

Christian Concepts of Human History

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Photo date and location unknown

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' "And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.'" (Rev. 21:1-7)

In considering the consummation of human history, there have been two major lines of Christian thought. One is the viewpoint based on apocalyptic literature, which insists on the literal universal extinction of the first heaven and earth. This would surely put an end to the historical progress of mankind. The other is the fulfillment of God's restoration of history by means of the redemption by Providence and by Christ Jesus.

Since it is important to gain a right understanding of the consummation of human history, I intend to inquire into various viewpoints found in different periods of Christian history.

Early Christianity

Jesus and the Apostle Paul understood the Old Testament to mean that Jehovah alone directs the entire course of world history. This was quite different from the Greek view of transmigration, repetition, or periodicity and also different from the views of the Jewish nationalists, who looked at history as rectilinear and continuous. Criticizing the Jewish nationalists, Jesus avoided saying that human history is leading to punishment and compensation.

Rather, he said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." (Matt. 7:24-25) Jesus also advised his disciples to witness to the Gospel even to the farthest corner of the earth.

The Apostle Paul enumerated the sages of Israel in the traditional manner, but he didn't mean that genealogical succession has anything to do with God's new people. This is because Abraham became the forefather of faith to both the Jews and the Gentiles (Luke 3:8, Rom. 4: 18). He persisted in a cosmopolitanism based on the Gospel of Jesus, calling Jesus the "Second Adam," the universal recreator.

Early church fathers

The concrete historical viewpoint of early Christianity was developed by Augustine through his insistence upon a teleological view of history. He viewed the historical process as rectilinear, God being the Alpha

and Omega. This was a contrast to the Greek cosmological view of transmigration, repetition, or periodicity in history.

In accordance with the doctrine that God created the heaven and the earth during six days (one day meaning a period), Augustine classified human history by periods. Each period is 1,000 years. After 6,000 years of history pass, a 1,000 year period of God's rest will begin. Augustine said that the entire course of human history is covered in the creation, degeneration, redemption and conviction. If the fall of man means the loss of his intrinsic state at creation, redemption could be nothing other than the recovery of the lost state. It is inevitably required for God to make positive intervention by His sovereignty in the course of history in order to redeem history itself.

God's intervention in history for the purpose of redemption seems to be carved in relief for the last judgment. Augustine persisted in saying that God's Kingdom did not originate from Jesus Christ, but has developed parallel with the Satanic world since the dawn of human history. He says that these two mixed worlds confront each other with love and hatred, but would be separated at the last judgment.

Medieval Christianity

The historical viewpoint of medieval Christianity did not differ in any way from the traditional one. Europe in the Middle Ages was a unified international society centered on the Christian faith and the idea of the Holy Roman Empire. This was nothing more than a political development of medieval cosmopolitanism, and everyone in Europe was free to travel around the entire continent, regardless of national barriers.

Accordingly, most of the historians of that time tried to praise God rather than take pride in "freedom." They were convinced that human history was not controlled by man himself, but by God's providence and purpose. They made it their mission to find His providence and purpose through historical processes, and came to the conclusion that the method of finding them is through revelation.

It was by revelation that the end of the world was already being made known to the people. Thus, the end of the world was given much more weight in its interpretation.

I should not overlook the progressive historical viewpoint of Joachim of Fiore. Quite different from Augustine, who insisted on God's providence developing in six periods, Joachim taught that human history has progressed through three periods. He regarded the historical viewpoint of Augustine as conservative, and said that even the nature of God has developed through history.

According to Joachim, the entire course of human history can be divided into three periods: that of the Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Spirit. The period of the Holy Father was from Adam to King Uzziah, that of the Holy Son from King Uzziah to Saint Benedict, and that of the Holy Spirit from Saint Benedict to Frederick II (1260 AD.). These three ages don't have any connection with one another, but are mutually confused.

He also said that the coronation of Frederick II at Jerusalem in the year 1260 AD might be the zero hour of the entire course of history, bringing the dawn of a new age. There are several outstanding features of Joachim's revolutionary viewpoint of history. He integrated general history with the redemptive history manifested in the Old and New Testaments. Through this he contributed to making the study of redemptive history recognized as a prophecy of world history, Previously separated by Augustine, these were now reunited.

Joachim said that the Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Spirit develop during the historical course with an indivisible relationship. In other words, the trinity is immanent in history.

By the Middle Ages, the eschatological faith which had been upheld with great tension was sublimated into a passion for developing the established churches. This was in order to found a complete society on earth.

Modern theology

Recently there has been a tendency to look at human beings as the master of history. If history is the totality of all human affairs, the course of history may be controlled by the actions of man. Man has a capability and freedom far above nature, but his capability and freedom may be either good or evil. The evil direction unavoidably gives rise to condemnation.

Christianity deals with three relationships involving man: man's relations with God, his neighbors, and with nature. When these relations function normally, a vertical human history is formed. When man betrays God, encroaches upon his neighbors, and conquers the creation through misuse or abuse of his freedom, history will bring destruction and degeneration upon him on their behalf.

In fact, the course of history has been full of such tragic records. Therefore, God has been intervening in human history in order to draw mankind back to loving God and his neighbors and having the creation respond to mankind.

Jesus' prayer for the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth expresses his tenacity to history. Then, what does true history mean? It should be the records of the blessed, peaceful, and beautiful human family with God as the father, enveloped in His love and justice.

In this meaning, Christ is sure to be the master of the true history. Thus, Christian faith comes to be faith in the end of the world, for the end of the world is the object of history shown us by God.

The End of the World

Early Christianity

The early Christians waited for Jesus, according to his saying that he would soon come back. (Matt. 10:23, Matt. 16:27-28, John 20:23) But the prophecy of the end of the world was not fulfilled in their lifetime, and history kept its course on the earth. Thus they came to believe that redemption of the world in the end time would take place within history.

Saint Paul emphasized that God sent the Spirit of His Son to make us His sons, not servants. For Saint John, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment were actually realized by the coming of Jesus. John has Jesus say, "he who bears my word and believes on him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24) So the early Christians were convinced of God's actual blessing and purpose of redemption.

Early church fathers

As the apostles in the early age of Christianity, the church fathers were confident that they were living in the last days of the world, although Jesus said the day or hour was unknown.

But their apocalyptic views of the end of the world were more intense, in comparison to the early Christians, so this enabled all the churches to be united. Every believer in Christ tried to improve his morality and prepare for the return of Christ. The Christians believed the tyrant Nero to be the antichrist, who was to precede the true Christ. Clement maintained that the dead are judged individually directly after their death, and that the martyrs such as Peter and Paul received the gift of immediate everlasting life in the Kingdom of Heaven right after death. But most of the early fathers taught that on the day of the last judgment, all persons would be judged as a whole.

Origen's view

Emphasizing allegorism, one school of biblical interpretation, the Alexandrine school under Origen, preferred a spiritual interpretation of the scripture to a literary or historical one. The key points of his views are as follows: Since there is neither a notion of "wrath" or "punishment" in God, the terms show a part of God's love and desire for everyone to quit a criminal life.

Insisting on the importance of the actual life of Christians at the time of the end of the world, Origen made nothing of the last judgment predicted in the Bible.

As the freewill of human beings is nonmaterialistic, it remains after the flesh passes away. The redemption of all things, including Satan, may be possible only on the basis of this free will. But the possibility of degeneration still exists, even after redemption. It is only by God's love that redemption can come after the fall, because love does not cease. He who lives within love, lives within God.

Believing that the resurrected flesh is a spiritual one, different from the one before death, Origen denounced both the literal interpretation of the Bible and the spiritual one. He said that everyone will await his eternal fate in purgatory, after death. The consummation of the process of history will be fulfilled at the return of the Lord. But his return will not happen at any particular place; rather, it will be a manifestation of his spiritual Godhead to everyone, disclosing his own character. Then people will naturally follow the Lord.

Modern theology

Modern theologians try to reinterpret the traditional view of the end of the world, seeking for its original meaning. They protest that if there is a literal, visible tribulation, the original interpretation of Peter and John is lost.

Recent writers have emphasized a paradox between Christ as the historical Jesus and Christ as the eternal Lord, and the paradox between the eschatological view and historical processes.

Rudolf Bultmann, a prominent theologian, in an address on "History and Eschatology" at Edinburgh University in England, said, "Every moment may be the eschatological one. It will be realized based on Christian faith. The Christian existence is both eschatological and historical." Such a paradox may be similar to that manifested by Martin Luther, who said that a Christian is both a righteous person and a sinner.