CHAPTER 11

ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

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Though the Roman Catholic church claims historical continuity with Jesus Christ himself and regards the subsequent Christian development as its own, nevertheless it acquired distinctive features in matters of doctrine, worship, ethics, spirituality, and organization since the Reformation in opposition to the Protestant churches (and to a lesser extent also to the Orthodox church since 1054). Hence, in this chapter, "Roman Catholic theology" refers to the doctrinal development that has taken place in the Roman Catholic church from the sixteenth century (commonly referred to as the Counter-Reformation) until today. By *eschatology* is meant the doctrine of the "last things," that is, realities concerning the ultimate destinies of the individual person, of humanity, and of the world as a whole, such as death, individual judgment, heaven, hell, the resurrection of the dead, Christ's Second Coming (Parousia), and universal judgment.

Since it is characteristic of Roman Catholic theology to accord a special authority to the official teachings of the church (the magisterium), especially of ecumenical councils and bishops (in particular the bishop of Rome and his immediate collaborators), this chapter begins with an exposition of the magisterium's teaching on eschatology. Next, it expounds the eschatology of some of the most influential contemporary Roman Catholic theologians. Finally, it indicates the main directions which Roman Catholic eschatology will take in the near future.

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Catholic Official Teachings on Eternal Life

Pre–Vatican II Eschatology

Until the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Roman Catholic eschatology was by and large a reiteration of biblical and creedal affirmations concerning the afterlife. It consisted mainly in an elaboration of the belief that Jesus, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, "will come again to judge the living and the dead" and that there will be "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." It offered a mostly literal interpretation of the biblical sayings about Christ's Second Coming and universal judgment as well as about heaven and hell. Under the influence of Greek, especially Platonic, philosophy, Christian theology began emphasizing individual over collective eschatology and spoke more of the immortality of the soul than the resurrection of the body or of the dead. Against the doctrine of *apokatastasis* (universal restoration), the Council of Constantinople (543) affirmed the eternity of hell. In his constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336), Pope Benedict XII taught the immediate retribution after death, that is, "beatific vision" in heaven for the blessed, eternal punishments of hell for the damned, and spiritual cleansing and the satisfaction of temporal punishments in purgatory for those who die with venial sins. The pope also assumed that the soul exists apart from the body until the end of time (the "intermediate state"). In dispute with the Orthodox church and in reaction against the Reformers' denial, the existence of purgatory as a place of punishment and purification was affirmed by the Councils of Lyons (1274), Florence (1439), and Trent (1563). With regard to the identity of the resurrected body, the Eleventh Council of Toledo (675) and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) taught the resurrection of the same body "in which we live, exist, and move."

In the neoscholastic theology of the pre–Vatican II era, the treatise on eschatology called *De Novissimis* (On the Last Things) was generally placed at the end of dogmatics. An unintended but unfortunate result is that eschatology became a harmless appendix to the theological curriculum, as Karl Barth has wryly remarked, to satisfy human curiosity about the mysteries of the beyond, with little or no impact on how Christian faith is understood as a whole. It was not treated as the central theme, as it is in the New Testament, shaping and permeating the systematic exposition of the Christian faith. Furthermore, the main focus of this eschatology is the eternal fate of the individual, while the collective destiny of humanity as a whole and of the cosmos itself and the roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the shaping of this destiny recede into the background. Finally, biblical statements on the afterlife were for the most part taken as a realistic *description*, an advance report as it were, of what happens beyond death rather than as a *prescription* for how, in

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light of the faith in eternal life, Christians should carry out, of course with God's grace, the transformation of history and the world, in all their economic, sociopolitical, and ecological dimensions, into the reign of God.

Vatican II's Renewal of Eschatology

Convoked by Pope John XXIII, not with the view to condemn errors and to define new doctrines, as had been the case with all the preceding ecumenical councils, but as a pastoral council to promote the updating (*aggiornamento*) of the church in response to the challenges of the modern world, Vatican II does not offer a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of Christian doctrines, including eschatology. Rather, the council's main contribution consists in restoring eschatology to its rightful place in Christian theology. Eschatology was brought from the margins to the center of Christian thought and was linked with the key doctrines of the Christian faith.

This radical reversal is evident in the most important of Vatican II's sixteen documents, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* = *LG*). The seventh chapter of *LG* places eschatology in the context of the church as the pilgrim people of God. Eschatology is no longer conceived as a descriptive report on the afterlife but as that which defines the very nature of the church:

> The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which by the grace of God we attain holiness, will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when the time of the renewal of all things will have come (Acts 3:21). At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself, which is so closely related to humanity and which attains its destiny through humanity, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ. (no. 48)[1]

Furthermore, since Vatican II follows St. Cyprian in viewing the universal church as "a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (no. 4), by situating eschatology in ecclesiology, the council also gives it a strong Christocentric, pneumatological, and ecclesial imprint. Vatican II emphasizes that the final age was already irreversibly inaugurated by Christ, was carried forward by the Holy Spirit, now continues in the church, and involves the duty of transforming the present world:

> The promised and hoped for restoration, therefore, has already begun in Christ. It is carried forward in the sending of the Holy Spirit and through him continues in the Church in which, through our faith, we learn the meaning of our earthly life, while, as we hope for the benefits which are to come, we bring to its conclusion the task allotted to us in the world by the Father, and so work out our salvation (see Phil. 2:12). (no. 48)

Therefore, according to Vatican II, eschatology is not just one of the several Christian doctrines; rather, it is, as it were, the thread linking all the Christian

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doctrines together. The church does not simply believe in the afterlife; it is by nature a "pilgrim church":

> Until the arrival of the new heavens and the new earth in which justice dwells (see 2 Pet. 3:13) the pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and takes its place among the creatures which groan and until now suffer the pains of childbirth and await the revelation of the children of God (see Rom. 8:19–22). (no. 48)

Calling for constant watchfulness and the ardent desire to be with Christ, Vatican II goes on to reiterate the traditional teachings on hell, heaven, purgatory, Christ's glorious return, the resurrection of all the dead, the universal judgment, the communion of saints, the suffrages for the dead, and the cult of angels and saints (especially Mary). While rejecting nothing of the core eschatological doctrines, Vatican II avoids giving the impression of providing insider information on the afterlife but rather presents the teachings of the faith in a sober and restrained manner, by using mainly biblical language and images and eschewing graphic and detailed descriptions. More significantly, the council places eschatology in a new context, namely, that of a deep commitment to the transformation of the world and human history, thereby rebutting the Marxist charge that religion, especially Christianity, is the opiate for the masses.

This concern for earthly realities is vigorously expressed in Vatican II's pastorally most significant document, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes* = *GS*). Having affirmed that "the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history is to be found in its Lord and Master" (no. 10), the council teaches that victory over "the mystery of death" has been won by Christ: "Christ won this victory when he rose to life, for by his death he freed women and men from death" (no. 18). But, for the council, eschatology is not only individual and otherworldly but also and primarily collective and this-worldly. *GS* explicitly affirms that belief in eschatology does not and should not lessen Christians' commitment to bettering this world:

> Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectation of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society. (no. 39)

GS goes on to discuss the role of the church in the modern world, especially its task in dealing with urgent issues such as marriage and the family, the proper development of culture, economic and social life, war and peace, and the relationship of these mundane realities with the reign of God. The connection between eschatology and the kingdom of God, only adumbrated at the council, continues to be the central theme of postconciliar theological movements, such as political, liberation, and feminist theologies.

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Post–Vatican II Magisterium

In the postconciliar era, the church's traditional teachings on eschatology were challenged by new insights in anthropology, especially with regard to the ontological unity of the human person, which render the discourse on the survival of the "soul" apart from the body problematic and raise the possibility of an immediate resurrection in death. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue brought to the forefront of theological discussion the themes of reincarnation and universal salvation (*apokatastasis*).

In response to these challenges, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 1979 a seven-point letter in which it affirms that (1) there will be the resurrection of the dead; (2) this resurrection affects the whole person and is an extension of Christ's resurrection to human beings; (3) after death, a "spiritual element," properly designated as "the soul," survives so that the "human self" subsists, "though deprived for the present of the complement of its body"; (4) it is meaningful to offer suffrages for the dead; (5) Christ will come again in glory; (6) the Virgin Mary's assumption into heaven is unique to her; and (7) there are hell, heaven, and purgatory. In conclusion, the letter affirms that there are both a "fundamental continuity" and a "radical difference" between our present life in Christ and the future life.[2]

In 1992, the International Theological Commission (ITC) published a lengthy document entitled *De quibusdam questionibus actualibus circa eschatologiam* (On Certain Current Issues in Eschatology).[3] Reaffirming the substance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's letter, the ITC makes twelve points: (1) the resurrection of Jesus is the cause and model of our resurrection; (2) there is identity between the earthly body and the risen one; (3) the theory of resurrection at the moment of death is to be rejected; (4) there is an intermediate state; (5) the soul survives death; (6) the "two-stage" eschatology, that is, the doctrine that the human person is constituted by body and soul, is not derived from Platonic dualism but from the scripture; (7) death is both evil and good: evil, insofar as it is the result of sin, and good, insofar as it can be a "death in the Lord"; (8) the invocation of the saints is legitimate and necessary; (9) the practice of praying for the dead and the burial liturgy imply the existence of a "post mortem purificatory phase"; (10) the doctrine of reincarnation must be repudiated; (11) eternal life and beatific vision consist in friendship with God; and (12) in developing eschatology, the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) must be followed.[4] Clearly, the ITC's document, while appropriating the recent emphasis on the anthropological, Christological, pneumatological, trinitarian, ecclesial, and cosmic dimensions of eschatology, still wishes to reaffirm certain traditional doctrines that had been challenged by some contemporary theologians, such as the immortality of the soul, the intermediate state, and the resurrection at the end of time.

The last important magisterial postconciliar document that offers a substantial treatment of eschatology is the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*). The *CCC*'s eschatology is found in its exposition of the eleventh and twelfth articles of the Apostles' Creed.[5] Under the article "I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body,"

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the *CCC* discusses the resurrection of all the dead as "the work of the most Holy Trinity" (no. 989) and as the fruit of Christ's resurrection: "We shall rise like Christ, with him, and through him" (no. 996). In question-and-answer format, the *CCC* goes on to answer the various questions connected with the resurrection: *what* the resurrection is (reunion of the soul with its glorified body), *who* will rise (all the dead), *how* (with our own bodies), and *when* ("at the last day").

Under the article "I Believe in Life Everlasting," the *CCC* deals with six last things: (1) the particular judgment ("Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through purification, or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation" [no. 1022]); (2) heaven ("the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness" [no. 1024]); (3) purgatory (the "final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" [no. 1031]); (4) hell (the "state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed" [no. 1033]); (5) the last judgment ("the Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life" [no. 1039]); and (6) the new heaven and the new earth ("the final realization of the unity of the human race" [no. 1045], "the profound destiny of the material world and man" [no. 1046]).

By its very nature, the *CCC* limits itself to stating as concisely and precisely as possible the Christian beliefs about the afterlife; it does not intend either to engage in or settle theological controversies. Its approach is admittedly traditional. Nevertheless, the *CCC*'s eschatological synthesis is remarkable for its decidedly trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesial emphasis, which has been the hallmark of contemporary Roman Catholic eschatology.

Contemporary Catholic Eschatologies

The renewal of eschatology and its relocation from the periphery to the center of Roman Catholic theology during and after Vatican II did not of course happen by chance. Rather, it is the fruit of biblical, patristic, medieval, and liturgical studies that form part of what is known as *ressourcement* (going back to the sources) and *Nouvelle Théologie* (new theology) that took place mainly in Germany and France after the First World War. Thanks to this retrieval of the sources of the Christian faith, the individualistic and one-sided otherworldly focus of neoscholastic eschatology was overcome, and the anthropological, Christological, pneumatological, trinitarian, ecclesial, and cosmic dimensions of eschatology were restored.

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Furthermore, twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology, like its Protestant counterpart, was deeply influenced by the rediscovery of apocalyptic eschatology. The works of Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) forced theologians to come to terms with the expectation in early Judaism and in the New Testament of an imminent irruption of God into the old order and the establishment of God's reign in the world. In an ironic twist of history, the failure of nineteenth-century liberal theology's "quest for the historical Jesus" produced one of the most momentous insights for contemporary theology, namely, that apocalypticism and eschatology stood at the center of Jesus' message and ministry and of early Christianity. Ernst Käsemann's memorable phrase that "apocalypticism is the mother of all Christian theology," admittedly a hyperbole, does not miss the mark by much.

This rediscovery of apocalypticism sparked a debate about how Jesus himself understood the timing of the coming of God's kingdom. Weiss and Schweitzer proposed a "consistent eschatology," according to which Jesus expected a future and imminent end of the world. At the other end of the spectrum, C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) espoused a "realized eschatology," which affirms that the reign of God has already come fully in Jesus' ministry and especially in his death and resurrection. For Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), eschatology does not have a historical character but is realized existentially in the believer's faith-filled encounter with God as revealed by Christ. In contrast to consistent, realized, and existential-supratemporal eschatologies, most other theologians, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, hold that in Christ the kingdom of God was already inaugurated but has not yet been fully realized. This "already-but-not-yet" eschatology claims to do justice to both Jesus' sayings and deeds that proclaim that the reign of God was already present in his person, on the one hand, and those that promise that it is still an outstanding reality, on the other.[6]

This presentist-and-futurist eschatology is accepted by most Roman Catholic theologians not only because it seems to best account for the New Testament data on the end time but also because it coheres well with Vatican II's teaching on the church as a sacrament of God's reign (*LG*, nos. 1 and 9) and with the Roman Catholic typically inclusive, "both-and" rather than dialectical style of theologizing. Within this common eschatological framework, different theologians have developed their own understanding of eschatological realities.

Karl Rahner (1904–1984)

Perhaps more than anyone else, the German Jesuit theologian was instrumental in laying the foundations for a renewed eschatology in Roman Catholic theology, even though his writings on the subject took the form of essays rather than a systematic *summa*.[7] Rahner's most significant contribution to eschatology lies first in his proposal of seven theses for interpreting eschatological statements:

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1. Eschatological statements concern genuinely future events.
2. God knows future events and humans can understand truths about them if God chooses to reveal them.
3. God has not revealed the exact date of the end.
4. To understand the future, it is necessary to understand the past; in other words, humanity's ending must be linked with its beginning, eschatology with protology.
5. Genuine eschatology is differentiated from false eschatology (which Rahner terms "apocalyptic") insofar as the former reads the present situation of salvation (or damnation) out into its mode of future fulfillment (*Aussage*), whereas the latter reads from the projected future fulfillment of salvation (or damnation) into the present (*Einsage*). Hence, two errors must be avoided: first, reading the eschatological texts of the Bible as anticipatory reports of what will happen at the end of time and transferring this information back into the present in order to discern therein clues of impending eschatological events; and second, demythologizing the historical nature of eschatological events and denying their real, still-to-come future.
6. Thesis 5 has several implications:
   A. Statements about salvation and about damnation are not on the same level: the former affirm a factual reality, whereas the latter threaten a real possibility. Because of this real possibility of loss (primarily for *me*), *apokatastasis* cannot be spoken of as fact, but only as an object of hope and prayer.
   B. Eschatological statements concern the human person as an ontological unity of "body" and "soul" and as a member of the human family; hence, individual and collective eschatologies must be treated together as a whole.
   C. There is no contradiction between the expectation of an imminent end of the world and the so-called delay of the Parousia.
   D. Christology is the criterion of the hermeneutics of eschatological statements; eschatology is anthropology conjugated in the future sense in Christological terms.
   E. Christology also determines not only the hermeneutics but also the contents of eschatology:

> That time will have an end; that towards the end the antagonism between Christ and the world grows fiercer; that history as a whole ends with the final victory of God in his grace; that this consummation of the world, insofar as it is the incalculable act of God's freedom, is called God's judgment; insofar as it is the fulfillment of the salvation already real, victorious and definitive in Christ, it is called the return and the judgment of Christ. Insofar as it is the fulfillment of the individual, who cannot be wholly absorbed and lost in his function as [a] moment of the world, it is called particular judgment. Insofar as it is the fulfillment of the resurrection of Christ, it is called the resurrection of the flesh and the transfiguration of the world.[8]

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7. Eschatological assertions need to be reexpressed in images and languages appropriate to each age.

In the light of this hermeneutics, Rahner examines various aspects of eschatology. One of his most original interpretations concerns the meaning of death or, more precisely, the human act of dying. Lamenting that traditional eschatology has focused more on what comes after death and has neglected to reflect on the meaning of dying itself, Rahner suggests that death should be viewed both as a "natural" and "personal" act. In its natural aspect, death is not simply a "separation" of the soul from the body, leaving the soul unaffected; rather, it strikes the whole person, in body and soul. A plant and an animal simply "perish"; humans "die" as spiritual and free persons. A beast dies less of a death than does a human being. Second, in dying, the human person is not cut off from the world and does not become "acosmic"; on the contrary, after death, Rahner argues, the human person is no longer limited to this or that body but acquires a wider and deeper connection with the whole cosmos—which relationship he terms the "pancosmicity of the soul." As a personal act, dying is one's definitive and final act of transcendental freedom whereby one determines one's eternal destiny. Such self-determination takes place throughout one's life, in and through one's categorical choices, but in dying, such a process is brought to a final and definitive end. Thus, dying, while a fate and a punishment for sin imposed from without, with all its brutishness and ugliness, is also, according to Rahner, a supreme act of freedom in which one accepts, freely and willingly, one's own creaturehood and finitude, entrusting oneself, like Jesus on the cross, in darkness and despair ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?") and yet in trust and hope ("Father, into your hands I commend my spirit") to the God of mystery and love. In this dying, Rahner sees an opportunity for "anonymous Christianity."[9]

With regard to the so-called intermediate state, Rahner suggests that the traditional teaching about the separate existence of the soul after death during which it awaits its reunion with its body at the general resurrection at the end of time (as implied by Pope Benedict XII's *Benedictus Deus*) is nothing more than a cultural framework and not a defined dogma. Hence, Rahner entertains the possibility of the individual person's immediate resurrection in death, which however does not do away with the general resurrection, just as the particular judgment does not render the universal judgment unnecessary. Of course, the general resurrection and the universal judgment are not a repetition of the individual resurrection and the particular judgment; they fulfill different functions and purposes. As for purgatory, Rahner understands it not as a punishment by God's vindictive justice but as a painful process of self-integration and self-transformation required by a person's sins themselves, which fracture the unity of his or her personality. Such integration of all the multiple levels of personality, which is achieved through love, need not be conceived of as a temporal process occurring after death but as something taking place in dying itself. Its duration can be understood as the depth and intensity of the pains the person experiences in death itself. With

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regard to reincarnation, Rahner rejects the theory of an eternal cycle of birth and death which does not bring one's history of freedom to a definitive end and reincarnation in subhuman creatures as unnecessary and unworthy of the human person. But he wonders whether a modified version of the theory of reincarnation might fit in with the Christian faith in cases of persons whose lives do not possess a genuine history of freedom.[10]

Rahner speaks of heaven in the traditional terms of "beatific vision" but with an important modification. It is not conceived of as an intellectual vision of the divine essence *nude, clare et aperte* (nakedly, clearly, and openly) through the *lumen gloriae* (light of glory), to use the expressions of traditional eschatology, but as a personal sharing in the Trinity through uncreated grace. Furthermore, such sharing does not eliminate the mystery of God; rather, beatific vision is the vision of the incomprehensibility of God as absolute and holy mystery, Rahner's favorite "name" for the deity.

Hell, given Rahner's understanding of human intellect as necessarily positing God as the condition of possibility for knowledge as such and of human freedom as ineluctably oriented toward God as absolute value, is seen as an absolute self-contradiction. Hence, as mentioned above, Rahner cautions that hell as eternal self-alienation from God should not be spoken of as a factual reality but as a serious possibility. With regard to the eternity of hell and the connected theme of *apokatastasis*, Rahner says that the two biblical statements about God's universal will of salvation (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:1–6) and the possibility of eternal self-loss must be affirmed together. How these two dialectical statements can be reconciled with each other remains unclear to us. The nature of human freedom forbids one to state with apodictic certainty that all will be saved. On the other hand, Rahner points out, to deny a priori the *possibility* of universal salvation would be tantamount to imposing arbitrary limits upon the supreme sovereignty of God's will. Human freedom is encompassed by God's more powerful freedom and mercy. Hence, Rahner urges us to hope and pray—first for others and hence also for ourselves—that all will be saved. Such hope is founded on God's universal salvific will, which is real and efficacious and must be translated into concrete actions of solidarity on behalf of others.[11]

As for the resurrection of the dead, Rahner refrains from giving information on its modality and on the qualities of the risen body, as neoscholastic eschatology has done. Rather, he strongly links the resurrection of all with the resurrection of Jesus and explains the transcendental condition of possibility for the Christian faith in the resurrection. Rahner roots this condition of possibility in the human desire for the definitive and absolute validity of one's entire temporal existence in freedom. This transcendental hope serves as the context in which both Jesus' resurrection and our own resurrection are made intelligible and credible.[12]

Finally, for Rahner, the final consummation of the human history and the cosmos, symbolized by the Parousia of Christ and his universal judgment and by the definitive and glorious coming of God's kingdom, is both immanent and

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transcendent. Insofar as it is transcendent, it is the result of God's unmerited, forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God as the absolute future. This God as the absolute future, Rahner suggests, is God the Spirit, or the Holy Spirit. Insofar as it is immanent, it is realized in and through this-worldly utopias and earthly goals from which it is distinct but to which it is not opposed. Hence, Rahner argues, the church, precisely because—and not in spite—of its orientation toward the transcendent consummation in the kingdom of God, must engage actively in projects of justice, peace, and human development. Referring to the global revolutionary situation in the 1970s caused by extreme poverty and injustice, Rahner states: "The Church must exhort and arouse Christians to take part in this global revolution in a way appropriate to their position in society and the possibilities open to them as a duty of Christian conscience."[13]

This rather extensive exposition of Rahner's eschatology is justified not only because he played a key role in reenvisioning Roman Catholic eschatology, but also because most, though by no means all, of his theses, albeit controversial when first proposed, have now been widely accepted, and in this sense they may be regarded as representative of contemporary Catholic eschatology. Rahner's theses that still are debated are those concerning the nature of human dying, the existence of the intermediate state, and the possibility of immediate resurrection in death. The remaining pages of this chapter will discuss the contributions of other theologians, especially when they diverge or add to Rahner's eschatology.

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988)

Commonly, albeit misleadingly, portrayed as the conservative alternative to the liberal Rahner, the Swiss theologian (a Jesuit, like his German colleague, who left the society in 1950 to found a secular institute with Adrienne von Speyer) is best known for his massive trilogy *Herrlichkeit*, *Theodramatik*, *and Theologik*, a total of fifteen volumes, in which he elaborates his theology of God's self-disclosure as the radiance of divine beauty.[14] With regard to eschatology, von Balthasar shares Rahner's (and Barth's) theocentric and Christocentric concentration. Paraphrasing Augustine and in terms that recall Rahner, he writes: "God is the Last Thing of the creature. Gained, He is its paradise; lost, He is its hell; as demanding, He is its judgment; as cleansing, He is its purgatory."[15]

However, von Balthasar's most distinctive and controversial contribution to eschatology is his theology of holy Saturday. Following the visionary experiences of Adrienne von Speyer, he suggests that in addition to the crucifixion on holy Friday, there is also the mystery of holy Saturday in which the crucified "descended into hell" as a final act of self-kenosis and, in solidarity with the dead and the damned, took on the total self-estrangement from the Father. The crucified's descent into hell in solidarity with sinners, von Balthasar argues, is the theological basis for the possibility of and the necessity of hope for *apokatastasis*.[16]

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Ladislaus Boros (1927–)

The Hungarian Jesuit's particular contribution to eschatology is his proposal of what is known as the *Endentscheidungshypothese*, according to which "death gives man the opportunity of posing his first completely personal act; death is, therefore, by reason of its very being, the moment above all others for the awakening of consciousness, freedom, for the encounter with God, for the final decision about his eternal destiny."[17] This decision occurs not after death but *in* dying itself, which is conceived of not as a physical act but as a metaphysical event of the separation of the body and soul. Though Boros acknowledged his indebtedness to Rahner, the latter denied his paternity to this *Endentscheidungshypothese*, arguing that dying does not occur only at the end of but throughout life (the *prolixitas mortis*) and that every decision in freedom has an impact on one's eternal destiny.

Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–)

The Belgian Dominican has adopted various approaches to theology, from phenomenological Thomism (under Domenicus De Petter) to hermeneutical theories (Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur) to critical theory and praxis (the Frankfurt school). In eschatology, Schillebeeckx is most indebted to the third approach and emphasizes the need to focus on negative contrast experiences, ideology critique, and the narrative of human suffering in order to discover and realize the *humanum* which is the goal of the kingdom of God. Hence, for Schillebeeckx, God's reign is not found outside the world or, in his memorable phrase, *extra mundum nulla salus est* (there is no salvation outside the world). Humans are inescapably historical, that is, they live from the past in the present with the possibilities of the future open before them. This future consists in the full realization of the *humanum*. Eschatology is then the theological language to speak of this hope for a full *humanum*. In this context, Schillebeeckx speaks of God as the future of humanity, not in the sense that God will act at the end of history in some apocalyptic fashion to save humanity, but rather in the sense that God is acting in the present to lead humanity to an ever-greater future of God's reign. Thus, for Schillebeeckx, the present salvation-in-the-world is dialectically a sacrament of the salvation-to-come-in-God's-reign.[18]

Joseph Ratzinger (1927–)

Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith since 1981 and the now Pope Benedict XVI, the German cardinal is best known for his participation in the controversy on the intermediate state and the hypothesis of immediate resurrection in death, particularly with Gisbert Greshake (1933–) and Gerhard Lohfink

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(1934–).[19] Against them, Ratzinger reaffirms the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the intermediate state, and the final resurrection at the end of time. By *immortality*, Ratzinger means not a quality inherent in an individual but something that "rests on a relation, on a *relationship* with what is eternal, what makes eternity meaningful."[20] By *soul*, he means "that in us which offers a foothold for this relation. Soul is nothing other than man's capacity for relatedness with truth, with love eternal."[21]

Hans Küng (1928–)

The Swiss theologian is best known for his ecclesiological studies, especially his questioning of papal infallibility, for which his license to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian (*missio canonica*) was revoked in 1979. Küng's contribution to eschatology consists mainly in reformulating Christian answers on the afterlife in response to modern problems such as dying with dignity, euthanasia, the quest for liberation and justice, futurology, and cosmology. Küng's answer to this "horizon" of Christian eschatology is framed in terms of the "hope" for eternal life as revealed and realized in Jesus and the "consequences" of this hope for our responsibilities toward the self and society.[22]

Johannes Baptist Metz (1928–)

The foremost exponent of political theology, Metz believes that theology is essentially eschatological or, as he puts it, apocalyptic. He strongly espouses recognition of the secularity of the world, critique of the privatization of faith and theology, understanding the human person as essentially historical and social, rejection of "bourgeois religion," theology as a narrative of the "dangerous memory" of Jesus, and the praxis of liberation and solidarity with the victims of oppression and injustice. For Metz, hope is "imminent expectation"; time is not a continuum in evolution but a process "interrupted" by the dangerous memory of Christ's suffering (and the Holocaust) and qualified by the "eschatological proviso"; and the kingdom of God is not pure utopia achieved by means of human progress but the gift of God in response to our effective solidarity with the victims of society.[23]

Liberation Theologians

The most significant contribution of liberation theologians consists in making the kingdom of God the central category for eschatology. Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–) highlights the practical consequences of eschatology for politics: "Not only is it not an escape from history, but also it has clear and strong implications for the political

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sphere, for social praxis."[24] A liberation theologian who has written extensively on the kingdom of God is Jon Sobrino (1939–), who makes the "church of the poor" the *locus theologicus* par excellence.[25]

Feminist Theology

Among Catholic feminists who have contributed the most to eschatology is Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–). Using the criterion of "whatever promotes the full humanity of women," she decries the fact that traditional eschatology with its patriarchal bias has denigrated women and their bodies and has given a one-sided emphasis on individual eschatology. In contrast, she proposes to give priority to collective and ecological eschatology.[26]

Future Directions

Clearly, von Balthasar's famous dictum that the eschatological office, which Ernst Troeltsch said was shut down in the nineteenth century, has been working overtime is an accurate description of Roman Catholic theology, at least since the Second Vatican Council. Not only have Roman Catholic theologians been extremely busy rehabilitating eschatology but they also branched out in many different directions, sometimes to the dismay and distress of the magisterium. In general, there has been a decisive move from what the French Dominican theologian Yves Congar (1904–1995) called the "physics" of eschatology, that is, the description of the last things (in the plural: *eschata* or *novissimi*) to the acknowledgment of the presence in human history of the eschaton (in the singular), that is, the final, definitive, and victorious personal reality, Jesus Christ. In other words, there has been a shift from "eschatology" to "the eschatological." In this momentous shift, the various dimensions of eschatology as a central component of human existence and as a theological treatise—anthropological, Christological, pneumatological, trinitarian, collective, and cosmic—have been retrieved.

Thanks to this ongoing reconstruction of eschatology, new insights on the meaning of human existence, history, and the cosmos have been gained. Furthermore, new directions have been opened up and still need to be pursued in greater detail. In conclusion, a few of these new directions will be briefly mentioned.

First, the relationship between apocalypticism and eschatology needs further clarification. Needless to say, the coming of a new millennium as well as the threat of nuclear annihilation have spurred a vivid and perhaps even morbid interest in apocalypticism as a literary genre, as a set of distinctive ideas about dispensationalism in human history (especially the idea of four successive kingdoms), and

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as a (mostly conservative and world-renouncing) sociopolitical agenda. Now that these two catalysts have receded, the urgency of apocalypticism is diminishing, at least on the popular level. However, the basic ideas undergirding apocalypticism, such as human agency and divine intervention, the relation between history and millenarianism, the alleged activities of angels and demons, and the meaning of various signs and texts concerning the end of the world, still need to be elucidated and related to Jesus the eschaton. Study of the relationship between apocalypticism and eschatology should not, however, be limited to consideration of their respective origins (wisdom tradition or prophecy, respectively) and their mutual fertilization but must also contribute to removing the danger of a fundamentalist-literalist reading of apocalyptic texts (here, Rahner's distinction between the *Aussagen* of eschatology and the *Einsagen* of apocalyptic is useful) and to valorizing the revolutionary potential of apocalypticism (as has been done in political and liberation theologies).

The second area that needs further investigation in eschatology is the possible mutual illumination between contemporary scientific theories of the big bang and the big crunch, on the one hand, and the Christian imagination of the beginning and end of time, on the other. Of course, the Christian language about creation and eschatology is not an alternative scientific description of how the cosmos (creation) began and of how human history and the world will end (Christ's Second Coming, the general resurrection, and the universal judgment). Whereas, among Roman Catholics, Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) initiated a dialogue between Christian faith and science, such a conversation still has a long way to go between biology and physics, on the one hand, and eschatology, on the other. Whether after the big bang the universe will continue to expand, with the galaxies flying apart forever and eventually decaying into low-grade radiation and a heat death, or whether the universe, under the relentless force of gravity, will fall back into a cosmic melting pot, both scenarios reduce the outcome of cosmic history to nothingness. In conversation with such cosmologies, Christian eschatology will seek to avoid both a naïve evolutionary optimism and a paralyzing pessimism and will attempt to formulate a credible theology of hope. Furthermore, chaos theory, emphasizing unpredictability and genuine openness and novelty, offers Christian eschatology useful insights on the nature of the future not as a mere rearrangement of the past but as a variety of possibilities of true becoming, which God can bring about in God's kingdom.[27] Connected with this area of eschatology and science is the relation between eschatology and ecology, which also requires further reflection.[28]

The third area concerns the development of eschatology in the intercultural and interreligious context. Given our current process of globalization and the phenomenon of religious pluralism, today one can be religious only interreligiously.[29] This requires that Christian eschatology be reformulated in dialogue with the eschatologies of other religions such as—besides Judaism—Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, not in order to condemn some of their doctrines (e.g., reincarnation and universal restoration) but to learn from them.[30]

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NOTES

1. The English translation of Vatican II's documents is taken from Austin Flannery, general editor, *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).

2. For an English text of this document, entitled *Letter on Certain Questions concerning Eschatology*, see Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 2001), 1026–27.

3. The Latin original is available in *Gregorianum* 73 (1992), 395–435. The English version is found in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58 (1992), 209–43.

4. For an exposition and evaluation of this document, see Peter C. Phan, "Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994), 507–36.

5. For an English text of the *CCC*, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2003). The *CCC* is cited in the text by the numbers of its paragraphs.

6. For an overview of nine models of eschatology, see Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1988).

7. For a presentation of Rahner's eschatology, see Phan, *Eternity in Time*. For a complete list of Rahner's eschatological writings, see ibid., 249–56.

8. Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Karl Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1966), 343.

9. See Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. Charles Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961). See Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 79–115.

10. See Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 116–34.

11. See Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 135–58.

12. See Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 161–79.

13. Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Revolution," in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), 326. See also Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 180–200.

14. For helpful general introductions to von Balthasar, see John O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992); Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994); and Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

15. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Eschatology," in *Theology Today*, ed. Johannes Feiner et al. (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1964), 222. Compare von Balthasar's celebrated text with Rahner's in note 8 above.

16. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), especially pp. 148–88, and von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope That "All May be Saved?"* trans. David Kipp and Lother Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).

17. Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death*, trans. Gregory Bainbridge (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), ix. The same thesis is repeated with slight variations on pp. 54 and 165.

18. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *God: The Future of Man*, trans. David Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990). For an introduction to Schillebeeckx, see David Kennedy, *Deus Humanissimus: The Knowability of God in the Theology of Edward Schille-*

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beeckx (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1993), and Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993).

19. On the hypothesis of resurrection in death, see Gisbert Greshake and Gerhard Lohfink, *Nahererwartung-Auferstehung-Unsterblichkeit*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1979).

20. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 259.

21. Ibid. For a study of Ratzinger's eschatology, see Gerhard Nachtwei, *Dialogische Unsterblichkeit: Eine Untersuchung zu Joseph Ratzingers Eschatologie und Theologie* (Leipzig: St. Berno-Verlag, 1986). For an introduction to Ratzinger, see Aidan Nichols, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: An Introductory Study* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

22. See Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984).

23. See Metz's most important works: *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doeple (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980); and *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, trans. Peter Mann (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

24. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 122.

25. Among Jon Sobrino's many works, see especially *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

26. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), especially ch. 10, "Eschatology and Feminism." For a critique of feminist eschatology, see Peter C. Phan, "Woman and the Last Things," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 206–28.

27. In this area, the works of theologians such as I. G. Barbour, P. C. W. Davis, S. L. Jaki, A. R. Peacock, J. C. Polkinghorne, J. Haught, C. A. Russell, and others are of great help.

28. See Peter C. Phan, "Pope John Paul II and the Ecological Crisis," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1994), 59–69, and Phan, "Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Time," *Dialogue and Alliance* 9, no. 2 (1995), 99–115.

29. See Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

30. Here, the works of John Hick on death and those of Keith Ward are helpful.

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