announce the Judgment Day.

The depiction of the Last Judgment, as seen by St. John on the island of Patmos, has today become – as a real possibility of the end of history and universe as a whole – almost entirely unbelievable. And yet... Christianity with its apocalyptic eschatology is still here, undeniably living in the faith of many people. An important feature of Christian churches, especially Catholic, is the emphasis on “the public”, the community of sacral events, which holds true also and in particular for the Last Judgment:

“The idea decisive for the early church's expectation of the Judgment, however, was that the Last Judgment will be a public one. This corresponds to the fundamental Christian idea that human beings – both the living and the dead – are bound together in an indissoluble communion; it presupposes the conception of the church as the body of Christ. All of humanity is as one person. Humans sin with one another, and their evil is connected together in the ‘realm of sin’ in a manifold way, unrecognizable in the individual. Each person is responsible for the other and is guilty with the other. The judgment upon each person, therefore, concerns all. Judgment upon the individual is thus at the

same time judgment upon the whole, and vice versa. The Judgment is also public in regard to the positive side – the praise and reward of God for that which is done rightly and practiced in the common life, often without knowing it.”<sup>7</sup>

The quoted words, anonymously cited in the well-known encyclopedia, still prove one of the best characterizations of Christianity I’ve ever read. Christianity is great exactly in its emphasis on mutual interconnectedness of souls and the importance of community (society, church) for the individual’s salvation, which is based on this interconnectedness. All this notwithstanding, a thinking person is again and again facing the question as to how big is the price of the Christian community? If on the one side of the scales is the communal, universal *Heilsgeschichte* (salvational history) with all its miracles, rituals and myths, in which a rational human being is quite unlikely to believe any more, and on the other side the *truth*, or more exactly, the sense of *reality* – which side should the God-searching soul tip the scales to? Nowadays it seems as if “practical” Christians more or less ceased asking themselves questions about the reality of their faith. As if in the two millennia of Christian history this questioning has lost its vigor (or become redundant?). And thus we are facing a strange paradox that on the one hand the Bible gives a detailed description of the Last Judgment – and at the end of *The Revelation* it even says that whoever adds to or takes away anything from the words of the book, “God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19), while on the other hand it is very likely that we can hardly find anyone who still believes in the *reality* of these words! We all add something to them or take something away from them, even if it is only their “symbolic meaning”! There is definitely something wrong here... Whether the Bible isn’t (entirely) real or today’s faith isn’t (entirely) genuine?

If I go back to the beginning of this essay: I asked myself whether there is still someone among us who claims to be a Christian (if we set aside Jehovah Witnesses and other similar “fantasts”), is there someone who quite truly, that is literally, without any sophisticated supplements in the “metalanguage”, WHO quite straightforwardly (at face value) believes in Christ’s Second Coming, in the apocalyptic Last Judgment as it is described in *The Revelation*? I quite believe that the majority of Christians of the ancient world and Middle Ages would have promptly rendered a positive answer, while in the modern age Christ’s Second Coming (and the whole iconography of the biblical Last Judgment in general) has been understood more and more as a *myth* – for, as we have seen, the mythical symbolism is nowadays ascribed to *The Revelations* even by the “official” Catholic commentators. Myths of course have *their own* reality, though not such a reality to ground on it our hopes for the otherworldly salvation. It is poets rather than theologians and philosophers who are more competent for myths. The poets who in their metaphorical riches follow the immortal Dante concede to the eschatological “Last Things” a *quasi-real* status of a hyperbolic (transcendent) metaphor; in this sense, for example, William Butler Yeats in the poem *The Second Coming* wrote the following:

Surely some relevation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man...<sup>8</sup>

May Yeats' beast remain in its poetic quasi-reality, in the symbolic *Spiritus Mundi*! What does it actually mean: "Surely the Second Coming is at hand"? The moment I utter these words, I am immediately disturbed by the thought that this might come true. God forbid! And after all, *whatever for* should he, Jesus Christ, come for the second time? Hasn't he redeemed man already with his first coming? Didn't he already then say everything man needed to know? Hasn't he already given man his main commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34)? If, however, we continue asking ourselves about His Second Coming, we cannot avoid the question – *where* should he come *from* today? From Heaven? From which "celestial sphere"? Perhaps from the tenth? When we know since Copernicus that there aren't any celestial spheres "up there", when modern astronomy teaches us that there are only stars in the sky, far-off suns, many of them surrounded by planets, perhaps similar to our planet, since there is, so to say, an infinite number of stars, clustered in galaxies, in billions of galaxies spreading billions of light years away from us!

Let us say then that for the modern man – both believer and atheist, though in a different way – biblical eschatology bears principally a *symbolic*, metaphorical meaning. And since the symbol is always a symbol of *something* and since the metaphor, also the hyperbolic one, always refers to *something*, "transfers meaning", we may ask ourselves, *what* is today the aim of the symbolic meaning of the *Apocalypse*, *The Revelation of St. John*, which despite everything cannot be *entirely* reduced to the poetic quasi-reality, like for example Dante's or Yeats' poetic visions. Several answers are possible, but the one patently obvious is: the apocalyptic "second coming" is today a symbol of our finitude, death, and not only personal but also (potential) death of the universe, the total destruction of the world, universe, which is, despite its immensity and mysteriousness, still believed to be "our", thisworldly universe ... and ... *if* we believe in the Savior... his Second Coming is also a symbol of Salvation, Resurrection in the "other sameness", even though we have no idea as to the manner in which this should happen, the way resurrection not only of the soul but of the whole human being "made of flesh and blood" was possible – even if with his second coming the benevolent God Christ truly wanted to tear us away from the clutches of death.

Can we imagine the nearing end of the world? It is of course always possible since the existence of the world is not a necessity secured in advance. If we ignore catastrophes which wouldn't come "from above" but were occasioned by people themselves (nuclear wars, "hotbed" etc.), a proportionately large asteroid crushing into our planet would suffice to end human life on Earth – in biblical words: "And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch" (Rev. 8:10) – or let's say that somewhere in our solar neighborhood a supernova would explode, or even that the entire universe known to us would collapse in a sudden release of the energy of "false vacuum" and the like. There are many fatal scenarios parallel to biblical prophecies possible, but alas one is forced to argue that in contemporary scientific prognoses of the potential end of Earth, Solar System, Galaxy or even the whole Universe, we can find nothing biblically *apocalyptic* (taken literally: "revelational"), since it is no longer understood as a tragically elevated as well as salvational end of cosmic history, divine epopee; it is no longer deemed a triumphant culmination of *Heilsgeschichte*, because scientific "dark scenarios" say nothing of salvaged spirits who would have survived the death of the universe and bear witness to God's justice. The New Jerusalem, promised in the Bible,

would not have descended on Earth, neither would it descend between the two villages in desolate hills, as Montanists would have imagined it almost two thousand years ago, nor would the thisworldly Jerusalem or Rome mystically transform into the new one, as is most likely imagined by certain Christians with overstretched apocalyptic inspirations.

However, John's *Revelation* as the final book of the Christian Bible is still *here*, calling to an interpretation, understanding, even though every rational argumentation is insufficient. As we have seen, there are strong tendencies in the contemporary Christian exegesis toward symbolic interpretation of the *Apocalypse*. Such an interpretation of religious holy books was developed and theoretically grounded by one of the most famous protestant theologians of the previous century Paul Tillich (1886-1965). We shall take a look at some of his thoughts taken from the article "Religious language as symbolic" (1955). His basic thought, which finds inspiration in C. G. Jung, is that we have to distinguish between signs and symbols: the sign is conventional, denotative and suitable primarily for scientific discourse (and of course everyday communication), while the symbol with its semantic function is something more than the sign, primarily in that symbols "participate" in the *reality* they symbolize, i.e. they participate in the "power" of reality opening up with them, and at the same time help create it. Tillich says that "perhaps the main function of the symbol is the opening up of levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way", because "every symbol opens up a level of reality for which nonsymbolic speaking is inadequate."<sup>9</sup> Symbols likewise get born and die in the "collective unconscious", "in this way, all of the polytheistic gods have died."<sup>10</sup> Tillich thinks that religious symbols are symbols of the Holy, however, there is the tendency in human mind to make idols out of them: "All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself."<sup>11</sup> Symbols of the Holy are always ambiguous, immanent and transcendent in relation to man – symbolic reality is not less, but *more* than "just" simple reality (denoted by signs), Tillich believes.

In view of such a notion of the distinction between the sign and the symbol, Tillich's interpretation of religious symbols – together with the symbolism of the *Apocalypse* – can be summarized in the following way: there is absolutely no possibility of verifying their truth in the scientific methodical way, in the manner of *adaequatio rei et intellectus* – because this method is applicable solely to the denotative discourse of signs. This is why, for example, the sentence "God has sent his Son to this world" is nonsensical if we try to explain it as a denotative proposition, however, "if it is taken symbolically, it is a profound expression, the ultimate Christian expression, of the relationship between God and man in the Christian experience".<sup>12</sup> Such a notion of religious discourse is closely related to that of Jung, whose numinous forms are symbols (archetypes) of the collective unconscious and are as such "psychically real" – and this not only on the subjective, individual level of human mind or mentality. Such an interpretation of religious phenomena is very suitable for, let's say, Buddhism, maybe even for Jewish thought (Kabala); however, it is questionable for Christianity, exactly because of the Christian persistence on the "material reality" of most important religious statements – for example those of miracles, Communion, Resurrection ... - and Tillich eventually doesn't pay enough attention to this Christian emphasis. When he speaks about the sacrament of the Last Supper, he says: "In this sense, the Lord's Supper, or better the materials in the Lord's Supper, are symbolic. Now you will ask perhaps, 'only symbolic?' That sounds as if there were something more than symbolic, namely 'literal'. But the literal is not more but less than symbolic."<sup>13</sup> This may very well sound convincing, but

the problem is that despite the, let's say, presumed symbolic character of Jesus' miracles, reported in the Gospels, *there remains* a question as to whether or not they have *really* happened? Has Jesus really awoken Lazarus from the dead? Has he awoken him from the dead or not? An analogous question raises itself in reference to the central Christian sacrament, the Holy Communion: is it only a symbolic "memory" of Him, of the Last Supper of the human being Jesus, named Christ, a sage and a prophet, founder of the largest Western religion, the spiritual teacher of Christians – or is the "substance" of bread and wine in the Communion *really* transformed into His flesh and blood? What is the meaning of His words: "Take, eat; this is My body" (Matthew 26:26). And what is the meaning of the additional words in *The Gospel according to St. Luke*: "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19)? *Only* in remembrance or *also* in remembrance of Him? My opinion is that the *essence* of the Eucharist – which is known to me only "from outside", and therefore not from my own religious experience – is exactly its *double nature*, that is to say it cannot be reduced solely to the symbolic level, because, for an orthodox Christian, there is always also a "surplus" of *the real* beyond the symbolic level. Without it, the real Christianity would lose its salvational power, and all that remained of it would be "just" a symbolic discourse – which is by all means highly important and constitutive for the Western culture, both aesthetically and ethically precious for us all – but it would no longer be salvational in the sense it is understood and felt by Christians. Christianity would become a symbolic gnosis, as it is already seen by some "non-Christians" or "non-confessionals", included myself: I can admire the Christian symbolism (and also ethics, aesthetics etc.), but unfortunately I cannot be convinced in the *reality* of this symbolism.

And this is exactly the reason why symbolic interpretations of the Bible – including *The Apocalypse*, and especially *The Apocalypse* – are always problematic and insufficient, despite their attractiveness and "sophistication". There namely still remains an unanswered question: where is the *dividing line* between the literal and symbolic meaning? Let us say that, following the advice of contemporary "official" interpreters of *The Revelation*, we actually read it only as a symbolic record of the eschatological "Last Things" – otherwise we would get stuck in unsolvable epistemological and ethical dilemmas – but how can we read the *Gospels* themselves: are they also to be understood for the most part symbolically? Are Jesus' miracles (only) symbolic? And His resurrection from death? This is where a Christian is most likely to stop: no, this just cannot be understood "only symbolically", and we also cannot say, as Tillich believes, that the symbolic is "more" than the literally true, the real. Christ either has or hasn't arisen from the dead, *tertium non datur*. And a Christian believes that Christ has *truly* arisen from the dead!

This is why facing the truth of the *Apocalypse*, Christ's promise that he will come back, that he will come at the end of time *for the second time* to this world in all the glory of the messianic king, Savior and Judge, is so full of anxiety and traumatic even for a Christian, that it "sounds to him today as some sort of a myth", as we have read earlier in the *Biblical Lexicon*. Whether we like it or not, there arises a question: If His *Second Coming* is a myth, could we perhaps claim the same thing for the *first* one?

*Translated from the Slovenian by Janko Lozar*

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## NOTES

\* All biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>1</sup> *Biblical Lexicon*, in Slovenian: *Biblični leksikon*. 1984: Mohorjeva družba, Celje. (Translated from German: *Praktisches Bibellexikon*, hsg. Anton Grabner-Heider, Verlag Herder KG, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1969, and republications.)

<sup>2</sup> C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job* [1952], from *Psychology and Religion: West and East. Collected Works*, Vol. II., p. 612.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 618.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>5</sup> Oegema, Gerbern S., 1998: "Kanon und Apokaliptik", in: *Interpretacija Svetega pisma / Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Jože Krašovec, SAZU, Ljubljana and Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, p. 278-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Montanism*, also called Cataphrygian Heresy, or New Prophecy, was a heretical movement founded by the prophet Montanus that arose in the Christian church in Phrygia, Asia Minor, in the 2nd century. Subsequently it flourished in the West, principally in Carthage under the leadership of Tertullian in the 3rd century. [...] According to the known history, Montanus, a recent Christian convert, appeared at Ardabau, a small village in Phrygia, about 156. He fell into a trance and began to "prophesy under the influence of the Spirit." He was soon joined by two young women, Prisca, or Priscilla, and Maximilla, who also began to prophesy. The movement spread throughout Asia Minor. [...] The essential principle of Montanism was that the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, whom Jesus had promised in the Gospel According to John, was manifesting himself to the world through Montanus and the prophets and prophetesses associated with him. This did not seem at first to deny the doctrines of the church or to attack the authority of the bishops. [...] Another important aspect of Montanism was the expectation of the **Second Coming** of Christ, which was believed to be imminent. This belief was not confined to Montanists, but with them it took a special form that gave their activities the character of a popular revival. They believed the heavenly Jerusalem was soon to descend on the Earth in a plain between the two villages of Pepuza and Tymion in Phrygia. The prophets and many followers went there, and many Christian communities were almost abandoned. (From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1999, the query "Montanism".)

<sup>7</sup> From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1999, the query "concepts of life after death".

<sup>8</sup> Yeats, William Butler, *The Second Coming*, from F. T. Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*, A Mentor Book, Ninth Printing, 1961, p. 473.

<sup>9</sup> Tillich, Paul, 1996: "Religious language as symbolic," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson et al., Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 359.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363-4.