HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

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Abstract. *The paper offers a comprehensive and balanced approach to Christian eschatology, analyzing it both theologically and culturally. The author highlights how the idea of the end has provided meaning and hope in times of crisis, from the early Church to the contemporary world. Eschatology is not treated merely as doctrine, but as a mechanism for interpreting suffering and collective fear. Particularly valuable is the connection drawn between religious and modern secular narrative structures. The social functions of eschatology—identity formation, mobilization, and consolation—are also clearly emphasized. In conclusion, eschatology becomes a "mirror" of humanity, reflecting the hopes, traumas, and the need for meaning in every era.*

Keywords: *Christian Eschatology, Secular Perspective, Parousia, Secularization, Illuminism.*

Introduction

Eschatology, defined as the body of beliefs concerning the end of the world, the final judgment, and the destiny of humanity, constitutes a central element of Christian religious thought. From a secular perspective, the study of eschatology offers a unique window into the ways societies interpret uncertainty, suffering, and hope. This paper explores the historical evolution of Christian eschatology, its social and cultural roles, as well as its contemporary expressions, without evaluating its theological truthfulness, but analyzing it as a historical and cultural phenomenon.

Eschatology, a term derived from the Greek *eschatos* (“last”) and *logos* (“word,” “discourse”), designates the branch of theology concerned with the study of events at the end of history: death, final judgment, resurrection of the dead, the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of a divine order. In Christianity, these themes have occupied a central place since the early Church, being closely tied to the hope of the return of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the way eschatology has been understood, experienced, and applied has varied greatly depending on the historical era, social conditions, and political context (Grudem, 2004: 1133).

From a secular perspective, eschatology is not regarded merely as a religious doctrine, but as a cultural and social phenomenon that reflects anxieties, aspirations, and collective mechanisms of interpreting crisis. The study of eschatology thus becomes a window into the soul of historical epochs. From the persecuted Christian communities of the first century, who eagerly awaited an imminent deliverance, to modern post-apocalyptic films or theories of climate collapse, eschatology provides a narrative

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framework for confronting suffering, uncertainty, and the hope of change. This paper aims to analyze Christian eschatology from a historical and secular angle, focusing on three fundamental dimensions (Boyer, 1992: 137–150).

1. The historical evolution of eschatological conceptions across different eras: the Early Church, the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, modernity, and the contemporary period (Pagels, 2012: 45–60).

2. The social and psychological functions of eschatology, how it provided hope, cohesion, or mobilization (Brown, 2013: 171–175).

3. Modern and secularized manifestations of eschatology, themes such as ecological collapse or artificial intelligence adopting apocalyptic narrative structures outside the religious context (Jameson, 2003: 65–79).

This paper does not aim at the theological validation of Christian eschatology, but rather at a critical analysis of the ways in which it has influenced and has been influenced by the culture, history, and collective fears of humanity.

1. Historical Perspectives on Eschatology

1.1. Eschatology in the Early Church (1st–4th Centuries)

Social and political context

The first Christian communities developed within the Roman Empire, marked by persecutions, instability, and messianic expectations. These conditions fostered the emergence of an intense eschatology, in which Christ was expected to return soon to establish the Kingdom of God (Ehrman, 2018: 97–102).

Core elements of early eschatology

- Imminence of the Parousia.

The conviction that Jesus would return during the lifetime of the apostolic generation (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17).

- Jewish apocalypticism.

The direct heritage of Jewish apocalyptic literature (Daniel, Enoch) strongly influenced the Christian vision of the end of history (Collins, 1998: 111–115).

- Martyrdom as an eschatological sign.

For many persecuted Christians, martyrdom was considered part of the end times and a confirmation of the imminence of divine judgment (Moss, 2013: 53–60).

Secular interpretation

Secular scholars highlight how early eschatology served as a mechanism of psychological resilience. The promise of a final judgment overturned the world order, offering hope to the marginalized and persecuted (Pagels, 2012: 45–52).

1.2. From imminent eschatology to the consolidation of the Church (4th–8th centuries)

Transformation of expectations after the Edict of Milan (313).

The legalization of Christianity under Constantine radically changed the relationship between Church and state. The expectation of an imminent end diminished, as the Church began to collaborate with political power for social stability (MacCulloch, 2009: 259–265; 655–671).

Augustine's Amillennialism

St. Augustine (354–430) proposed an allegorical interpretation of the millennium in Revelation 20, arguing that the thousand years represent the spiritual reign of Christ

through the Church, not a literal future period. This vision, later called amillennialism, became predominant in the Western Church and stabilized the long-term expectations of believers (Augustine, 1871: 718).

Eschatology in monasticism

Monastic movements preserved a stronger eschatological tension: the ideal of withdrawal from the world was associated with preparation for meeting Christ, but without necessarily preaching an immediate end of history (Brown, 2003: 143–148).

Secular interpretation

From a secular point of view, the transition from imminent eschatology to a more symbolic vision reflects Christianity's adaptation to its role as the official religion. The emphasis on consolidating the institution replaced the need for an immediate apocalyptic expectation (Cohn, 1970: 18–22). This shift from an imminent eschatology, specific to the earliest Christian communities, to a more symbolic and spiritualized vision reflects not only a theological development but also a strategic adaptation to new socio-political conditions. When Christianity moved from being a marginalized and persecuted religion to the official religion of the Roman Empire, the focus was no longer on the imminent expectation of the end of the world, but on consolidating the existing order and strengthening ecclesiastical institutions (MacCulloch, 2009: 259–265).

This shift in emphasis was necessary for the Church to assume a stabilizing role in society. A continuous apocalyptic expectation would have become subversive in a context where religious authority gradually merged with political authority (Moss, 2013: 89–94). Thus, eschatology was reinterpreted not as an imminent prophecy, but as a distant promise or an inner spiritual reality. Instead of cosmic catastrophe and imminent judgment, the emphasis shifted to moral order and the progress of the soul toward eternal life (Brown, 1996: 92–95).

Moreover, this transformation allowed Christianity to respond to new intellectual and cultural challenges coming from Greco-Roman philosophical thought. A literal and immediate eschatology became difficult to maintain in an intellectual climate dominated by Stoic, Neoplatonic, or Aristotelian ideas, which favored the concept of an eternal or cyclical cosmos (Collins, 1998: 135–140).

Therefore, from a secular perspective, Christian eschatology should not be viewed merely as a religious doctrine, but as a mechanism of adaptation and survival within a changing historical context. The spiritualization of apocalyptic symbols allowed the Church not only to preserve its authority but also to extend it into political, educational, and cultural spheres (Pagels, 2012: 63–70).

1.3. Eschatology in the middle ages and the renaissance (9th–16th centuries)

Medieval eschatology: fear and hope

In the Middle Ages, eschatology acquired a practical dimension, constantly present in preaching, art, and literature. People lived with the conviction that death and the final judgment were imminent, reflected in themes such as *memento mori* and *danse macabre* (Delumeau, 1983: 57–62). Hell, purgatory, and heaven were described in detail in sermons and theological works, contributing to the maintenance of moral discipline through the fear of eternal punishment (Emmerson, McGinn, 1992: 87–95). Jacques Le Goff shows how the doctrine of purgatory emerged in the 12th–13th centuries as a transitional space, fostering the development of practices such as indulgences, with significant economic and social consequences (Le Goff, 1986: 152–158).

Popular millenarianism

Millenarianism (or chiliasm) is an eschatological doctrine according to which Christ will return prior to the establishment of a thousand-year kingdom on earth. This current was present not only in early theology but also in numerous popular movements that awaited a radical transformation of history (Emmerson, 2007: 113–116).

Although the official amillennialism [1] of the Church dominated theological discourse, popular movements with millenarian visions periodically emerged; for example, the flagellants or heretical groups (the Cathars [2], the Taborites [3]) used eschatology to challenge the established order (Cohn, 1970: 38–45).

The Renaissance and the change of perspective

The Renaissance brought a renewed interest in humanism and the study of ancient texts, which gradually led to a weakening of apocalyptic expectations in intellectual circles. However, at the popular level, apocalyptic prophecies connected to dramatic events of the time (e.g., the fall of Constantinople in 1453) continued to circulate (McGinn, 1979: 102–107).

Secular interpretation

From the perspective of secular historians, medieval eschatology functioned both as an instrument of social coercion (through the promise of heaven and the threat of hell) and as a mechanism of resistance in popular movements against clerical abuses (MacCulloch, 2011: 390–395).

1.4. Eschatology in the protestant reformation and the early modern era (16th–18th centuries)

The Reformation and apocalypticism

The Reformers employed eschatological language to criticize the Catholic Church, which some identified with Babylon the Great or with the beast of the Apocalypse (Bainton, 1950: 233–237). Martin Luther wrote that he was living in the last days, while radical Protestant movements adopted millenarian ideas, proclaiming the nearness of the end (Cameron, 1991: 248–251).

Eschatology as a driver of conflict

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[1] **Amillennialism** is the doctrine according to which the "millennium" in Revelation 20 does not designate a literal period of one thousand years, but is a symbol of the spiritual reign of Christ between His first and second coming. This view, supported by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* (Book XX), became the dominant position of the Western Church in the Middle Ages.*Augustine, The City of God, translated by Nicodim Milaș, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, Book XX.*

[2] **The Cathars** were men and women of great integrity, who referred to an ancient Christianity, dissatisfied with the situation of the Church of Rome. Catharism in Florence spread on fertile ground; artisans and merchants joined, taking advantage of the support of noble families in an attempt to confront the dreaded Inquisitions organized by the Holy See. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 38–45.

[3] **The Taborites** were a radical religious group that took part in the Bohemian Reformation and the Hussite Wars of the 15th century. Known pejoratively as *Picards*, the Taborites strongly believed in the imminent return of Christ to establish His kingdom. They upheld Jan Hus's claim that the Bible was the sole authority for faith and doctrine, and they believed that the only biblical sacraments were the Eucharist and baptism.Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 187.

Eschatology fueled the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. For example, the Anabaptist movement in Münster (1534–1535) established a violent theocratic regime, proclaiming the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth (Cohn, 1970: 210–218).

Rationalism and the beginnings of desacralization

With the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Voltaire and Kant rejected eschatological literalism, promoting a vision of human progress based on reason. Thus, apocalyptic expectations faded among intellectual elites, even though they continued to exist among the general population (Israel, 2002: 75–80).

With the rise of the Enlightenment, a significant rupture occurred in the way the Western world understood the relationship between humanity and the transcendent. Rationalism, as the dominant paradigm, rejected literal interpretations of Scripture and sought to replace revelation with autonomous reason as the foundation of knowledge. Philosophers such as Voltaire and Kant criticized the traditional eschatological vision, regarding it as obsolete in light of human progress and scientific rationality.

Voltaire, a prominent representative of the critique of institutionalized religion, mocked popular beliefs about the end of the world, which he considered superstitions harmful to the development of critical thinking and religious tolerance. In his writings, he argued that morality and human progress should not be conditioned by eschatological fear, but by natural reason and universal justice (Voltaire, 2006: 187–189).

In turn, Immanuel Kant rejected revelation as the supreme source of knowledge and argued that the essence of religion is found in practical reason and in the categorical imperative, not in dogmas related to an apocalyptic end of the world (Kant, 2004: 32–36). This change of perspective led to a decrease of interest in eschatology among intellectual elites. Instead of an imminent end of history, Enlightenment philosophy proposed a narrative of continuous progress, in which humanity evolves toward a state of moral and rational enlightenment. Eschatology was thus marginalized and desacralized, becoming a subject of interest mainly for the masses, who continued to interpret biblical texts about the end of the world literally (Collins, 1998: 117–120).

However, this desacralization did not mean a complete disappearance of fears about the end of history, but rather a shift from the religious to the secular register. Social crises, wars, and new ideologies took the place of apocalyptic symbols, constructing other eschatologies—this time secular and rationalized. Thus, the beginning of modernity coincided with a profound reconfiguration of the way humanity projected its future and understood the meaning of its existence.

Secular interpretation

From a secular perspective, the Reformation transformed eschatology into an ideological weapon for delegitimizing religious opponents, while the Enlightenment contributed to the secularization of eschatology, transferring the expectation of a cosmic end into a belief in the unlimited progress of humanity (Lilla, 2007: 53–56).

From a secular perspective, the history of Christian eschatology can be read not only as a succession of theological beliefs but as an ideological instrument used to redefine political and social order. The Protestant Reformation, especially through the writings of Martin Luther and other reform leaders, transformed eschatology into a rhetorical and theological weapon against the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope was frequently identified with the Antichrist, and Rome was seen as Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation (McGinn, 2000: 184–189). This polemical use of eschatological

symbolism served to delegitimize papal authority and to justify the religious rupture as part of a divine plan for the restoration of truth.

Paradoxically, this emphasis on the imminent end and the corruption of the dominant religious world also had a political effect: it fueled revolutionary and reform movements that saw in the end times an opportunity to establish a new, purer, and more just social order. Thus, eschatology was instrumentalized not only religiously but also socially and politically (MacCulloch, 2009: 659–661). The apocalyptic imagination was undermined by the rationalist spirit. Philosophers such as Condorcet and Voltaire replaced the vision of a cosmic end of history with the idea of humanity's continuous progress. In this new paradigm, there was no longer any need for divine intervention to establish a perfect order; man, through reason, science, and education, could build a better future (Delumeau, 2005: 387–390). Eschatology was thus secularized, and in place of a heavenly Kingdom of God was born the myth of an earthly utopia.

This shift from religious expectation to secular hope reflects one of the most profound transformations in the history of Western thought. Although the idea of the end was not abandoned, it was transformed into an ideal of social perfection, projected not beyond history but within it.

1.5. Modern eschatology and the rise of dispensationalism (19th–20th centuries)

Socio-political transformations

The 19th century was marked by revolutions, industrialization, and colonialism—events that created a tense social context, favorable to the revitalization of eschatological beliefs. In many Protestant circles, eschatology was reinterpreted to respond to new crises (Jenkins, 2011: 113–118).

John Nelson Darby and the birth of dispensationalism

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) laid the foundations of a vision called dispensational premillennialism, which holds that:

- history is divided into distinct dispensations in which God acts differently;
- the secret rapture of the Church will occur before a time of tribulation;
- the physical restoration of Israel is a major sign of the nearness of the end (Weber, 1979: 25–30).

This vision was popularized through the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), which had a massive influence on evangelical Christianity in the United States (Boyer, 1992: 123–130).

Millenarian movements and new sects

The period saw the emergence of groups with radical eschatologies, such as the Seventh-day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses, who set various dates for the end of the world (1844 in the case of William Miller) (Knight, 1993: 44–52). Even though failed predictions caused internal crises, these movements continued to thrive, adapting their interpretations (Boyer, 1992: 144–150).

Secular interpretation

Secular historians regard dispensationalism as a product of the anxieties of industrial modernity and globalization: the literal interpretation of prophecies provided a clear framework of meaning in a world perceived as chaotic and rapidly changing (Boyer, 1992: 95–98).

1.6. Contemporary eschatology (20th–21st centuries)

Eschatology in evangelical and charismatic movements

Today, many evangelical churches in the U.S. and elsewhere adopt dispensationalist or premillennialist views. The conviction that the end is imminent influences missionary priorities and, at times, even political choices, particularly regarding support for Israel as part of the signs of the last days (Weber, 2005: 89–94).

Amillennialism and symbolic eschatology

In traditional churches (Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant), eschatology today has a more symbolic character: the Kingdom of God is seen as a spiritual reality rather than an earthly reign, and the emphasis is placed on moral responsibility in the present (Wright, 2008: 181–190).

Secular apocalypse: climate, pandemics, and technology

Sociologists and anthropologists observe that in modern secular culture there have appeared secular eschatologies—narratives about climate collapse, artificial intelligence out of control, or global pandemics—which employ a language and narrative structure similar to religious eschatology (Scranton, 2015: 17–25).

Although lacking a judging God, these visions describe a dramatic end of civilization, and specialists consider them reflections of humanity's fear of losing control over its destiny (Wallace-Wells, 2019: 3–12).

Popular culture and eschatology

In contemporary society, the collective fascination with the end of the world has not diminished but has been reconfigured into a secularized form through popular culture. Films, series, books, and post-apocalyptic video games have become channels through which traditionally eschatological themes—world destruction, judgment, survival, hope for a new order—are reinterpreted in a secular framework, often science-fictional or dystopian.

Post-apocalyptic films, books, and video games (*Mad Max, The Walking Dead*) reflect the collective fascination with the end of the world and perpetuate eschatological themes in a secularized form (Sontag, 2002: 123–125).

These narratives no longer invoke divine judgment but crises generated by humans, technologies out of control, or climate catastrophes (Botting, 1996: 163–166). In this way, the religious apocalypse is transformed into an ethical and political warning concerning the excesses of modern civilization and the structural vulnerabilities of the contemporary world.

This secular eschatology retains the narrative structure of the religious one: a violent end, followed by a struggle for survival and the possibility of renewal. The fundamental difference is that salvation no longer comes from a divinity, but is the result of the courage, morality, or intelligence of human characters (Barkun, 2003: 39–44). In this sense, popular culture reflects the collective anxieties of the age—the fear of ecological collapse, uncontrolled technologies, or global pandemics—and reinterprets them symbolically in an accessible and engaging language.

More than simple entertainment products, these works play a formative role in the contemporary imagination: they shape perceptions of the future, of the limits of progress, and of human fragility. They propose, indirectly, a form of secular reflection on humanity's destiny—a theology without God, yet still concerned with the meaning and end of existence (Rosen, 2008: 4–8).

1.7. Social and psychological functions of eschatology

Providing meaning in the face of suffering

Eschatology responds to a fundamental human need: the explanation of suffering and injustice. Belief in a final judgment or in an eschatological restoration of justice offers believers comfort and hope in a world marked by inequalities (Berger, 1967: 29–35, 51–60).

Strengthening group identity

Myths about the end of the world are not mere products of religious imagination, but reflect a deep archaic structure of thought in which destruction and renewal succeed one another cyclically, giving meaning to existence through a return to an original moment. As Mircea Eliade underlines, apocalyptic scenarios are re-enactments of a logic of mythical repetition, in which profane time is suspended to allow the regeneration of the world and of the sacred order (Eliade, 1999: 37–45). On the other hand, sociologists of religion have shown that expectations of an imminent end can produce powerful social effects. Bryan R. Wilson points out that eschatological tension favors the internal cohesion of the group, creating an identity a distinct identity and providing a legitimate framework for rejecting the dominant values of wider society (Wilson, 1970: 37).

Reason for social or political mobilization

Throughout history, eschatology has often served as a catalyst for movements of change—both peaceful (movements of spiritual renewal) and violent (the Anabaptist revolt of Münster). Apocalyptic rhetoric can legitimize radical actions in the name of a cause considered ultimate (Cohn, 1970: 95–110).

Reflection of collective anxieties

Contemporary anthropologists observe that moments of crisis—pandemics, wars, natural disasters—are accompanied by a revival of interest in eschatology. It functions as a barometer of the emotional state of society. The greater the collective anxiety, the more apocalyptic scenarios gain ground (McGinn, 1998: 76–82).

Secular eschatology: similar function, different content

Fears about ecological collapse or technological disasters today play roles similar to religious eschatologies: they provide explanations for crises and allow fear to be channeled into a coherent narrative. From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon shows a cultural constancy in humanity's need to imagine an end to the present order (Scranton, 2015: 17–25).

2. Eschatology in the context of contemporary Europe: between secularization and secular ecumenism

In contemporary Europe, Christian eschatology faces two major trends that profoundly alter its reception: the secularization of society and the emergence of a secular ecumenism. These phenomena not only undermine the traditional theological dimension of discourse about the end of the world, but reinterpret it in cultural, ethical, or ideological terms, thus challenging the Church to rethink its prophetic and communal role in a post-Christian space.

2.1. The secularization of eschatological discourse

Secularization in Europe does not mean merely a decline in religious practice, but also a shift of ultimate meanings from transcendence to immanent horizons: progress, ecology, technology, global security. Where once eschatology offered a transcendent vision of the end, we now witness a shift toward immanent horizons: technological progress, ecological sustainability, global survival (Collins, 1998: 10–12). In this context,

eschatological themes (judgment, the end of history, collective salvation) do not disappear but are transformed into secular narratives about climate collapse, pandemic crises, or technological singularity (Moltmann, 2004: 18–22). This phenomenon has been called by some authors an "apocalypse without God."

In the introduction to his work, Scranton states: "the greatest challenge we face… is to understand that this civilization is already dead, even though the zombie-system of petro-capitalism continues and, for the moment, accelerates greedily but sterilely." (Scranton, 2015: 23).

Eschatology is no longer the exclusive domain of institutionalized religions but becomes a "cultural battlefield," where collective anxieties are expressed in quasi-religious language. Dystopian films, science-fiction literature, and activist discourse on the extinction of civilization have adopted traditional eschatological narrative structures (judgment, destruction, renewal) and integrated them into the secular imagination (Bauman, 2007: 41). In this climate, the Church is challenged to recover its relevance not merely by reaffirming dogma, but by offering an eschatological discourse that concretely addresses contemporary fears.

2.2. Secular ecumenism and the relativization of the eschatological horizon

Another emerging phenomenon is what some theologians call "secular ecumenism" (Brie and Brie, 2028; Brie, 2009)—a form of global moral solidarity without confessional anchoring, which adopts Christian values (love of neighbor, care for the planet, universal peace) but secularizes them. In this context, eschatology is absorbed into projects of ethical transformation of the world, without recourse to transcendence. For instance, the European project itself is, to a certain extent, a secular eschatology—a vision of a pacified political, social, and moral order, based on human rights and interstate cooperation. This secular "eschaton," however, is profoundly tense: European integration has created an axiological plurality that weakens the ability of religious discourse to speak prophetically about the end. In a world of moral consensus and relativism, prophetic eschatology (with judgment, moral choice, reward) risks being labeled as intolerance (Taylor, 2007: 525–536).

Moreover, European Churches—especially traditional ones—are called to reformulate their eschatological message within a pluralistic framework, without compromising revealed truth. To speak about the end of the world in a context where many consciences reject the idea of a final judgment requires a hermeneutics of dialogue and, at the same time, the courage to affirm theological distinctiveness (Eliade, 1992: 112–119).

2.3. Current challenges for the Church

Today, the European Church faces a tension: between remaining faithful to a biblical eschatology (which involves judgment, crisis, renewal) and finding cultural languages through which its message can be understood by a pluralistic and often skeptical society. The refusal of any form of eschatology leads to a dangerous relativization of ethics: if there is no end, there is no ultimate responsibility (Cohn, 1970: 296).

In this sense, the contemporary challenge is not only apologetic but also pastoral. How can the Church proclaim an eschatological hope without appearing retrograde or disconnected from humanity's major concerns? How can it integrate the discourse about the end into debates about climate crisis, fragile democracy, or artificial intelligence—without abandoning the biblical roots of hope?

Conclusion

Eschatology, beyond its specific theological content, proves to be a profound expression of humanity's desire to understand, to order, and to give meaning to ultimate events—death, suffering, crisis, and hope. From a secular perspective, it is not merely a religious doctrine that speaks of the end of the world or the return of a messianic figure, but a narrative and symbolic mechanism through which societies have articulated responses to their own historical and existential tensions. Every era has constructed its own end of the world, adapting eschatological symbols to its fears, traumas, and expectations.

In the period of the early Church, eschatology offered comfort in the face of persecutions and a sense of meaning to suffering, projecting a divine order that was to replace the injustice of the present world.

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