
An Eschatological Modernity

Eschatology—that is, a religious interpretation of the fulfillment of God’s plan (the eschaton)—reemerged as an important theme in twentieth-century European Christianity. Biblical studies led the way in the work of Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965). For Weiss, the predominant theme within the preaching of Jesus was the imminence of the “kingdom of God.” Schweitzer states that the earliest Christians believed in the impending end of the world and, as a result, in the urgency of responding to the gospel message. According to Joseph Ratzinger, the rediscovery of the eschatological character of Jesus’s preaching in the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer impacted biblical studies but had little immediate impact on systematic theology: “As far as systematic theology was concerned, they had not the faintest idea of what to do with their discovery.”¹ However, as Ratzinger explains, Karl Barth’s 1919 *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*

1. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 47.

initiated a revolution. Barth stated, “A Christianity that is not wholly eschatology and nothing but eschatology has absolutely nothing to do with Christ.”² Barth’s radical break with liberal Protestantism and his eschatological turn is often associated with a disillusionment with modern ideologies of progress triggered by the experience of the World War I. The war indeed acted as a ferment for a theological reawakening to eschatology among many Christian theologians.

Yet this reawakening also occurred in the midst of a period of reevaluation of the meaning of time and eternity, beginning in the nineteenth century. From around the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a broad crisis of adequately representing temporality and the eternal was unfolding within scientific, literary, economic, philosophical, and artistic spheres. Stephen Kern explains,

The structure of history, the uninterrupted forward movement of clocks, the procession of days, seasons, years, and simple common sense tells us that time is irreversible and moves forward at a steady rate. Yet these features of traditional time were also challenged as artists and intellectuals envisioned times that reversed themselves, moved at irregular rhythms, and even came to a dead stop. In the *fin de siècle*, time’s arrow did not always fly straight and true.³

No single theoretical model accounts for all the different shifts in temporal representation and eschatological consciousness during the period. It suffices, for my purposes, to indicate that the modern West experienced a confusion over the meaning of time and its end, a confusion that effected an eschatological consciousness during the *fin de siècle* and following. Additionally, this confusion affected the experience and representation of time and eternity in Roman Catholicism.

2. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314.

3. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 28.

Representing Time in a Changing World

According to David Harvey, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, an Enlightenment sense of space and time was dominant among the bourgeoisie. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized the rational, objective, quantifiable, and universal characteristics of time and space.⁴ For example, the production of maps increasingly represented the earth in those aspects necessary for navigation and commerce, evacuating space of the “sensuous” qualities developed in medieval cartography: “Maps, stripped of all elements of fantasy and religious belief, as well as any sign of the experiences involved in their production, had become abstract and strictly functional systems for the factual ordering of phenomena in space.” The Enlightenment gave a “totalizing” sense of space insofar as the whole world could be conceived as existing in a “single spatial frame.”⁵ The Enlightenment conception and production of time was similarly totalizing in its prioritization of the neutral, objective, quantifiable, and infinite qualities of time. The chronometer provided a fixed division for time’s flow, allowing its exact measurement and, significantly, the conception of time as a linear progress. Newton’s *Principia* envisioned space as a kind of envelope or container for materially extended things, and time was a receptacle for change. Absolute time was mathematical in its qualities and extended into the past and future infinitely. Although Newtonian space and time had its challengers in Leibniz and Kant, they left undisturbed the emphasis on the universal, neutral, and quantifiable temporal qualities.

From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, economic and colonial expansion required mastery over space. As Dana Sobel narrated in *Longitude* (1995), mastery over space, and specifically mastery of

4. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 245.

5. *Ibid.*, 249–50.

the oceans, necessitated a system for accurately determining longitude. She notes that means to determining latitude had been available for centuries through the position of the stars. But determining longitude with any accuracy remained a problem until the eighteenth century. While great strides were made to solve this problem through astronomy, the simplest solution came through a mechanical clock that could withstand travel, changes in temperature, and weather, while remaining accurate. By comparing the time of a known location to the solar time of a new location, one could determine the degree hour difference between the two, and thus one's longitude. The mastery of space required a mastery over time. This mastery over time did not happen quickly or uniformly. It took until 1884 for the International Meridian Conference to make Greenwich the prime meridian and standardize the measurement of longitude and world time on the basis of it. Sobel notes that it took the French another twenty-seven years to recognize Greenwich as the prime meridian instead of Paris.⁶

The end of the nineteenth century experienced the victory of the Enlightenment conception of temporality through technological advancements in mechanical clocks and systems of measurement. Ironically, this same period experienced a serious challenge to the Enlightenment sense of time with the genesis of literary, artistic, and cultural phenomena known as *modernism*. Technological development is significant to the story of modernism because new technologies reordered how Westerners experienced their world and how they experienced time. In brief, the increasing speed of communication and transportation during the nineteenth to twentieth centuries led to a shrinking world. As a result, heterogeneous local practices of measuring time—often governed

6. Dana Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* (New York: Walker and Company, 1995), 168.

by agricultural, local commercial, liturgical-religious, and seasonal cycles—were put in conflict. The development of the telegraph and the expansion of railways joined different local times together, exposing their differences. Kern notes that travelers on a cross-continental journey by railroad in 1870 would pass through over two hundred different local times. In 1870, there were over eighty time zones used by the railroads in the United States.⁷ The confusion between different systems had a detrimental effect on the efficiency of railroads and, in 1883, a uniform system of measuring time for the railroads was created. In the following year, the Prime Meridian Conference organized the twenty-four time zones. The increased speed of communication and transportation led to various systematic orderings of time across space, joining previously separated peoples and economies. This was a vast but chaotic reorganization and creation of public time, the uniform and measurable progression of moments to which local times would have to conform.

According to Harvey, modernism as a “cultural force” formed under the “crisis of representation . . . derived from a radical readjustment in the sense of time and space in economic, political, and cultural life.”⁸ The interconnectedness of the international economy, the increased speed of commerce, the unification of monetary systems, and the development of new communication technologies were elements of “time-space compression.”

Enlightenment thought operated within the confines of a rather mechanical “Newtonian” vision of the universe, in which the presumed absolutes of homogeneous time and space formed limiting containers to thought and action. The breakdown in these absolute conceptions under the stress of time-space compression was the central story in the birth of nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of modernism.⁹

7. Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 12.

8. Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 260.

9. *Ibid.*, 252.

Thus, “time-space compression” brought the tensions between public time and private time, the universal and the particular, the international and the local into the foreground.

The awareness of new configurations of space and time played out in art and literature, notably in the writings of James Joyce, Gustave Flaubert, and Charles Baudelaire. Joyce and Flaubert expressed the “simultaneity” of modern life, in which actions and events in different places paralleled and affected one another. Just as different places were being absorbed under a single economy, these authors tried to represent the relationship between heterogeneous “times.” Closely related to simultaneity was the feeling that modern life was riddled by constant change, insecurity, and ephemerality. Baudelaire’s attempt to reconcile “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” with “the eternal and the immutable” was characteristic of the “aesthetic thrust of modernism” as a whole “to strive for this sense of eternity in the midst of flux.”¹⁰

The attempt to reconcile time and eternity in literary modernism is consonant with the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson. For Bergson, the discrete units of mathematical or clock time fail to capture the dynamic flow of reality, life as a dynamic energy, and of the experience of *durée* (duration). According to Bergson, consciousness is a stream rather than a “conglomeration of separate faculties or ideas.”¹¹ He distinguished between a relative knowledge of reality through the symbols or language that ultimately distort it, by breaking it up into various pieces, and the absolute knowledge of reality through a form of intuition. In his conception of *durée*, he appealed to a mystical experience of time and of reality beyond our power to represent. In a sense, Bergson’s temporal mysticism was an

10. *Ibid.*, 10, 206.

11. Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 24.

attempt to reconcile the sense of eternity with an evolutionary view of a constantly changing world.¹²

The technological advancements that were the cause of economic and cultural unification brought about a struggle to reconcile the eternal with the contingent, changing world. Similarly, modern life brought about a rethinking of the historical plane, particularly the relationship between the present and the future.

Representing the Future

Enlightenment representations of the future depended upon a conception of time as straight and uniform in direction. Progress was a straight line from myth to reason, ignorance to knowledge, and bondage to freedom.¹³ The future of humanity was already emerging in the present day through the emergence of new forms of governance, science, and knowledge. In *fin-de-siècle* Europe, the Enlightenment version of the future became increasingly contested. Not only did challenges to Enlightenment notions of uniformity and progress emerge, but apocalyptic understandings of time took center stage in cultural, literary, and political arenas. Like the Enlightenment era, these new conceptions of time and history depicted qualitatively different times and caesuras between eras. Yet they announced different ruptures between the past and present, and between the present and future. The apocalyptic sentiment of living just before

12. Bergson is known to have had a keen antipathy toward clocks. As Kern notes, Bergson's appeal to the experience of temporality and his emphasis on intuition is consonant with Charles Péguy, who "explained the spiritual death of Christianity by its mindless repetition of fixed ideas: layers of habit stifle the dynamic energies of true faith." *Ibid.*, 26. Bergson's lectures inspired Christian thinkers like Pierre Rousselot, Jacques Maritain, and Gabriel Marcel.

13. Immanuel Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question 'What is Enlightenment?'" exemplifies the Enlightenment faith in a slow growth of humanity toward the independent use of reason, liberty, and knowledge. Kant states that enlightenment is the emergence of humanity from its immaturity. Enlightenment, he says, needs liberty to reason publicly.

the end was a wide-ranging cultural expression of this contested “future.”

A version of this sentiment is manifested in the Italian Futurist Movement’s admiration of technology, speed, and violence that ushered in a new world. The introduction to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo” (Futurist foundation and manifesto, 1909) reads almost like an apocalyptic text in which the seer glimpses through the veil of this world to the drama that lies beyond it.¹⁴ Marinetti narrates a drunken escapade that results in overturning his automobile in a muddy ditch. Emerging injured from the muck, he announces the principles of Futurism: live dangerously without fear; awaken to the “beauty of speed,” exemplified in the racing car; aggressiveness and violence are the media of creativity; reject antiquarianism, museums, and the past; glorify youthfulness. Marinetti declares that we are living at the last point of history. Human beings, as the creators of speed, have broken down the barriers to the impossible. He claimed to be ushering in the age of the “impossible” and the “absolute.” Although Marinetti’s glimpse of a glorious future is in continuity with Enlightenment thought, he does not propose a slow evolution toward maturity. The future breaks violently with the past and, indeed, violence and technology bring about this future. The Futurist infatuation with a new humanity or posthumanity united to technology spilled over into politics; many Futurists became fascists.¹⁵

14. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Fondazione e manifesto del Futurismo,” *Gazzetta dell’Emilia*, February 5, 1909.

15. See Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909–1944* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996). Mark Antliff argues that the arts mediated fascism in France prior to the Second World War, particularly insofar as they expressed the expectation of a new humanity, the “New Man,” and the desire to overthrow all institutions. Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

The awareness of the near future was not always the expectation of a glorious future era. In some cases, it was an expectation of a decline. The theory of the heat death of the universe, embodied in the second law of thermodynamics, exercised an influence over popular imagination, particularly in the French Decadent Movement of the late nineteenth century. The entropy of all available energy in the universe—no matter how far in the future it would occur—symbolized a feeling of being on the verge of the end. David Weir states, “Whether the late nineteenth century was actually a period of decadence is open to debate; but it clearly was perceived as such, as a time when all was over, or almost over: not the end, but the ending.”¹⁶ H. G. Wells’s *Time Machine* foretold a catastrophic future in which humanity would degenerate, “overpowered by the forces of nature and society, leading to . . . an ultimate extinction of the species.”¹⁷ The protagonist first arrives in a posthuman future and then travels in his time machine farther into the future to witness a barren planet tumbling through space. Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918) echoed the theme of the degeneration of society. Like all civilizations, Western civilization follows an evolutionary course of life and death. Having reached its apex, it is now experiencing its final season. “The theory of Entropy signifies today [the] world’s end as completion of an inwardly necessary evolution.”¹⁸ According to Spengler, the modern world is uniquely obsessed with time and the future; moderns measure the meaning of the present by its projected end.

In fields of art, politics, and history, a dominant trope was emerging. *Fin-de-siècle* interpretations of the present moment ranged

16. David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 17.

17. Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 91.

18. *Ibid.*, 105.

from intoxicated enthusiasm to despair. Furthermore, the imaginary future of society represented the telos of the present, the age right before the end. Whether the coming era was perceived as the dawn of a new era of history, or the initial winding down of a tired universe, the present age was seen to be one of transition to a new era.

Eternalism in Catholic Neoscholasticism and Anti-Modernism

A new historical consciousness arising within various fields posed the vital challenge to Christian theology in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. Roman Catholic theology and culture manifested a particular allergy to historical consciousness, particularly in the neoscholastic theological movement and among antimodernist Catholics. *Neoscholasticism* refers to a Catholic theological movement that arose in the middle of the nineteenth century as a recovery of medieval theology. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) endorsed medieval theology, preeminently the theology of Thomas Aquinas, as the primary intellectual vehicle for a Catholic response to the challenges to Christian belief in the modern world. Based on *Aeterni Patris*, theological schools employed neoscholastic theology for the theological formation of priests, which held a quasi-official status within Catholic teaching for over seventy years. Neoscholasticism is historically related to what Joseph Komonchak calls the "construction" of Roman Catholicism, a distinct subculture or sociological form that Catholicism took as a response to modernity.¹⁹ Resistance to the modern world was characteristic of this subculture. *Antimodernist* refers to those authors and their writings who suppressed Catholic Modernists, that is, those considered overly sympathetic toward modern philosophy, critical

19. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 18, no. 2 (1997): 353–85.