

HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO ESCHATOLOGICAL ISSUES

Hermeneutical perspective of Werner Jeanrond

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In the world of global poverty, recession, postconflict European society like in the case of ex-Yugoslavia, European transformation of economy, especially in the light of Greek problem, after the American hell's day of Nine Eleven, eschatological issues like Inferno, Apocalypse and Domsday are back in the center of people's minds. Theological thinking wants to carry on with these issues, because the role of theology for any time is to give an explanation.

Eschatological questions in a broader sense concern theology and philosophy. There is growing rediscovery of eschatological questions in theology as we shall see, and in philosophical fields where is present a new interest in apocalypse, of course in some different sense, especially in a work of neomarxist philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.

Our basic problem is this: How can theology deal with eschatological questions? Can theological approach in the light of Scripture be reasonable for "secular" readers? How can theology intermediate this emergent questions? We propose a theological hermeneutical key in reading these questions because hermeneutics is an unavoidable dimension of theological reflection. Then our basic claim is next: every theological question must be hermeneutically treated. We find that Werner Jeanrond's hermeneutical perspective is an appropriate one. From this point of view it will be intelligible to talk about eschatological topics in post-modern, multi-cultural and global world. Because we cannot speak about all eschatological topics which demand fuller and wider description that cannot accomodate in our small work, we will limit ourself in talk about apocalypse.

In the first part of the text we will show growing interest in apocalypse in philosophy and theology. Then we will propose that hermeneutical perspective of Werner Jeanrond is a comprehensible way of dealing with every theological question. He is writing about hermeneutical significance and hermeneutical call of theology.

After that, we will come to reading Scripture and Tradition trying to highlight apocalypse in its narrow theological sense. Based on this reading we will propose and elaborate next claim as a central point of this work: hermeneuti-

cal reading of apocalypse tells us that apocalypse is an essential horizon of Christian life.

I. *Growing interest in Apocalypse*

Apocalypse in the broader sense

In his book “Analogical Imagination” David Tracy has suggested that every theologian in his work must communicate to three publics: Church, academy and wider society.¹ If theological work cannot speak to these three publics it cannot be called theological. Based on this issue, we will be happy if theological dealing with apocalypse concerns not just church, but also academics and wider society.

Apocalypse in the broader sense is not identical with its original context. Apocalypse in wider context is horrible happening, time when will start the ultimate end. Looking at wider societal contexts like in film industry, we see growing attention not only in the moment of apocalypse — aliens and zombies who occupy our planet or world catastrophies like global warming, tsunamies or tornados etc. — but also in the post-apocalyptic age where survivors are trying to find a way of living after disaster. Maybe it would be more appropriate to call these interests in the-end-of-the-world-issues post-apocalyptic interests. These fictional scenarios are not so far away from reality when we see terrible horrors of our age: Auschwitz, nuclear bombs and world wars. Undoubtedly, apocalyptic reflection about our lives is at the heart of humanity, because every human person reflects his own destiny, end and death. In theology, we call it anthropological foundation of eschatological question: every human person is concerned about his destiny, dying, death and the question of justice.

Likewise there is interest among philosophers about apocalypse. But their philosophical interests — like that of Žižek, Negri and Hart — differ from the original religious context of Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in his book “Living in the end times” argues that we will come to an ultimate breakdown of civilisation.² He announces the end of neoliberal capitalism and proposes some kind of neomarxist eschatology: expecting the end of neocapitalist world and a new and fairer world. Similarly, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their book “Empire” announce the end of the classical independent state.³ They see that

1 David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, New York, 1981.

2 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London, 2011.

3 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, London, 2001.

the state loses its sovereignty and that his place took centers of powers which manage citizens. Those centers of power are called empire in their work. Also, they look nostalgically to old industrial capitalism where it is clear who is owner, worker and where capital goes. But now is the time of financial capitalism which interest is not like in industrial capitalism in some improvement which all citizens will enjoy, but her only interest is money. In “Declaration” Negri and Hardt propose that instead of empire which schema is financial capitalism, we must constitute society “in which all have access and share the common”.⁴ It is some kind of political-cultural apocalypse where we must fight against the centers of power called “empire” which managing this world end expect the world where the main and blessed victory will be fair treatment of common. It seems that Negri–Hardt perspective is more convenient because it gives us post-apocalyptic way of living.

Their treatise of apocalypse is not theological but it is close to theological apocalypse in following point: this world, which is injustice, will come to his end. Although, we can locate that Žižek neomarxist eschatology and cultural-political eschatology of Hardt and Negri have some closure-points with theological eschatology, but also they are so much different. Christian eschatology propose that in Christ we are already saved and we just expecting something what we now see barely, what we participate in our times. It is not something barely knew, Christian apocalypse is predictable, it is already lived and visible by christian who are aware that their real home is on heavens.

Apocalypse in narrow sense

Original context of apocalypse is in Jewish tradition where usually God’s people are saved and enemies not. Apocalyptic writings are full of symbols, dreams and metaphors. It is writing style. Precisely stated, eschatology is a part of theological science, but apocalypse is concerns genre of Judeo-Christian writing. Obviously, there is not some special teaching in theology about apocalypse, but in our work we participate in this word trying to get close with wider philosophical-cultural context of apocalypse, although when we dealing theologically with this word we thinking about Doomsday when all creatures will be under the authority of God.

Rediscovery of eschatological issues in theology become evident in the end of 19th century in the works of Johannes Weis⁵ and Albert Schweitzer⁶ who emphasized eschatological character of Jesus proclaiming. Hereafter

4 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration*, New York, 2012, 101.

5 See especially: Johannes Weis, *Jesus 'Proclamation of the Kingdom of God'*, London, 1971.

6 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for Historical Jesus*, New York, 1955.

scriptural syntagme “The Kingdom of God” have been discussed in eschatological perspective.

In evangelical theology eschatology become very important especially in the work of Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth. In Bultmann individualistic view, eschatology is like others New Testament’s myths whose meanings is existential. Eschatology is viewed like happening which concerns meeting between believer and kerygma. Barth is trying to finish with common opinion that proper place of eschatology is last chapter of every Christian dogmatic. It seems like eschatological rediscovery is prepared for one of the most eschatological theologian, if we can call him like this, of 20th century: Jürgen Moltmann. His precious work, especially “Theology of hope” and “Crucified God” accommodate eschatological perspective in a theological focus. His main argument is that Christian eschatology is focused on resurrection of Jesus Christ which has a proleptic structure. While we are actively waiting for Apocalypse we can at the same time participate in God’s future. In the example of Moltmann theology we argue that eschatology is not something on the edge of theology, like it was in the tractate *De novissimis*, but it has become central point of all theology.⁷

Hermeneutical perspective of every theological question

Hermeneutical reading of texts gives us helpfully key of understanding our own existential perspective. German theologian Werner Jeanrond has shown that hermeneutical perspective is not something quite new, but it was present from the beginnings in Greek philosophy, Jewish tradition and early Christian reflection.⁸ His important claim is next: “The theologian is primarily concerned with understanding the meaning of a biblical or a doctrinal text for us today”.⁹ When we deal with manifold experiences and writings of Christian Tradition, we are engaged in hermeneutical process. We are trying not just understand geographical and chronological characteristics of the text, but especially, and that is a hermeneutical call of theologian, causes of Christian praxis in different contexts, what one text means for one generation in one

7 We mentioned some theological examples in order to emphasize that in 20th century has been detected rediscovery of eschatology. There is another set of theologians who took eschatological perspective in Christianity in full earnest: Oscar Culmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger.

8 Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, New York, 1991.

9 Werner Jeanrond, *The Theological Understanding of Texts and Linguistic Explication*, *Modern Theology*, 1 (1984) 57.

time, and then try to find more appropriate way of dealing with this world in our time.

Jeanrond finds some crucial hermeneutical problems that concern every theological question. First, he insists on radical historical hermenutic subject. What does it mean? It means that in front of the text stands not some stable subject who is independent from history and human situation, but subject who is involved in human history and situation. That means next: it is very important to get seriously in every interpretation of author's worldview, political, social, cultural and individual situation. Second, he notes that it is not just Scripture who is made on pluralistic way, but every exposure of theological subjects is pluralistic. This is evident especially in reading apocalyptic literature where many interpretations of texts exist, for instance it regards the Book of Revelation, or Book of Daniel. Third, he proposes intercultural hermeneutic: every community enter in process of interpretation with her own hermeneutical key of understanding text.

But, what is happening when we are faced with many possible interpretations of texts? What is happening when we took seriously Tracy's methodological suggestion about three theological public? Jeanrond insists that through interpretation of texts we step in three dimension of interpretation: understanding, explanation and assessment. After we understand principal meaning of text, and after we explain every possible interpretation, we must deal with pluralism of meanings. Jeanrond propose assessment as a basic dimension of every interpretation. We cannot stand in many possible interpretations just like this, assessment is indispensable. After process of assessment comes fourth hermeneutical problem for Jeanrond: after each community provide interpretative key of understanding text, we must enter in hermeneutical conversation which is proposed by David Tracy.

In his book "Plurality and Ambiguity", Tracy has developed model of conversation based upon Gadamer model of conversation.¹⁰ Tracy's model of conversation is last moment of hermeneutical reading of the texts: theologian must enter with his interpretation in honest dialogue with other possible interpretations. This conversation between various interpretations must be open to change if it wants to be honest.

So, apocalypse explored and explained by theologians must enter in wider conversations where various interpretations of apocalypse will meet each other. Especially when we are reflect eschatological issues hermeneutical task of teology is very helpfull. Why? There is many symbolism in apocalyptic literature which can be interpreted wrong. Hermeneutical perspective can help theologians to treat eschatological literature properly.

10 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, Chicago, 1987.

Theological task is evident: hermeneutical reading of text leads us to true meanings of the texts.

II. *Theological reflection on Apocalypse*

After we saw growing interest in apocalypse in our times especially in philosophical and theological reflection, and after we emphasized that hermeneutical reading of texts is very prominent and unavoidable it is important to look at briefly to apocalypse in Bible and Tradition. Only from this point we can make some features of apocalypse for our days which can be proposed in intercultural dialogue.

Apocalypse in Bible and Tradition

Theological reflection on Apocalypse in wider sense, as we said earlier, is in fact talk about Doomsday, eschaton, the ultimate happening where all what exists will be reduced to the authority of Jesus Christ.

Old Testament approach about eschatology is connected with dialectic of promise and fulfilment. In some principal cases we can see God's promise to his people and their expectation of God's fulfilment of that promise:

- God's promise to first people after the fall
- Abraham's belief in God's promise
- God's promise to his nation in Egypt about Promise Land
- Expectation of God's Day when God will reveal his glory and when he subjugate all nations under Izrael's authority.

So, at the begginig of the relationship between God and man there was always dimension of expectation. While God's nation waits for the fulfilment of the promise, they must stay brave and strong in their faith in the only one God.

Apocalyptic literature of Israel history has arised in the time of Israel's crisis where there was evident that the Kingdom of David probably be never more established. So, God will set up a new order which is described with so much symbolism in the Book of Daniel, Angel book of Henok and Hermin's Shepherd. Basic feature of apocalyptic literature is detailed description of Doomsday–apocalypse.

New Testament's approach to apocalypse centers on the issue "Kingdom of God". Far away from political speech Jesus Christ emphasized that the Kingdom of God is connected with him, even more, the Kingdom of God is Jesus Christ. Norman Perrin provide responsible theological interpretation of

“Kingdom of God” in the proclamation of Jesus when he took hermeneutical approach seriously. He insists on three steps of investigations: historical criticism who “describes the attempt to understand the meaning of a text in its specific and original historical context”, importance of method which “seeks to establish the cultural historical milieu of the message of Jesus and to come to understand that milieu using all the resources of historical scholarship, including finally an act of historical imagination”, and importance of hermeneutical understanding of texts as the “art of understanding expressions of life fixed in writing.”¹¹

In next generations eschatological questions will have many interpretations which are under the influence of several theories:

- Parousia is historical incarnation of Jesus Christ (Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria)
- There is two parousia: first is incarnation and second will be realized in the end of times (Saint Justin, Sheperd of Hermas)
- Idea of millenarism
- There is also two Parousia: first incarnation and second every celebration of Eucharist.
- Idea of Joachim de Fiore about three ages
- Medieval treatising eschatological questions as questions full of apocalyptic fear

Second Vatican council has contributed to better understanding of eschatological question especially in *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Sacrosantum Concilium*. Renzo Lavatori has shown that 2. Vaticanum doesn't expose some methodological approach to eschatological question, rather it establish last things and shows them like components which are incorporated in reality and life of the Church.¹²

Hermeneutical understanding of apocalypse

All of this ideas witness that when we are talking about eschatological issues we are in the fields of many interpretations. It is helpful to recall Jeanrond proposal: when we are reading this different historical interpretation of scriptural texts about apocalypse we must remind oneself that the subject of these

11 Norman Perrin, *Eschatology and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Method in the Interpretation of the New Testament*, Georgia, 1986, 4–5.

12 Renzo Lavatori, *Il Signore verrà nella gloria. L'escatologia alla luce del Vaticano II*, Bologna, 2007.

texts are radical historical hermeneutic subject. For instance, when we look at the medieval year of 1348, when there was a black death which killed 30 percent of Europeans, their attitude about apocalypse was very dependent on their survival situation. We cannot read their interpretation of apocalypse independent from their historical situation. Moreover, Jeanrond argue that in pluralistic theological interpretations we must move to assesment as next hermeneutical step. What does it means for our purpose? It means that we must asses every interpretation, see which interpretation is more interesting for our own time.

So, we may ask next questions: What kind of apocalypse is appropriate for our present situation? What is the best theological perspective of apocalypse for our time? Instead to define it, let us see two basic features of that kind of apocalypse.

First, we can say that apocalypse, took in broader sense, is the fundamental horizon of Christian living. Expectation of apocalypse, when all creatures and all created world will be took to the closeness of Jesus Christ, is standard for Christian. Christians do not share broader sense of apocalypse as a horrible happening where it is not sure if we will be promoted to the next post-apocalyptic stage of surviving life. Christian apocalypse is predictable happening when all our deep hopes and desires will be apsorbed by God which is evident in liturgy. Liturgical aspect of Christian life is exactly this: staying in a close relationship with God which is not yet full relationship and wich allow us to see not a whole picture of last things but a part of it. Christian's view of apocalypse is happy and positive meeting with last moment of the world when, as Romano Guardini puts it, men will see himself in God's light.¹³ So, every the-end-of-the-world happening, scenarious, talking is family field for every Christian because he is the first-order apocalyptic partizan of this world. Nobody can terrify Christian with the-end-of-the-world scenarious because he already expecting the first-class apocalypse in which the main role will be the role of God of Jesus Christ. Romano Guardini in his book on eschatology also emphasized this relationship in which are believers put in. He said that to be God's son or daugther is not just a matter of belief in God, knowing that he protects us and care about us, but also, and that is a one of adequate interpretation of believing, that we are by grace engage in relationship with Father in which his son Jesus Christ stays. This is the remarkable and profound definition of being Christian: to stay in relationship with Father paralley with Jesus Christ. It seems appropriate to locate this relationship as a place of Pauline-Augustinian havenly citizenship.

How does this Father-Son relationship show his strength? Where can we find those family aspcts of Christian life evident?

13 Romano Guardini, *The Last Things*, London, 1954.

This haven citizenship is main part of fully responsible Christian existence in this world. Follow this statement second feature of theological understanding of apocalypse is next, and this is the answer to upper questions: apocalypse is very interested in actual human situation. For someone it could be logically stated that christian do not have interest in this world because he is expecting new world proclaimed by the church. But, it is not truth. Fundamental Christian vision of apocalypse is engagement about this world. We can see in theological literature of 20th century, which is the century of rediscovering eschatological questions, that biblical eschatology has influenced theology of liberation, political, black and feminist theology. Every social injustice, every violence, and every human suffering is a matter of christian because it was a matter of Jesus Christ, and because to stand in described family relationship with Fother includes unsatisfaction with every injustice of this world. Christian cannot stay in God's presence and still don't have eyes to see human's needs or don't have hands to make a better world.

Jeanrond offers his own way in reflection of apocalypse which is connected with this world in his book of love: Christian understanding of apocalypse is based on love which includes commitment. Basic aspect of eschatology for him is next: "Becoming a whole and fulfilled subject with others and with God in and through love is an essential aspect of his eschatological dynamic."¹⁴ Without practical assignment in world there can not exist christian understanding of future things. Jeanrond insists that Christian expectation of apocalypse must be full of fights againts injustice. Waiting for apocalypse in Christian sense is connected with practical engagement against poverty, sin and injustice.

Conclusion

Growing interest in apocalypse concerns every Christian and every theologian. In Bible and Tradition we saw many different interpretations of eschatological questions, but we emphasized two basic features of Christian understanding of apocalypse: it is fundamental horizon of Christian living and it is very interested in human historical situation. But, at the end of hermeneutical understanding of apocalypse, theologian must step in wider dialogue between various interpretations of apocalypse. Theologian's task, as we saw in Tracy's and Jeanrond's hermeneutic, is to explain his own way (of course, which is connected with his community) of understanding apocalypse to all publics of theology: church, academics and society. In that dialogue between

14 Werner Jeanrond, *Love and Eschatology*, *Dialog—A Journal of Theology*, (50) 1 (2011) 61.

various interpretations we can see that Christian activist plain against social injustice, poverty and sin is close to other social movements which are also involved in such questions. Anthony Kelly in his book “Eschatology and Hope” proposes that Christians must enter in inter–hope dialogue where christian will actively look at the future with other traditions and religions.¹⁵

If Christian understanding of apocalypse, which is described above, is not present in the wider extra–church context, it cannot be taken seriously. Only in intercultural, or inter–hope, scene radost i vedrina of Christian understanding of apocalypse can show her fuller light.

15 Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, New York, 2006.