

PARADOXES OF HUMAN HOPE: THE MESSIANIC HORIZON OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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THE FACT that a theologian or church historian must still prove the idea that the gospel has a political message, against a dominant tradition of theoretical apoliticism in theology, is the measure of the Church's continuing forgetfulness of its Jewish prophetic roots and its acceptance of a Platonic, individualistic concept of salvation. The biblical prophetic message brought together as a single vision the dualisms between the sacred and the secular, the individual and society, the spiritual and the material, which Christianity absorbed through the religious culture of later Hellenism. Israel's God was a God who acts in history—*saeculariter*. Its ethical message was addressed to the community, and to the individual in his social context. Since the political leaders were mostly responsible for this, much of the prophetic rebuke was addressed to the rich and powerful, "who grind the faces of the poor, bring near the seat of violence, and are not troubled by the ruin of the people." Israel's hope for salvation did not split the human community from the cosmos, but looked forward to a total transfiguration of man and nature in the kingdom of God. This *telos* of human society in history is not otherworldly in the sense of a flight to heaven which leaves the present world unchanged; rather it implied an ultimate grappling with the systemic disorder in the world itself that would overcome it and bring creation into harmony with God's will. The prayer which Jesus taught His disciples puts this matter in a nutshell: "God's kingdom come"—which is to say the time and place where "God's will is done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." Heaven, here, stands as the mandate for what must be done on earth, not as a place of flight beyond the earth to an "other place" beyond earthly potentials.

Such a prophetic message was political. It was addressed first and primarily to the social community in its public, political functions. But it was not a secular politics. Such a distinction between religion and secular politics, or even between ethics and politics, is one of the modern schisms of consciousness unknown in the Bible. The prophetic message was not the politics of man but the politics of God. God's word was the mandate and demand within which the struggle for an authentic social order was carried out and from which vantage point its failure was judged. The messianic promise led Israel into a revolutionary politics that was acted out very directly in three centuries of active

guerrilla struggle against the surrounding imperial powers of Greece and Rome. The apocalypses written from the time of the Maccabees to the Jewish Wars were the literature of this resistance movement.

But messianic movements are not the only form of religious politics. Conservative as well as radical social movements imply a religious sanction and world view. In antiquity, indeed, there was no political order which did not place its political system within a religious world view. The great empires of classical society each presumed that their laws and leaders deserved allegiance because they were founded on the cosmic order and, beyond that, the transcendent order of the gods. The king was the visible embodiment and representative of the divine King of the universe. Jewish and Christian messianism did not sever this relationship between religion and politics, so much as they challenged the myth that this integration between God's kingdom and the kingdom of man already exists. The declaration of a disharmony between God and the kingdom of man, nevertheless, rests on the assumption that the two should indeed be in harmony and are intended to come together into an ultimate integration on the other side of God's revolution.

The myth of Christendom was built on a partial appropriation of this future hope. God's reign was seen as already established through the establishment of Christianity and the "defeat of the demons" of pagan idolatry. A new integration of God and empire was declared by proclaiming the emperor (or pope) as the new "vicar of God's word on earth." When this myth of Christendom began to break down in the period from the late Middle Ages to the French Revolution, this did not simply dispel the religious dimension of politics. Rather it released its messianic dimension to act again as a revolutionary future hope for the human political enterprise. Christendom and the Church now found themselves assailed with the same antagonistic myth of the apocalypses with which they had once assailed the pagan Roman empire. Now they were the leviathan, the dark ages, the superseded humanity which was to be replaced by a new dawn of the Age of Light. Yet religion and the transcendent, squeezed out of their vertical relationship with society, were being covertly smuggled in again as the transcendent horizon of the new historical project which was to go on "from glory to glory" to the ultimate perfection of man and the world.¹

Just as the old religious world views, whether messianic or ontocratic, implied a politics, which either blessed the present social order or decreed divine judgment against it, so now the new politics and practice

¹ See R. Ruether, *The Radical Kingdom: The Western Experience of Messianic Hope* (New York, 1970) *passim*.

of progress contained a hidden theology which was all the more evocative because its religious content was largely unconscious. This unstated messianic theology, which looked forward to a new horizon of integration of man and God into a transcendent *telos* of historical progress, could cause generations of men to pit themselves in furious struggle against social systems painted in diabolical colors or, in turn, to give a messianic coloring to the new revolutionary societies created out of this struggle that were presumed to incarnate the basis of this perfection, even though the completion of their divine mission still lay in the future. The revolutionary party thus recaptured the infallibility and aura of divinity once claimed by popes and kings by divine right. The more loudly the proponents of modern political ideologies proclaim their "secularity," the more surely they have sought to absolutize their own presuppositions in a way that put these beyond question. One-dimensional secularity, therefore, becomes less a denial of messianic hope than a presumed incorporation of it into the bases of the present system in a way supposedly guaranteed to fulfil all man's hopes. To untangle this complicated modern appropriation of future hope into secular social systems, we must trace this relation between society and its transcendent horizon back to its ancient roots in kingship ideology in the great empires that surrounded Israel.

Messianism grew from ancient kingship ideology. The word "messiah" itself was originally the throne name of the Davidic king who sought to imitate the aspirations of the great kings of Egypt, Babylonia, and Canaan.² The king was both "son of God," representing God before the people, and "son of man," the collective representative of the human community before God. As such, he summed up the hopes of his people and was the lifeline that connected the people to the cosmic order. The king was the priestly leader of the congregation of Israel in the annual celebration of the New Year's festival where the fulfillment of these promises of kingship, summed up in the coming reign of God, were ritually experienced. Messianic hope thus grew from that germ of ecstatic vision contained in the religions of ancient empires for which the cosmos, the political order, and nature were not split apart into separate compartments but existed in a single realm where the threat of chaos and the renewal of paradisiacal hope was experienced. The re-born world was an ideal that was poured again and again into the realities of man's daily life. The reign of God was a mandate laid on human society to become that place of blessing and wholeness that was

² Among the numerous studies on this subject, see S. Mowinckel, *He Who Cometh* (Oxford, 1956).

glimpsed as the human and natural community passed, as one, through the threat of death and mounted up on the ecstatic wings of new life.³ This never fully realized dimension of the hopes of the New Year festival became, in Israel, projected into a future that was finally seen as so transcendent to the possibilities of the existing situation that a part of this hope split off into the heavens and escaped into a transmundane world beyond the limits of the present universe. Only in this infinite and absolute "other world," beyond change, space, and time, could the ultimate reaches of human hope be fulfilled. Human hope, having transcended the limits of existing reality, demanded the positing of another and different kind of world, where such hopes could be fulfilled.

But Judaism and even Christianity never completely forgot that these hopes were supposed to be about the redemption of this present universe. In Judaism, messianism split into a temporal and an eternal chapter, with a millennial paradise *within* history, followed by the "end of the world" and the creation of a new, eternal world *beyond* history. In Christianity the millennial paradise was ideologically incorporated into Christendom, while the eternal heaven was cut off from its function as a horizon of human history and became the otherworldly hope of the soul after death, but in a way that was no longer allowed to intersect with or judge the basis and fruits of Christian society and the Church. But this ideological incorporation of messianic hope into Christendom and/or its disjunction into the heavens was continually challenged by the apocalyptic religions of the poor and the oppressed, who recovered the sense of this language about the world-to-come in a way that reconnected it with their hopes for historical vindication and ultimate judgment against the powerholders of society. Thus the messianism of the Jewish and Christian apocalypses never fully died out, but flowed in an underground stream in these faiths, from whence it could be reborn, again and again, as the religion of oppressed peoples, even over against what now became the Christian Babylon.

The basic meaning of this messianic hope lies in the continued human experience of a tension and contradiction between the is and the ought of life. This being so, it is not enough to examine this reality and the ways it contradicts the visions of ideal beatitude. We must also examine the ideals themselves and the appropriateness of their tension with present existence. That is to say, we must not merely ask how the situation is judged in relation to the ideal, but also whether the ideal is an authentic expression of the proper "nature" of creation. We must

³ Cf., e.g., Aage Bentzen, *King and Messiah* (London, 1955), and Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford, 1967).

assume not merely a futuristic or eschatological pole in relation to present existence but also a primordial pole that stands for the appropriateness of the ideal in view of God's "original intent" for His creation. It was this linking of the eschatological Christ with the cosmological Logos-Demiurgos that was the creative leap of Christian revelation as this worked itself out in the theology of the New Testament. It was on this unity of the cosmological and the eschatological Christ that the Church Fathers built classical Christology. They sought thereby to ward off any disjunction between creation and redemption that would suggest that the new creation comes about simply as a repudiation of this present universe, rather than as a vindication of its true nature and God's original design. Salvation does not alienate us from ourselves, but restores us to our true selves.

In this light we must examine that process in later Judaism and in Hellenistic philosophy whereby the character of the ideal was so infinitized in relation to present existence that the holistic world view of the Psalms was broken up into a number of contradictions. Christianity inherited the legacy of both streams of this development and synthesized it into its classical theology and spirituality, thereby preserving the heritage of the religious history of late antique society precisely in its alienated stage of consciousness. We will analyze these contradictions briefly under three headings: (1) the split between the individual subject and the outward collective reality of both the sociopolitical order and the natural, cosmic order; (2) the split between the "community of faith" and the "evil empires"; (3) the split between this-worldly hope and otherworldly hope.

SPLIT BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND OUTWARD REALITY

The religions of early peoples did not think about life and death, disaster and hope in a privatizing way. Rather this question was situated in the public realm, where man was related to his fellow man in the social covenant and to the life of plant and animal, earth and sky, in the economy of nature. Man and nature, as one covenant of creation, wept together and rejoiced together. By the same token, future life was not the salvation of the individual psyche, abstracted from society and nature, as with the Platonic myth of the immortality of the soul. It was the transfiguration of creation, embodying not only each man's inward obedience to God, but justice and peace between man and man, man and animal, animal and animal—a paradisiacal felicity where "hills leapt like rams" and "rivers clapped their hands." Man and nature participate, as one life system, in common vicissitudes and common

ecstasies. This was the animistic element which Israelite temple psalmody inherited from the nature cult of Ba'alism.⁴

With the development of individual self-consciousness, however, this collective consciousness was gradually eroded in a way that deepened the sense of individual responsibility, but also undermined the earlier sense of collective participation. The alienation of the individual from society was accentuated by the history of imperial conquest and political amalgamations, which destroyed the old political communities based on tribal ties. In the huge impersonal empires of Persia, Hellenistic Greece, and Rome, men no longer felt that same sense of belonging to a community with their neighbor, with the land, or with the political chieftain as their collective head. Now each man began his own quest for individual salvation, as a private quest for personal well-being and its eschatological vindication, rather than celebrating the salvation of the people as one body.

The individual now felt alienated from the imperial political order, so that, instead of identifying with it as his social body, it came to be seen as an alien and even diabolic machinery of fate over him in which he could neither participate nor take responsibility. Even in societies based on ancient republicanism, the sense of citizenship and civic virtue (*politikē aretē*) gradually eroded, and the view grew up that man could only save himself by an inner migration to some sphere beyond the reach of this outward power. Similarly, men became alienated from outward nature and came to see the body of the cosmos and even their own bodies as a carnal weight and tomb of the soul from which man must liberate his incorporeal spirit,⁵ rather than as an animate community of fellow beings with which he can weep and rejoice. For such a man, mountains could no longer "sing" nor could rivers "clap their hands," as they had for the ancient Hebrew psalmists.

Some writers recently have placed the blame for this depersonalizing of nature peculiarly upon Christianity, as the determined foe of "pagan gods," i.e., the gods of the countryside.⁶ But it would seem that this development was a more universal phenomenon and pertains to a particular stage in the development of consciousness. This stage of consciousness happened to coincide with ripening antiquity and the birth of Christianity, although there was some return to these more

⁴ See E. F. Hvidberg, *Weeping and Laughter in the Old Testament* (Leiden, 1962); also S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols.; New York, 1962).

⁵ This thesis is developed especially by Hans Jonas to explicate the development of religions of alienation that find their extreme form in Greco-Oriental Gnosticism; see *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God* (Boston, 1958) pp. 23 ff.

⁶ L. White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967, pp. 1203-7.

animistic ways of thinking in medieval Christianity and, in its sacramental theology especially, the Church had a sense of the human face of nature which modern secular man has lost.⁷ This alienation of man from nature has resulted in an ethic that leaves man to repudiate and/or exploit nature without any sense that it belongs to a common life system with himself, until today we see a modern world whose technology is rapidly destroying the organic foundations of existence.

By the same token, man's alienation from society resulted in an ethic and eschatology defined in purely individual, incorporeal terms, whereby man's religion no longer envisioned society as an arena of judgment or salvation, nor recognized that the important evils are those which men raise up into corporate systems. For centuries the Christian churches have taught their people to examine the failings of their private lives in minute guiltiness, while ignoring completely the colossal powers and principalities of oppression and exploitation which men build collectively, and of which the Christian Church itself was often the uncritical beneficiary. The return to the holistic vision of messianism, then, is a return to a world view in which man, society, and nature form a single community of life, which must succeed or fail as one. Today, more than ever, human survival depends on the renewal of this holistic vision that perceives the interdependence of all living things in a global community where personal morality cannot be divorced from how we live our lives with our fellows, even on the other side of the earth, or how we situate our social and economic systems in relation to the organic life systems of animal and plant, earth and sky, air and water.

SPLIT BETWEEN COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND EVIL EMPIRES

A second, equally disastrous distortion of the dynamic of messianic hope took place with the bifurcation between the "community of faith" and the "evil empires." The messianic vision of the kingdom was originally the horizon of ecstatic hopefulness springing from and referring to a people as a political community. Israel, as much as any of the other peoples around her, aspired to be a great nation, even an empire, and to extend her reign "from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth." When the eighth-century prophets declared that the Day of the Lord shall be darkness and not light, they raised up the negative side of this ecstatic hopefulness and used the disparity between the promise and Israel's present state as a measuring rod of divine judgment, rather

⁷ Christianity appropriated the Platonic concept of the "image" to build a sacramental view of nature as the embodied image of God. This view continued in Eastern Orthodoxy as a doctrine of nature upon which both the theology of the sacraments and the theology of the icon are built. This also was the starting point for sacramental theology in early medieval theology; cf. Hugh of St. Victor's *De sacramentis christianae fidei*.

than assuming the promise as a guarantee of victory. These prophets thus developed an understanding of the nation and its promise that contained its own dialectic of judgment and redemption, messianic hope and sinful apostasy. However, as Israel fell under the sway of larger and larger imperial powers and lost any realistic hope for a national autonomy that might compete with, much less subdue, these empires, the "nations" around Israel became the symbol of her nonfulfilment. The negative side of the dialectic of judgment became split off from Israel and projected upon the nations, so they became the objectifications of demonic apostasy to be judged, adversely, by the coming reign of God. A quasi-paranoid psychology characteristic of the apocalypses grew up whereby Israel (and the Church) were automatically the "oppressed saints" and the nations became the personifications of all evil, clothed in the dress of the ancient monsters of Chaos.

This development was never without its counterbalancing tradition, to be sure. There was always a deep tradition in Judaism that Israel was unfulfilled as a people because she herself was apostate from God (which Christianity, unfortunately, tended to deflect from its reference to the Church, by making it simply a past historical judgment upon the "Jews"). Also there was not lacking the universalist tradition that other nations, each in its own way, were God's people and would participate in redemption. But the paranoid psychology of the apocalypses was inherited in a more polarized way in Christianity, since here the "spiritual Israel" has been split off from the tribal Israel and has undertaken its own denationalized universal career, in a way that no longer took responsibility for any political community. This split between the spiritual Israel and the Israelite nation began within Essenic Judaism, but became more absolute when the Church dissociated herself from the Jews and became a gentile faith.

The denationalized apocalyptic tradition, which raises to cosmic proportions the split between the "saints" and the "evil empires," has created an insoluble definitional problem of the relation between Church and state. The Church saw herself as a purely spiritual people, not identified with any civic community. Yet the Church carried from Israel the heritage of aspiring to be a rival polity with the "empire" that would replace the reign of the "nations" with that of Israel in the age to come, "when the kingdom shall be restored to Israel." This latently political dimension of apocalyptic antipathy to the empire could then participate in an apparent reversal of its own position, as in Eusebius of Caesarea, by drawing on all these same messianic texts of future Davidic kingship to sanctify this same empire, once it had become "Christian."⁸ In so

⁸ This is evident particularly in Eusebius' two orations on Constantine. See N. Baynes, "Eusebius and Christian Empire," in *Byzantine and Other Studies* (London, 1955); also

doing, the messianic horizon ceased to act as a source of judgment upon this empire, and the religious revolution of the prophets was undone. Instead, messianic language became simply a way of absolutizing the empire and placing its rulers and ideology above criticism.

This bifurcation of the spiritual community of faith and the empire resulted in a double tendency in Christian history vis à vis the state, both of these missing the mark equally of a true dialectic of judgment and hope. On the one hand, there has been the tradition of irresponsibility toward the political order, since it is the "realm of the devil" and not the responsibility of the Church, which is to attend to "purely spiritual things." On the other hand, there has been the contrary but complementary tradition of the sanctification of the Church's own "Christian" social structures with the aura of messianic absolutism, including "Christian empire." This tendency toward self-absolutization in the name of messianic fulfilment, or at least the first fruits thereof, continues into modern times in secular form in revolutionary states, such as the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., which make the messianic idealism of their foundation into a basis for aggrandizement abroad and the warding off of internal criticism.

To be sure, there have been alternative ways of viewing this relationship of Church and state, particularly in one side of the Puritan tradition, where the messianic ideal was united with the ideal of the nation in a way that could act as a standard of prophetic judgment rather than of self-sanctification. It is from this tradition that there springs the American theology of the social gospel. But the predominant tendency in Christian history has been one which oscillated between the theology of the ontocratic empire and the apocalyptic sect: on the one hand, sanctifying Christian social systems with the aura of messianic inerrancy, and, on the other hand, consigning empires (and churches) to hell, while the "true Church" withdrew into an irrelevant private morality. Both of these have acted together to undermine, fatally for most Christians, the sense of the messianic horizon as the source of prophetic discernment vis à vis the political order, including the social form of the Church.

A major rethinking of this relationship of Church and state is in order, both to restore the Church to its continuity with the hopes of the earth and society, and to restore to society the ideals which have been abstracted into the Church. The overcoming of a false spiritualization of the Church (which usually masks very concrete political interests) must be matched by a breaking open of the false secularization of the state. The messianic hope of the Church's proclamation is nothing else than

the messianic hope of the human community and the cosmos. However, this messianic horizon of human history can only play its proper function if it is not identified, in an immanentist way, with any established order, including that which calls itself "the Church," as though the kingdom were already fulfilled and incarnate in its structures. Rather the horizon of messianic hope is restored to human society and creation in order to stand as the prophetic principle of discernment and truth-telling by which empires are judged and also by which they renew with aspiration to become truly vehicles of brotherhood, justice, and peace.

In the service of this mission a community of faith arises, born in the clash between this hope and the disappointing actuality. But this sense of contradiction does not remove its message from relevance to that established order. Rather it exists to speak a word to it by reawakening the sense of tension between what is and what ought to be. But the community of faith reawakens this sense of tension only by making it clear that the promise of the kingdom exists as a mandate laid upon the society whose call it must heed and by whose standard it is judged. There is no guarantee that those who call themselves the Church will, in any institutional succession, continue to be the ones to play this prophetic role. Institutions can only carry a historical culture *about* this message. It is the free play of the Spirit that awakens communities that actually hear, respond to, and live this gospel, often against the institution which bore but did not live it. For the Church, as a social institution, ever tends to enter into a symbiosis with the established political order in a way that undercuts its ability to function prophetically, and God raises up prophetic communities to serve His mission wherever He pleases.

Until the eighteenth century, new prophetic communities arose by asserting, in the language of the Church tradition, the claim to be the "true Church," standing in tension with the apostate church and society that had sold out to Mammon. However, the Enlightenment undercut the validity of religious symbols as a meaningful culture. The Church and its religious language became associated with a past discredited social establishment and a world view whose symbols men could no longer decipher, and so the prophetic party could only claim messianic hope in secular language and a scientific, antireligious culture. Often, however, the heirs of secular messianism come later to make a distinction between the Constantinian and the apocalyptic Church, repudiating the former, while claiming the latter as their ancestor, as was the case with the Marxist humanists who engaged in dialogue with Christian theology.⁹ Christians likewise may discover the same contradictions,

⁹ See R. Garaudy, *From Anathema to Dialogue: A Marxist Challenge to the Christian Churches* (New York, 1966); also Ruether, *The Radical Kingdom*, pp. 185-200.

embracing a messianic Christianity against the Constantinian Church and identifying the former with revolutionary movements. In this way the relation of Christianity with radical social criticism is renewed.

But the secular revolutionary can also repeat the historic mistake of the Church and, on the morrow of the victory of the revolution, make his ideals into a new Constantinianism to sanctify a new *status quo* of the revolutionary party and thereby create a "new ruling class" imbued with the same self-absolutization and infallibility complex of the older hierarchy.¹⁰ The Church, then, keeps its proper role in relation to society, not by defining itself as a totally separate "spiritual" people with a hope above and beyond that of creation and society, nor yet by simply selling out to bless the bombs of the political *status quo*. Rather the Church must stand as the ever renewed prophetic edge of society itself which exists to renew in each generation the tension between the established order and the demand of God, in order to make that messianic horizon the vantage point for judgment but also for renewed aspiration for society.

SPLIT BETWEEN THIS-WORLDLY HOPE AND OTHERWORLDLY HOPE

Finally we must reckon with the bifurcation of human hope into a temporal horizon *within* history and an eternal horizon *beyond* history. This bifurcation appeared in the development of Jewish messianic thought from prophetic futurism to apocalypticism. It points to the final irreducible question about the nature of human potential and its destiny. This is the question about which there truly can be no final "until the end comes," i.e., from within the perspective of history itself, but where we can only continue to affirm both sides of the contradiction. The tendency to infinitize human hope to the absolute, and thus to denigrate all "merely mundane" hopes as unworthy of the messianic vision, has resulted in a tradition which makes the concept of salvation come completely unglued from the realities of human life and human nature and thus makes future hope meaningless.

The bifurcation of hope into temporal and eternal hope points to the unknown border between man's real possibilities and those demands which appear to be "above his nature," yet which something "in his nature" still forces him to demand as the "still more" of his ultimate fulfilment. This is the unknown border that we cannot define because we do not know the limits of man's potential. This is the horizon of the world where reality is unfinished and its "nature" is not fixed, but it is still in process of being created. Here is where messianism broke open the closed ontocratic concept of Being into the becoming of a

¹⁰ See M. Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York, 1957) *passim*.

universe exploding into the future. Yet because this "beyond" and "still more" that man feels to be transcendent to his present possibilities is, nevertheless, posited out of a need implanted "in" his nature, classical Christian theology argued that human nature has not only a transcendent goal but also a transcendent ground. These two are identical in the transcendent Logos-Christ who is the goal because He is also the ground of cosmic history. Thus nature or creation ceases to be simply a point of reference for the origin of what is, and becomes the transcendent mandate laid on a world in process of formation to grow up to the full dimensions of that transcendent vision. The extrapolation of human hope into the infinite future postulates an infinite ground as a basis of the possibility of that future. But this journey from infinity to infinity leaves in question the status of that finite, historical reality which must tend to appear as a "fall" away from this "higher world" of man's absolute ground and end.

The inability of any theology or cosmology or political ideology to complete this circle without contradiction is the measure to which our thinking itself must remain in its incompleteness, as the world itself is incomplete. This contradiction may be illustrated by the paradoxes of the relationship between the ancient Hebrew myth of Exodus and the later myth of the apocalyptic "end of the world" and the Philonic flight of the soul to heaven. The myth of Exodus might well be seen as an antieschatological myth. It is the story of the escape from that Egypt which subordinates man's real finite life to the building of the pyramids of mummified death. The escaped slaves flee from the tyranny of thanatocratic absolutism to find a place where they can be at home; where each man can sit "under his own vine and fig tree." Were Philo and the Church Fathers correct when they infinitized the myth of Exodus so that it became the myth of the flight of the soul from earth and body to the eternal, immutable heaven? Or did this not contradict the original redeeming direction of the myth of Exodus and bring it back around to a re-embrace of that very thanatocracy from which the slaves were fleeing? Should we not rather interpret Exodus in a finitizing direction, as the myth of the return of the wanderers in infinite space and timelessness to earth, where alone mortal man has a homeland?

Such antiutopian myths of "return home" to local space, time, and identity appear redeeming when men have wandered long in absolutizing expectations which have all proved disappointing. Yet one suspects that even Camus' Odysseus will grow restless in Ithaca and take up his mythical journeying again. The Jewish Passover wisdom tells us that, even if we were in Jerusalem, we would still have to say on Passover "next year in Jerusalem." The present Jerusalem is still not the

fulness of the Jerusalem of hope. The contradiction of human hope, then, is this: the destiny to which man is called is not a "new creation" where man would be unrecognizable to himself, but one where he is reconciled with his truest and deepest self. Yet man can find no resting place for this "original nature" simply by returning to his country village. This is not merely because "nature" is unfinished and still struggles to be born from chaos. Even more, it is because the village itself is part of a situation which has been shaped by those very dreams of absolute finality that make of the expected heaven the premonition of a living hell. Thus man's revolt against the thanatocracy of the Pyramids of Power in the name of the kingdom of God exists in a symbiosis with that same self-absolutization that creates the Pyramids of Power, so that imperial oppression and apocalyptic revolt ever oscillate as two sides of the same urgency. Messianic expectation, in revolt against imperial ideology, still bears the secret seeds of having been, itself, the frustrated projection of imperial ideology upon the future. Thus the paradoxes of hope cause men to oscillate between endless exodus from a demonized reality of their own making or else the exhausted temptation to unite that absent vision with the new regime, in Stalinisms of revived and debased messianic imperialism.

The history of modern utopias, kakotopias, and science-fiction nightmares expresses this same contradiction in the language of that hope created by modern science and technology. Most modern ideologies of progress and revolution still suggest the myth of infinite exodus to that ultimate fusion of man with the absolute *telos* of history. Marxist apocalypticism in turn gave birth to Marxist Constantinianism once the revolutionary party was in power. But the original ideals in turn become a ground for new recoveries of the "original Marx," against this debased institutionalization, in Marxist "protestantism" or revisionism.¹¹ Teilhard de Chardin's well-known Omega Point put this ideal of the absolute *telos* of history into the larger framework of cosmic evolution. Both Hegel and Marx assumed somehow that there is a final resting point in the future where historical progress comes to a point of perfection, or where man rises from "the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom" and thereafter goes on from "infinity to infinity." Theology of hope boldly declares that God is the future of man, i.e., that the word "God" means nothing else than the infinite future potential of man. Yet these absolutisms of the future become suddenly frightening rather than inspiring as we see the megamachines built up

¹¹ See L. Labedz, *Revisionism: Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas* (London, 1962) *passim*.

upon the earth out of these infinitizing expectations. What does Teilhard's Noosphere and Omega Point sound like literally, if not the great Computer in the sky of 1984 in which individual thought and creativity is subordinated to the one centralized Master Mind of the totalitarian state? The affinity of absolutizing human imagination for totalitarianisms makes ancient ontocracy appear in the new form of the world Pentagon of Power, as Lewis Mumford has pointed out so brilliantly in his two volumes on ancient ontocratic empires and their modern counterparts in technological totalitarian states: *The Myth of the Machine* and *The Pentagon of Power*.¹²

Over against these myths of self-absolutization and exodus into infinity, we have the antiutopian myths of anarchism, liberalism, crisis theology, and Camus's philosophy of rebellion. Strange bedfellows though these may seem, each in a different way revolts against the tyranny of the Absolute as the governing power of man's life and hope, and point man back to finitude as his earthly context of authentic life. Anarchism does this by combining apocalyptic revolt with utopian community-building over against the totalitarian state, whether that of ancient monarchy or modern dictatorship, and a return of man to the primitive tribal community of local space, time, and identity.¹³ Liberalism, in quite a different way, would reject the absolute state of divine kingship in order to build a political system that accepts the reality of sinfulness and finitude and safeguards itself by limitation of public jurisdiction and the division of power. Crisis theology saw the very essence of man's sinfulness as his rejection of his created status for self-deification. The transcendent God, who can never be fused with man's political aims, becomes the rod to break this idolatry and return man to finitude to live day by day with repentant mind. Camus finds in the very absence of God, as a point of reference for man's future hope, a way of breaking the tyranny of this totalitarian sacrifice of the real man for dreams of absolute power. Camus pointed man back from the flight into the future to his real ground in the present to live in unperfectible solidarity with his brother and the sorrowing earth that are the only true companions of man's life.¹⁴ Yet these antiutopian myths are redeeming only in the clash with that absolutism which they reject. They find no place of rest within the present, and so in their own way tend to become

¹² For Mumford's critique of Teilhard, see his *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York, 1970) pp. 314-19.

¹³ See G. Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Movements* (Cleveland, 1961); also R. Ruether, "Communitarian Socialism and the Radical Church Tradition," *Ecumenist* 9, no. 4 (May-June, 1971) 52-57.

¹⁴ A. Camus, *The Rebel* (New York, 1959) pp. 302-6 and *passim*. See Ruether, *The Radical Kingdom*, pp. 143-46.

stultifying, to the extent that they are successful, and to ideologize the imperfect *status quo* as "the best that we can expect."

Thus man's goal remains a mystery because, even more, man's "nature" is unknown to himself. The classical Christian theology of the Logos-Christ was intended to provide the perspective on this situation by lifting our eyes beyond the existential paradox to the larger ground on which man can stand that gives him the surety that his destiny is meaningful. Only the One who underlies man's future because He is man's transcendent ground can remove us from the tyranny of trying to lift ourselves to heaven by our own bootstraps. Not man's capacity to become divine, but God's gracious descent to become human, can give man the courage not only to exodus against a debasing situation, but also to live day to day in inconclusiveness without losing love, hope, and faith. This is a God who not only "will be," but who "is" and who "was, in the beginning."

MESSIANIC HOPE AND RECONCILIATION WITH THE EARTH

In his provocative book *Christianity in World History*,¹⁵ Arend van Leeuwen argues that the Christian myth of messianic hope, secularized as the technological thrust of Western, post-Christian culture, is now extending itself from the West to uproot and transform all traditional ontocratic societies into that messianic culture of revolutionary struggle and world-transcending future hope which was implanted in history by Christian revelation. The apocalyptic Christ is, after all, the center of history, as traditional Christian salvation history believed. But Christ is the center of history, not in the sense of a straight-line conquest of the world by societies called Christian or an institution called the Christian Church, but in a dialectical manner, by which all humanity realizes its historical existence by appropriating the secular content of the Christian paradigm of messianic humanity. But this can happen only in an antagonistic relationship to the ecclesiastical and Western power structures that bore this gospel. At precisely the point where the sacralizing walls of Church and Christendom dissolve, the inner content and dynamism of the messianic myth is becoming the myth of universal human salvation. Now all humanity becomes historical through the mediation of secularized messianic hope and all men see life as a revolutionary struggle against the established power structure and a world-transcending *élan* toward a new age.

However, Van Leeuwen fails to see the ambiguities of this myth with its peculiar correlation between its apocalyptic and ontocratic thesis and antithesis, nor the strong drive in certain traditions of recent Western

¹⁵ New York, 1964.

Christian thought, including the interpretation of eschatology characteristic of crisis theology, to reverse the infinitizing drive of this myth and to understand salvation as a return to finitude. Because he fails to reckon with these ambiguities, Van Leeuwen does not grapple with the peculiar correlation between the myth of the transcendent kingdom and that of the world-destroying apocalypse that makes them appear fatefully together in modern revolutions. Why is it that the building of the new world where all man's hopes will be satisfied ever goes hand in hand with a technology of death that can only end in the fiery happening of that "end of the world" that was once only the vindictive or desperate dream of a seer? The question before us, then, is not merely the vindication of the relevance of the messianic myth to modern man, especially revolutionary man, but whether we can break the fateful nexus between the polarities of this myth in time to prevent the death wish of the warfare state from canceling out all the benefits of the welfare state.

Historically man today is in a position analogous, but on a global scale, to that state of uprootedness and cosmopolitanism of Greco-Roman society when Christianity was first born. As in that period of late antiquity, so today all the cultures and salvation myths of the constituent peoples of an emerging universal civilization are breaking down in their traditional forms, and yet undergoing strange transmutations whose future shape is not clear. Astrology, demonology, revivalism, utopian and gnostic and apocalyptic countercultures spring up to express contemporary man's acute alienation from the whole project of civilization that has built the modern earth.¹⁶ As in antiquity, Western rationalist man despairs of his own reason and looks to the "mystical East" for revelation. Many are rummaging around in the storehouses of half-forgotten religious cultures for some options which scientific man thought he had left behind. Others seek to carry the present state of technological prowess forward to its final rationalization, firm in the faith that this is still the path to salvation, while their antagonists are equally sure that it is the path to hell.

Today, both in the West and among insurgent peoples around the world, we are seeing a new intensification of the Western mode of scientific abstractionism and revolutionism. The project of domination of nature and the raising of man into a more and more artificial environment goes steadily forward under the inspiration that has been working in the West since the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. At the same time, oppressed peoples around the globe, who have been the

¹⁶ See R. Ruether, "Christian Origins and the Counter Culture," *Dialog* 10 (1971) 193-200.

victims of Western technocratic culture at their expense, seek to follow the same path of technological development. Yet, at the same time, nature and society are giving us very clear warning signals that we are reaching the end of the usefulness of the spirituality of world transcendence and rejection of nature. In effect, today we are seeing two revolutions in consciousness that appear to be moving in contrapuntal directions. On the one hand, the alienated members of the dominant society are turning away from technology toward new communal, equalitarian, and ecological life styles and the redirection of psychic energy toward reconciliation with the body and with nature. But these ecological and human potential movements remain elitist, privatistic, esthetic, and lacking in a profound covenant with the poor and the oppressed. Some aspects of the "sexual Left," indeed, appear to be moving toward a culture-destroying nihilism that shows again how far Western man is from finding that integrating center of experience that is truly healing and wholesome. On the other hand, the needs and aspirations of insurgent peoples rise along the lines of the traditional rise of industrialism, through competitive nationalism, technological development, domination of nature, and revolt against the past. Such traits are necessary for the liberation from material necessity and psychological dependency for those peoples who have been denied these traits and a Western society that monopolized their fruits for themselves. Yet they appear deplorable, or at least ambiguous, to those who have already seen the end of these traits in their own societies.

Each wave of revolution which falls short of liberating man from the spirituality of domination and subjugation ends in the further subjugation of man to technological and bureaucratic machinery. It seems that all the transformations of reality which can be wrought through the myths of world transcendence, flight from the earth, and revolt against history are turning back to re-establish us in our human self-contradiction. Yet there can be no reconciliation with the earth on the basis of the *status quo*, because the earth itself is being destroyed by a man-made environment which incarnates these same contradictions. We are fast becoming so imprisoned in the powers and principalities that are the perverse realizations of the stuff of our heavenly dreams that we can scarcely imagine what a redeemed earth might look like that would break this fateful nexus between kingdom and apocalypse. The ancient hope for the coming of the Messiah, which combines the myth of the world-renewing Ba'al with the world-transcending Yahweh-Christ, contains the legacy of this entire journey. The unfinished effort of classical Christian theology to synthesize the world-affirming and world-negating traditions of religious hope has now become our social task, upon which the survival of mankind depends. We seek a new

fusion of spirit and body that can bring to bear upon man's humanization all the resources which he has won through his world-transcending *élan*. This goal cannot be one of endless self-infinity toward the Absolute, nor yet simply the return to the romanticized jungle. It is a new mandate to learn to cultivate the Garden, for it is in the cultivation of the Garden that the transcending powers of consciousness come together with the organic harmonies of nature in partnership. We seek to overcome the deadly leviathan of the Pentagon of Power, but in order to convert its body into bread to feed the hungry of the earth.

From within this dilemma, all appears to be in a state of confusion unto despair. We do not know how such a reconciliation is possible without a return to that stultification of the neolithic village from which mankind was released by the world-transcending myth of the Savior-King. But we have not yet learned how to prevent this world-transcending *élan* itself from ever turning to its negative side in a rampage of mass destruction. We are not sure whether the megamachines of man's alienation from the earth can be curbed in time to prevent them from placing man between the fatal choices of totalitarian rigidification in the Skinneresque utopia "beyond freedom and dignity,"¹⁷ or else the triggering of cosmic famine and carnage. We see only that we stand face to face with the crisis point of history where the ultimate polarities of the human self-contradiction have come around and met at their nether point, and we scarcely dare hope that these apocalyptic death throes may yet prove messianic birth pangs of some new humanity still to be born. Not the divinity of man but the humanity of God can give us the sure ground to struggle against this denatured Babel of concrete and steel and to establish that human cocreatorship upon whose work we may look and declare that "indeed, it is very good."¹⁸

¹⁷ This is the title of B. F. Skinner's recent treatise on his vision of the ultimate mechanistic, behaviorist utopia.

¹⁸ The content and conclusions of the essay summarize a major work of mine on Christology and Christian origins to be published in the fall of this year: *Messiah of Israel and the Cosmic Christ: The Development of Christology in Judaism and Early Christianity*.