CHAPTER 16
ESCHATOLOGY AND RESURRECTION

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The aim of this chapter is not to develop an introduction to eschatology and resurrection as such but strictly *in relation to creation*. While this constraint severely limits the scope of the analysis, it also addresses an often-overlooked question. Theological discussions of creation and eschatology frequently take place in hyperspecialized cul-de-sacs, each so concerned with the myriad controversies in their own spheres of doctrine – for example, cosmic origins and environmental ethics with the one, political prognostication and afterlife speculation with the other – that there often remains little time for inquiries into the relationship between them. Not that there has been much felt need for such inquiry. For most of Christian history, the relationship between creation and eschatology was relatively uncontroversial: creation is the beginning that flows from God, while eschatology is the conclusion in which creation returns to its source, and the cosmos moves inexorably from one to the other by God's gracious providence. According to Origen, 'the end is always like the beginning', and just as 'there was one beginning', so too 'there is one end to all things'.[1] The tidiness of this classical, rather Neoplatonic picture has fractured over the past century as talk of creation and eschatology has been tethered to various theological disputes whose conceptual frameworks and presuppositions are often in tension with each other. More recent talk of eschatology, in particular, has emphasized narratival categories and natural presuppositions about what makes consummation new with respect to creation. The task of this chapter is, therefore: first, to clarify by way of historical inquiry the problem of continuity that bedevils theological reflection on the relationship between creation and eschatology; and second, to venture a theological alternative that avoids this problem altogether by demythologizing some natural assumptions about eschatology, thereby providing a more credible and liberating way forward.

The creation–eschatology relation and the problem of continuity

Προσδοκοῦμεν ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν, καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come. So concludes the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The reference to the 'age to come' – often mistranslated as 'world to come' and too often reduced to a simple eternity – raises the question of the relationship between the present and future ages, between creation and consummation. This question became more pressing with the rediscovery of apocalyptic ideas in the early twentieth century and the subsequent rise of cosmic and political eschatologies. These approaches forced a reckoning with eschatological

[1]Origen, *First Principles*, 1.6.2.

hope as more than the Christianization of the world[2] and challenged classical theologies that assumed not only a dualist anthropology but also an account of eschatological perfection consisting of a beatific vision on a spiritual plane no longer connected to the physical limitations of embodied existence. Much of the literature about the *creation–eschatology relationship* (hereafter CER) has focused on the question of timing; namely, whether the coming age was originally expected in an imminent future that never arrived and so forced the church to adapt to its surroundings or instead was always understood as something already inaugurated but not yet fully realized. Embedded in this debate, however, is the more basic question regarding the continuity, or discontinuity, between the old and new ages. Is the age to come a wholly new reality, either material or immaterial, that replaces the present cosmos, doomed as it is to an eventual conflagration? Or is the new age progressively being unveiled within the creation, perhaps as the church grows through evangelization or as Christians engage in sociocultural transformation and production? Or, finally, is the eschatological age already fully present even though it is invisible to every eye except the eye of faith? Insofar as the relationship between death and resurrection is paradigmatic for the relationship between the old and new ages, the conundrum of continuity in the CER raises the question of the continuity between the fleshly body and the *sōma pneumatikos* of the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15.44), and thereby also the relationship between our present existence and whatever is awaiting, if anything.

As these questions already indicate, the problem of continuity is a veritable thicket of problems – a thicket that has grown especially unruly in recent decades – thus necessitating a more nuanced set of categories in order to discern precisely *which* continuity is at issue in debates about the CER. The continuities can be differentiated into the following nine categories:

i. *Resurrectional continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the fleshly body before death and the spiritual body after resurrection – primarily with respect to Jesus and secondarily with respect to humans. Here the question is how christology and theological anthropology make sense of human identity between mortal and eternal life.

ii. *Cosmological continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the old and new cosmos. The term cosmos 'refers to the entire universe of physical, spiritual, terrestrial, and celestial reality' – that is, to the whole of reality in its fullest sense.[3] Here the question is soteriology on the cosmic level; namely, how God's act of creation relates to the eschatological hope for all things.

iii. *Anthropological continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the old and new person. Here the question is soteriology on the individual level, in which creation and eschatology are ways of speaking about sin and faith.

[2]Regarding the Christianization of the world, Friedrich Schleiermacher frames this doctrine in terms of the 'consummation of the church' rather than that of the world, in which the eschatological hope consists in the 'spread of Christianity over the mass of humanity'. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. Catherine L. Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina G. Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 965.

[3]David Bentley Hart, 'Different Idioms, Different Worlds: Various Notes on Translating the New Testament', in *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 366.

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iv. *Epistemological continuity* views the CER as the relationship between nature and grace. Here the question is whether the knowledge of God has any continuity with the knowledge of nature that is ostensibly available to all people.

v. *Scientific continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the beginning and end of the visible, material universe, especially earth. Here the question is how theology's claims about eschatology relate to scientific claims about the future end of life on earth and the end of the universe, including all possibility of life, as a whole.

vi. *Historical continuity* views the CER as the qualitative relationship between the historical and the eschatological – between time and eternity – and the quantitative relationship between the past and the future. Here there is a twofold question about Christian origins (how the early Christian community understood the eschaton) and Christian identity (how the individual Christian understands the relationship between one's present existence and the eschatological future).

vii. *Sociopolitical continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the present social order and the chiliastic ideal of an earthly kingdom. Here the question is whether and how Christianity's eschatological expectations relate to the social and political situation.

viii. *Narratival continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the literary beginning and end of the Christian biblical canon and, more broadly, the beginning and end of the Christian story or 'salvation history'. Here the question is about the narratival coherence, aesthetic plenitude, and pulchritude of the total story.

ix. *Covenantal continuity* views the CER as the relationship between the two modes of God's covenant community – Israel and the church. Here the question is whether God remains faithful to God's promises to Israel or whether the church supersedes and supplants Israel.

Many of the conflicts in theology stem from tensions between the different frameworks within which theologians explore the relationship between creation and eschatology. When theologians establish one of these as the norm, it forces the other frameworks to conform to the theological presuppositions embedded in the first. For instance, the 'nature and grace' dispute in the early twentieth century arose from a tension between epistemological and anthropological frameworks. The science and theology debate stems from the notion that 'nature' in the epistemological frame is the same as nature in the scientific frame. For some, discontinuity in one category may not conflict with continuity in another; for others, continuity in one category demands continuity in every other.

Virtually every theologian accepts the need for continuity and discontinuity in some capacity; however, the overarching question is: Where are the continuity and discontinuity located? A brief historical survey demonstrates the diversity and complexity of the options within Christian thought. Some CER categories did not arise until relatively recently, such as the historical (since historical research is a modern development) and the covenantal (since most of Christian history was anti-Jewish and supersessionist). The sociopolitical category was a minority position throughout Christian history, as millenarian movements and apocalyptic ideas arose repeatedly, often enjoying widespread popularity, particularly in response to social crises and institutional hegemonies. In what follows, of particular interest is how the

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cosmological and anthropological categories reflect the theological and cultural conditions of different periods, both because these categories remain central throughout the various stages in theological history and because they highlight the problem of continuity in a profound way.

The ancient Mediterranean world of Second Temple Judaism and the earliest Christian communities emphasized cosmological and anthropological discontinuity amid covenantal continuity. In addition to the apocalyptic expectation of the imminent End that characterized Jewish communities during the time of Jesus and Paul, there was the understanding of the resurrection and afterlife common to this period. As Matthew Thiessen observes, numerous passages in the Jewish scriptures (e.g. Judg. 5.20; Pss. 8.3-7; 148.1-3; Job 38.4-7), as well as Second Temple texts such as the *Animal Apocalypse*, *Joseph and Asenath*, and Qumran's Thanksgiving Scroll, identify stars as divine or angelic beings, or at least as images of the divine. The stars or angels were understood to be made of *pneuma*, which in the cosmology of the time was a material substance – not the immaterial 'spirit' of modern parlance. Resurrection within this context was understood as a 'process of astralization', in which the wise will shine 'like the stars forever and ever' (Dan. 12.3) and the righteous will be 'like the angels' and 'made equal to the stars' (2 Bar. 51.10).[4] This process of becoming star-like fulfils the original Abrahamic promise that his seed will be like the stars (Gen. 15.5), which Thiessen convincingly argues should be understood in qualitative rather than numerical terms, and finds support for this reading in Philo, Irenaeus, and Origen.[5] The gospel of Paul to the early communities of gentile Christ followers was that, through faith, they receive Christ's *pneuma* – that is, they are infused with the risen Christ's angelic-astral matter – and thereby share in the seed and promise of Abraham; they begin the astralization process now, which their later resurrection will fully realize when they join the righteous 'up in the shining aether beyond the moon'.[6] While the apocalyptic texts from this period describe the eschatological hope in terrestrial terms as universal peace and a renewed and glorious temple, the astral nature of resurrected bodies suggests that ancient Mediterranean cosmology expected a celestial afterlife, which, as Paula Fredriksen points out, fits with Paul's claim that the redeemed have their 'citizenship' (*politeuma*) in the heavens (Phil. 3.20).[7] Amid the material discontinuity between terrestrial and celestial existence – 'the form of the cosmos is passing away' (1 Cor. 7.31) – there is the continuity of God's promise to Abraham. If there is a material continuity, it consists in the fact that God's people are already, in some mysterious way, a pneumatic community; *pneuma* is the substance that unites the resurrectional, cosmological, anthropological, and covenantal categories within the early communities of Christ believers.

As the apocalyptic cosmology faded from view, the Christian community adapted to the world and brought about the era of ecclesiastical empire, a church-directed culture defined by the exercise of sacerdotal authority within a divinely willed hierarchical order. According to the structure of the Ptolemaic cosmos, everything had its ordained place and function: the human person was the microcosm that reflected the macrocosm, and the macrocosm existed

[4] Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 140–3.
[5] See Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 137–9.
[6] David Bentley Hart, 'Postscript to the Paperback Edition', in *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 593.
[7] See Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 244n49.

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for the sake of the fulfilment of the microcosm. In this context, there was a far greater emphasis on eschatological continuity – especially material continuity. Gregory of Nyssa's dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* repeatedly stresses that 'the resurrection is nothing other than the restoration of our nature to its original state', and for this reason the very same elements must be used or else the result would be a new creation rather than a resurrection.[8] The form will be different, just as the seed is formally different from the tree, but the material elements will be identical so that the same body gathers around the same soul in paradise. Thomas Aquinas is often associated with eschatological discontinuity since his concept of heavenly bliss – in which humans spend eternity intellectually contemplating God within a static, timeless cosmos on the grounds that bodily corruption derives, he claims, from the movement of the heavens – seems so foreign to creaturely experience.[9] But this formal discontinuity coincides with material continuity, specifically with respect to the cosmological and resurrectional categories. When Aquinas asks whether the world will be renewed (*innovabitur*), his key argument in support of the affirmative is that all corporeal things have been made for the sake of humanity, and since human beings – whom he calls a 'little world' (*minor mundus*) – will be renewed in the sense of being freed from mortality and corruption, it follows that the universe will be renewed as well.[10] The rationale for this renewal is simply that while the mind's eye will be able to comprehend God's essence, one's fleshly eyes, whose elements will be restored in resurrection, will have to settle for seeing God's divinity in its corporeal effects. The newness in question, Aquinas clarifies, will be neither natural nor contrary to nature, but instead will be above nature (*supra naturam*), 'just as grace and glory are above the nature of the soul'.[11] Resurrection is nature without the tendency towards corruption, which, for Aquinas, requires static timelessness. John Calvin briefly takes up this topic in the context of addressing what he considers superfluous questions, which are pursued by those hungry for 'empty learning'.[12] Nevertheless, he says the renewal of creation will serve the purpose of granting the redeemed the pinnacle of happiness. Even though people will no longer need creation for their sustenance and survival, the knowledge of the new creation and the sight of it – unencumbered by the limitations of time, weariness, and sin – will fill the pious with unsurpassed pleasure.

In most of the accounts of eschatology from late antiquity to early modernity, discontinuity is largely swallowed up by continuity. Within a church-directed culture, with its all-encompassing cosmic structure of nature and supernature ordained from the beginning by God, it is understandable why the accent would fall on cosmological and resurrectional continuity. The CER is the return of creation to its source, the restoration of the cosmos to its original and perfect form. For Aquinas, the renewed world is merely the amelioration of the universe by way of the addition of glory. Indeed, he goes on to say, nothing wholly new can be created, for

[8]Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 118.
[9]See Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa Contra Gentiles. Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Garden City: Image Books, 1957), chap. 97.
[10]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920–5), III (Suppl.), Q. 91, Art. 1.
[11]Aquinas, *ST*, III (Suppl.), Q. 91, Art. 1.
[12]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), III.xxv.11.

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that would violate the biblical claim that God ceased creating on the seventh day, and thus everything God does in the consummation has to be prefigured in some way in the original creation.[13] The consummated creation for Calvin seems to be largely identical to the present world and what has changed is primarily humanity's freedom from vice and illness, which distort and inhibit the ability to fully enjoy the world. For Calvin and Protestant orthodoxy, cosmic eschatology was of little to no interest; indeed, special preoccupation with this subject, as with Thomas Müntzer or the Anabaptists at Münster, was likely a sign of something sinister and perverse. The ecclesiastical culture of this period rendered eschatological speculations pointless. When the metaphysics of the classical tradition became unbelievable for many in the wake of the scientific and historical revolutions, it was easy for liberal theology to let eschatology simply merge into ecclesiology. For all intents and purposes, that had already happened centuries earlier.

Early modernity extended, even deepened, the continuity that characterized Christendom's church culture. While the Protestant Reformations, particularly the Lutheran tradition, instigated a fresh wave of apocalyptic prophecies and astrological prognostications, the confessional Protestant traditions largely contained discontinuity within the anthropological category.[14] When post-Reformation apocalyptic eschatology, and the Ptolemaic cosmology that supported it, faded in the mid-seventeenth century, the emphasis on anthropology to the neglect of other categories made the transition to a Copernican cosmology and the modern disbelief in eschatology relatively painless. If liberal theology was largely a theology of continuity, the rediscovery of New Testament apocalyptic ideas in late modernity reignited talk of eschatological discontinuity, even though – now on the other side of Kant, Lessing, and Hegel – cosmological discontinuity had been replaced by historical and epistemological discontinuity. Karl Barth thus declared: 'There is no continuity, no harmony, no peace between the death of the old person and the life of the new.'[15] Barth here expanded on the sixteenth-century Lutherans, who confessed that 'in spiritual and divine matters . . . the human being is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, indeed like a block of wood or a stone, like a lifeless statue'.[16] Elaborating on this, Barth wrote that fallen human beings 'are surely dead', like 'human corpses'.[17] In these and other statements, Barth extended the anthropological discontinuity of the Reformation into the epistemological, historical, and even cosmological realms (by way of christology), thus turning the soteriological principle of justification by grace alone into the starting point for thinking about the CER more broadly. The result, naturally, was the emphatic denial of natural theology. To emphasize continuity would be to deny the need for and dependence upon God's grace. Barth, of course, does not contest that, viewed empirically, the human person appears

[13]See Aquinas, *ST*, III (Suppl.), Q. 91, Art. 1.
[14]See Robin B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Robin B. Barnes, *Astrology and Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[15]Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik: Die Lehre von der Versöhnung 2* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1955), 448; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 399.
[16]Formula of Concord, 'The Solid Declaration', in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 548 (II.20). The passage in question is culled from several of Martin Luther's own writings and is attributed to him as a quote.
[17]Barth, *KD* IV.1, 535; Barth, *CD* IV.1, 481.

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the same before and after the event of faith, just as the world appears the same before and after Christ. Barth merely denies that this fact has any theological significance since theology is not concerned with the empirical but with the ontological – the true being of the person and the world. For Barth, as for the dialectical and apocalyptic theologians who followed him, the eschatological consummation of humanity, its discontinuous death and resurrection, has already occurred in Jesus Christ, and it only remains for faith to acknowledge what is always already true.

As a Lutheran theologian, Rudolf Bultmann shared Barth's soteriological convictions, but to avoid metaphysical speculation he distinguished instead between the ontological and the ontic: the ontological self is the visible, empirical person, while the ontic self is the hidden, existential dimension – what the Apostle Paul, drawing on Hellenic thought, calls the 'outer' and 'inner' person (2 Cor. 4.16).[18] For Bultmann, anthropological discontinuity does not entail 'a magical transformation of the human person that removes the believer from Dasein'. One's existence is ontically 'sublated' and 'overcome', he says, but not ontologically 'destroyed'.[19] Such a person is now 'deworlded' (*entweltlicht*) even though they exist 'within the world', a paradox that he explicitly connects to the christological paradox of 'the Word made flesh' and the soteriological paradox of *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and a sinner).[20] For Bultmann, then, the eschatological discontinuity of the moment of decision – in which one is removed from the world – coincides with a person's worldly, ontological continuity. The discontinuity (of eschatological existence) always involves a simultaneous continuity (of worldly existence), and continuity finds its true meaning and significance in discontinuity.

The nuanced, paradoxical relationship between continuity and discontinuity in the work of the dialectical theologians has been lost in the criticism levelled against them and their apocalyptic heirs by biblical scholars who have embraced the literary and postliberal developments of the late twentieth century and have deployed a narratival framework specifically to expound the CER. These scholars, influenced especially by N. T. Wright, adopted modern historicism but then stripped it of its critical dimension, leaving them with an inflated category of narrative, which they elevated to the level of a master concept that then determines all other categories for thinking about creation and eschatology. The biblical canon becomes a single coherent macronarrative whose plot begins with creation and concludes with new creation, and in which Jesus is one agent among others – alongside judges, kings, and prophets – within the story of salvation history.[21] For Wright, any critique of this narratival construct is taken as a denial of creation, covenant, history, and even Israel, and thus the dialectical and apocalyptic theologians are guilty of 'deJudaizing' the New Testament, denying history

[18]See Rudolf Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, ed. Erich Dinkler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 127.
[19]Rudolf Bultmann, 'Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube: Antwort an Gerhardt Kuhlmann [1930]', in *Neues Testament und christliche Existenz: Theologische Aufsätze*, ed. Andreas Lindemann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 65–6.
[20]See Rudolf Bultmann, 'Das Befremdliche des christlichen Glaubens', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 55, no. 2 (1958): 191–2; Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Gifford Lectures 1955* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 154.
[21]See J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 57–60.

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(since history, he says, 'implies continuity'), and rejecting the goodness of creation.[22] By confining creation and eschatology within this narratival box, Wright and other postliberals can criticize modern theologians for having different cultural and theoretical presuppositions from the early Christians while simultaneously ignoring the actual cultural presuppositions of Mediterranean antiquity. The singular macronarrative binds both past and present to a fictive construct. Much like the hermeneutical Swiss army knife of the 'already but not yet' formula so beloved by this school, the salvation–historical story is a malleable tool capable of avoiding any real historical or exegetical problem. Wright ultimately argues that continuity between creation and eschatology is 'established in the final consummation' and thereby guarantees the possibility and promise of natural theology.[23] For Wright, the CER applies to a whole host of continuities – between creation and new creation, death and resurrection, nature and grace, Israel and the church, and between the church and the coming kingdom – the loss of any implying the loss of all.

Finally, and most recently, theologians engaged in the dialogue with the natural sciences have conflated cosmological continuity with scientific continuity on the assumption that 'creation' refers to the origin of the observable universe and thus 'new creation' must refer to the universe's final end. The work of Robert John Russell is particularly notable in this regard. He argues that clues to the new creation can be gleaned 'from the themes of continuity and discontinuity found in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection'.[24] Specifically, he claims that 'a literal understanding of the bodily resurrection of Jesus' is 'the first instance of a general, regular phenomenon' and so provides an analogy for the future of the cosmos, one that requires rejecting the predictive value of Big Bang cosmology. Russell speaks of 'elements of continuity' and 'elements of discontinuity' between pre- and post-resurrection Jesus and between creation and consummation. The elements of continuity in Jesus include 'at least a minimal element of physical/material being' in addition to personal and interpersonal characteristics. He claims that science can assist in understanding which conditions and characteristics of the universe are essential and, thus, are elements of continuity.[25] Like the narratival biblical scholars, Russell gives little attention to the historical–cultural gap between the ancient Mediterranean world of the Gospels and modern science; he assumes, for instance, that the eschatological future pertains to *this* world and so already rejects the astral afterlife presupposed by Second Temple Jews. More importantly, he assumes that the ancient apocalyptic and eschatological expectations of resurrection have timeless validity as factual propositions to which all Christians are confessionally bound, and if they conflict with scientific expectations regarding cosmic entropy and the collapse of the universe, so much the worse for science.

The foregoing brief survey demonstrates that across the different periods of church history, the understanding of the CER has fluctuated dramatically – with an emphasis on discontinuity in one period giving way to continuity in another. More importantly, there was often significant disagreement about where to locate the continuity and discontinuity, as changing cosmologies

[22]See N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 457, 461, 807; N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), xiii, 80.
[23]Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 254.
[24]Robert J. Russell, 'Resurrection, Eschatology, and the Challenge of Big Bang Cosmology', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 70, no. 1 (2016): 54.
[25]See Russell, 'Resurrection, Eschatology', 52, 55.

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and cultural presuppositions produced conflicting accounts of the relationship between creation and new creation. Every age has conceptualized the CER – including what counts as eschatological newness – in light of the cosmologies and anthropologies that made sense to them at the time; this historical adaptability is a feature, not a problem, of Christian theology. But this means it makes little sense to repristinate a previous era's account of creation and eschatology. As Klaus Nürnberger points out, 'it is a typical feature of the biblical tradition that it abandoned, transformed, or replaced outdated images and metaphors on a regular basis', and thus there is no reason why 'theology should feel obliged to claim timeless validity for any one of the biblical future expectations, including those taken up into Christian doctrinal formulations'.[26] Of course, not every new conceptual framework is inherently helpful. For example, the scientific category conflates divine creation with the natural world accessible to empirical investigation, thereby forcing theology into a concordist corner that places it on the defensive against scientific discovery.[27]

What unites most of the categories and accounts of the CER identified above is the common-sense assumption that 'creation' and 'eschatology' refer to two distinct objects in human experience – the world as it is (creation) and the world as it ought to be or will be one day (eschatology). This experiential gap between creation and new creation forms the underlying basis for all talk of (dis)continuity, but it also traps theology in a bind since it is forever trying – and failing – to discover a bridge across this divide. The assumption that there is a gap between creation and eschatology mirrors other perceived gaps in Christian experience. The doctrine of double predestination stems from the attempt to explain the gap between why some believe, and others do not – that is, in Calvin's words, why the gospel 'does not gain the same acceptance either constantly or in equal degree'.[28] Instead of thinking about redemption psychologically 'from below', the alternative is to think theologically 'from above', in terms of what must be true about redemption in light of who God is and what God has done and revealed, of which Barth's universal election is a well-known example.[29] Much like psychological approaches to soteriology, the problem with most CER accounts, especially those that emphasize the narratival framework, is that they force theology into an anthropocentric straitjacket. The perception that creation lies in the past while eschatology lies ahead in the future is a finite perspective, conditioned by the experience of temporal progress from birth to death, as well as the natural propensity to structure reality in terms of a beginning, middle, and end. But the fact that reality is experienced in this way is not a sufficient reason to conform theology to this narratival structure. Indeed, it is all the more reason to be wary of it.

The final part of this chapter proposes rethinking the CER to move beyond the continuity problem altogether – or at least beyond any sequential account that views creation and consummation as two distinct moments and realities. Doing so requires shifting from a

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[26]Klaus Nürnberger, 'Eschatology and Entropy: An Alternative to Robert John Russell's Proposal', *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 980–1. While he helpfully emphasizes the historical development of eschatology, Nürnberger assumes ancient mythical, eschatological accounts were merely metaphorical and not viewed as actual expectations about the material cosmos, which does not fully take into consideration the ancient cosmology presupposed by these apocalyptic texts.
[27]On the concept of concordism and its varieties (scientific, historical, and theological), see Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 14–16.
[28]Calvin, *Inst.*, III.xxi.1.
[29]See Barth, *KD* II.2, 367–72; Barth, *CD* II.2, 333–8.

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psychological or empirical perspective on the CER to a genuinely theological perspective, which also means jettisoning the narratival and scientific categories for thinking about creation and eschatology.

Beyond the continuity problem: The paradoxical identity of creation and eschatology

Towards the end of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas observes that each person naturally desires the last end – an end that brings a fitting conclusion to their existence. Borrowing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas says that 'the way someone is determines how the end appears to them' (*qualis unusquisque est talis et finis videtur ei*).[30] Those who desire happiness imagine the ultimate end as a place of perpetual bliss. Those who pursue justice imagine the end as a cosmic setting to rights. Confronted by the cacophony of finite existence, humans long for a final consonance, an intelligible ending that will bring order to the whole. Humans live and die, as the literary critic Frank Kermode observed, *in mediis rebus* (in the middle of things), and 'to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems'.[31] Humans are socially formed, in other words, to expect, even demand, coherent and tidy endings, not only for themselves but also for the world in its totality. They conceive the eschatological End as the cosmic projection of individual ends – as the ultimate that will bring the needed resolution to the penultimate. Ludwig Feuerbach was more insightful than most theologians in recognizing that 'heaven is the true god of human beings. As a person conceives their heaven, so a person conceives their god'.[32]

As natural as it is to conceive of creation's consummation as the projection of one's deepest desires and unconscious habits, a Christian theological account of the CER cannot settle for interpreting eschatology in psychological terms, as if a person's birth and death reflect, on the individual level, 'the two great acts of God at the beginning and end of all things: the creation and the consummation'.[33] The challenge here is to rethink what makes the new creation actually *new*. Responding to Paul Griffiths' notion of the *novissimum* as the last thing that has no future novelty, Joshua Wise argues that the question of eschatological newness has been hampered by a 'natural' concept of newness that defines the new as the most recent state of affairs. Griffiths' *novissimum* absolutizes this natural account of novelty so that the last thing of any creature is a state of affairs that cannot be superseded by something newer and more recent.[34] Wise argues instead for an account of divine novelty: newness in this theological sense is not the most recent occurrence in a linear sequence, but rather God is eternally new and anything that participates in God thereby shares in this divine newness. While Wise ends up arguing for a mythical account of eschatology that retains too much anthropological and cosmological continuity on the grounds that 'grace crowns nature' – even imagining an afterlife that involves

[30]Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.95.2–3; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.1114a.17.
[31]Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.
[32]Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1843), 260.
[33]Barth, *KD* III.3, 260; Barth, *CD* III.3, 230.
[34]See Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 7.

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the experience of temporal progress – his argument for a divine, rather than natural, account of newness remains apt.[35]

The first step is to see creation and consummation as concepts referring not to objects of human experience but to divine acts, and thus to let the being of God, and not one's natural prior understandings, determine their meaning. A 'natural' reading of these terms assumes they have a meaning in theology roughly equivalent to their use in everyday language. For instance, one might speak about one's *creation* of a book manuscript, and – if sufficiently productive – a year or two later, one might speak about one's *consummation* of the book. This natural interpretation is the underlying assumption behind the narratival framework, in which creation marks the temporal and ontological origin, while consummation or eschatology marks the temporal and ontological end. The analogous (or, as it often is, borderline univocal) application of this natural understanding of creation and consummation to theological talk of divine creation and consummation implies an anthropomorphic deity who relates to the cosmos the way an author relates to a book: a discrete entity who volitionally chooses to create and sovereignly determines the creation the way a potter determines the clay – a mythological metaphor used in scripture (see Isa. 64.8; Jer. 18.6; Sir. 33.13) that has worked its way into liturgy and theology. Using such language univocally leads directly to what Tink Tinker identifies as the 'up-down cognitive image schema' that characterizes how Euro-colonial people in North America frequently understood the relationship between creator and creation.[36] According to this colonial imaginary, 'God' is the hierarchically highest being that rules over those lower on the ontological order. Euro-colonial eschatology at the ultimate, cosmic level thus reflects Euro-colonial eschatology at the penultimate, political level: just as Indigenous persons were placed in re-educating boarding schools under the eschatological motto of 'kill the Indian and save the man', so too God is conceived as a cosmic colonizer who re-educates humanity through the church under the motto of 'kill the sinner and save the soul'.[37]

So much God-talk, especially with respect to the CER, implies a being endowed with supreme authority who chooses among options and rules over creation at a remove – a god who, as both Aquinas and Paul Tillich observe, is merely 'a being' instead of 'being itself'.[38] If God is so qualitatively other and absolutely transcendent as to be the power of being as such, then it makes little sense to speak of creation and consummation as discrete acts; God does not will this or that option, because God is pure willing itself. One can only speak of these as divine acts if one recognizes that, in truth, God does only one act – the singular act that determines both the divine being and creaturely existence. As Meister Eckhart points out in his commentary on Genesis, the eternal now in which God created heaven and earth is 'the very same now in which God exists from eternity, in which also the emanation of the divine Persons eternally is, was, and will be'. God 'did not exist before the world did. . . . It is false to picture

[35]See Joshua Wise, 'The Concept of Newness in Eschatology', *Pro Ecclesia* 27, no. 3 (2018): 326–9, 334.
[36]George E. Tinker, 'Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator', in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2013), 169.
[37]On the boarding schools, see David W. Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*, 2nd edn (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020).
[38]See Aquinas, *ST*, I, Q. 13, Art.11; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:156–7, 235–41.

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God as if he were waiting around for some future moment in which to create the world'.[39] But if it is false to imagine God waiting around to create the cosmos, it is equally false to imagine God waiting around to consummate the cosmos. Indeed, it is false to imagine eschatological consummation as a second act at all. Divine transcendence means, as Nicholas of Cusa held, that God is the coincidence of opposites, including the 'coincidence of the beginning and the end'. As the 'Absolute Same', God is 'the Beginning, the Middle, and the End of every form'.[40] Eschatology is no more in the future than creation is in the past; from the vantage point of God's eternal now, both are equally present and coterminous. To borrow a term from the dialectical theologians, the relationship between creation and eschatology should be spoken about as a *paradoxical* relationship.

In his later work, Bultmann set out to address a problem with talk of divine action; namely, that so much of this talk is rooted in 'natural' assumptions. Traditional mythological talk views God's action as taking place alongside other occurrences in the world. Divine action within this model is discrete, miraculous, and competitive with other causal agents. Liberal pantheism (or even narrative providentialism), on the other hand, views God's action as identical to worldly occurrences, typically described in terms of history. Either way, divine action is *directly* identified with visible, objectifiable occurrences. Both approaches thus objectify God by locating divine action on the same level as nature and history; divinity is here only quantitatively, rather than qualitatively, distinct from the world. Bultmann's solution was to apply Kierkegaard's language of paradox to the problem of divine action. Faith, he says, asserts the '*paradoxical* identity' of divine action with worldly occurrences.[41] The act of God does not appear in the world as something to which one can point and say, 'There it is'. Instead, because of God's utter transcendence, 'God's action is hidden for every eye other than the eye of faith.'[42] The permanent invisibility of such action is precisely what protects God's genuine deity.

Applied to the CER, the point is that consummation does not take place alongside or subsequent to creation; both are eternal and thus simultaneous. Creation and consummation are paradoxically identical – paradoxical only because the identity is not visible apart from faith. The doctrine of creation is 'an eschatological claim about the world's relation to God', and thus 'protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation'.[43] The eternal act of creation is always the eschatological power of the future drawing creation into its consummation (*creatio ex resurrectione*),[44] just as the eternal act of consummation is always the creative power of being

[39]*Comm. Gen.* 7, translated in Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 84–5.
[40]*De Genesi*, 142, 147, translated in Jasper Hopkins, *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning Press, 1994), 393, 396.
[41]Rudolf Bultmann, 'Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung', in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: H. Reich, 1952), 197. For more on Bultmann's use of Kierkegaard's concept of paradox, see Cora Bartels, *Kierkegaard Receptus: Die Theologiegeschichtliche Bedeutung der Kierkegaard-Rezeption Rudolf Bultmanns* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2008), 1:353–428, 2:283–6.
[42]Bultmann, 'Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung', 196.
[43]David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 68.
[44]See Mark Butchers, 'Creatio Ex Resurrectione?' (PhD diss., King's College, London, 2006).

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itself. Both creation and consummation point people to their existential insecurity, to the truth that their being lies outside themselves: creation refers one to the insecurity within oneself, while eschatological consummation refers one to the ground of this insecurity in the eternally interrupting and consummating God. Considered with respect to the world as experienced now, the discontinuity between the singular divine act of consummative creation (or creational consummation) and the objectifiable world of one's finite existence is so absolute that they – the divine act and the finite world – become perfectly and paradoxically continuous. There is no continuity problem because there is no gap to cross that is not always and already crossed by the eternality of God.

As true as this may be for God, perhaps at the level of human participation the continuity problem still needs to be retained since humans remain finite even if God is infinite. Here, too, however, Bultmann argues that natural ideas have been allowed to seep into understandings of creation and eschatology. Bultmann observes that the New Testament understands the eschatological act of salvation and revelation as 'the gift of life that overcomes death'. Revelation 'is an *event* that abolishes death, not a doctrine that says it does not exist'.[45] Because humans continue to suffer and die despite the revelation of faith, one's native assumption is that revelation must be a possibility now that only becomes an actuality in the future, at the end of one's life or at the end of history – what some are fond of describing as 'already but not yet'. As attractive as this may be as a flexible solution to the continuity problem, this approach to eschatology misconstrues eternal life as the mere 'prolongation of what is called "life" now'. Such an understanding of resurrection and eschatological existence sees consummation as 'the fulfilment of the natural longing in which a person wants to remain what they are'.[46] In other words, any understanding of eternal life as a form of existence that necessarily competes with and is subsequent to mortal life assumes a merely quantitative, rather than qualitative, distinction between finite and eternal existence. It is not genuinely *new* – a truly new life, just like a truly transcendent divine act, would not compete with humanity's worldly, historical existence now. Support for this has already been shown in the Apostle Paul's notion that Christ is resurrected in mortal human bodies (Gal. 2.19-20; 2 Cor. 4.10-11) and in the Johannine notion that one passes into eternal life in the moment of faith (Jn 5.24; 1 Jn 3.14). Translated out of its ancient cosmological context, the New Testament emphasis on the radical discontinuity between flesh and pneuma becomes a metaphor for describing the paradoxical identity of flesh and pneuma: in faith, a person is both a finite, fleshly person and a pneumatic, eschatological person.

A paradoxical, realized eschatology, therefore, honours both the Godness of God and the newness of new life. A conception of eschatology as a future phenomenon is just as much a psychological projection as the conception of God as the all-sovereign author who provides the tidy conclusion to our story. To view the CER in such a natural and mythological way not only imagines divine agency on the level of creaturely agency but also imagines eternal life on the level of creaturely existence. For this reason, Bultmann's lead should be followed when he says that God's work as creator takes place in God's work in the crucified Christ, so that faith

[45]Rudolf Bultmann, 'Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament [1929]', in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–65), 3:15.
[46]Bultmann, 'Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament', 16.

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in God is simultaneously faith in God's act of creation and consummation: 'To have faith in the cross of Christ means to be prepared to let God work as the Creator. God creates out of nothing, and whoever becomes nothing before God is made alive.'[47]

Conclusion

Theological reflection on eschatology and resurrection has historically been both constrained by the parameters of orthodoxy and given to flights of speculation – often with little attention to the changing cosmologies and world pictures underpinning the various conceptions of the eschatological End. Moreover, the recent interest in salvation–historical narratives only reifies traditional mythical discourse and reads one's natural assumptions into scripture. One way out of the conundrums surrounding eschatology involves following both medieval mystical theology and modern dialectical theology by emphasizing the otherness and eternality of God and applying the language of paradox to the CER. While this approach comes at the price of certain long-held commitments and expectations, it avoids psychological projections upon both God and the afterlife. In place of a 'natural' account of eschatology and resurrection, this approach brings creation and eschatology together: creation is always already eschatological, and the eschaton is always already present and creative.

Further reading

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[47]Rudolf Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort: Predigten, Andachten, Ansprachen 1906–1941*, ed. Erich Grässer and Martin Evang (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 271–2; Rudolf Bultmann, 'Faith in God the Creator [1934]', in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 181.

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