



life, death & beyond

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION BOOKLET

TOPIC 2 – ESCHATOLOGY & APOCALYPSE

THIS BOOKLET CONTAINS WHAT YOU **MUST** KNOW FOR THIS PART OF THE UNIT – YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE YOU ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH WITH THIS MATERIAL SO THAT YOU CAN USE IT AND BE FLEXIBLE WITH YOUR UNDERSTANDING IN ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS.

The questions at the end are **not** exam questions – they are designed to help you get to grips with the material. You may well want to draw upon your answers to them as you plan essays.



Religious and secular teaching on Eschatology & Apocalypse

Definitions:

Eschatology: *Christian teaching (doctrine) about the end of time “The end of the Age”*

Apocalypse: *“unveiling what was hidden” revelation about the end of the world*

Beliefs about the end of the world continue to fascinate us. They are common themes in popular culture (eg *Apocalypse 2012*) and the advent of the new millennium sparked renewed interest in ancient prophetic devices such as the Mayan Calendar and the ever popular Dan Brown series. Numerous cults have been established based around apocalyptic expectation (eg Waco & Heaven’s Gate) and it appears no high street is ever complete without the sandwich board-clad man declaring “the end of the world is nigh!”. It is undeniable that whether religious or not, the possibility of life as we know it coming to an end remains of great concern to the general populous.

Biblical Basis

The Christian doctrine of Eschatology regarding what will happen at the end of the world can be found in the last book of the Bible, called the Revelation of John. This book is a prophecy, recorded by John which he received in a dream or a vision about the Apocalypse. The imagery is vivid and predicts a final battle between God and Satan, initiated by the “2nd Coming” - the return of Christ - an event predicted many times by various authors of Biblical sources:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory”. (Matt 24:29-31)

Revelation chapter 20 outlines the triumph of Good over Evil whereby Satan is finally defeated and the final judgment of mankind takes place. This is sometimes referred to as “Armageddon”.

TASK: Make sure you have a record of the sequence of events as described by John in Revelation.

The imagery and language used by John in Revelation reflects a clearly Jewish influence. Biblical scholars attribute this to the audience and existing belief system that John would have been most familiar with, however the way in which the modern reader is intended to understand it remains a subject of extensive debate. According to some scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann, the entire prophecy is to be understood as “sacred myth” in much the same way as the Creation accounts in Genesis are. It is therefore necessary to “demythologise” the account in order to identify the underlying message. Bultmann, like Hegel and Hume before him saw the need to strip away the elements of religious belief which were unverifiable. (I’ll come back to this in a bit...)



Future based Eschatology

The physical resurrection of the dead in John's prophecy is a **monist** view of the human person – we are resurrected physically to face judgement, there is no separation of the body and soul as is hinted at in other Biblical texts. It is a future event; at death, the person lies in wait for judgement, there is no immediate entry into Heaven. Such beliefs can be found elsewhere in the Bible too, such as Daniel 12:2

“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”.

The prospect of facing Judgment of this kind has (understandably) weighed heavily on people's minds. There is a sense of urgency – a call to change, repent and be saved or else be cast into “the abyss”. The imagery of the Shepherd (Christ) sorting the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25 is reflected as people are held to account for the way they have lived their lives.

For a number of smaller Christian denominations such as the 7th Day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses, the notion of “Rapture” is of central importance. Basing their belief on a letter from St Paul to the Church in Thessalonica which says,

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)



Many Evangelicals, especially in the United States, known as Dispensationalist Premillennialists hold the return of Christ to be in two stages. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is seen to be a preliminary event to the return described in Matthew 24:29-

TASK: Find out more about “Rapture” by doing a quick Google search.

31. Although both describe a return of Jesus in the clouds with angelic activity, trumpets, heavenly signs, and a gathering of the saints, these are seen to be two separate events, the first unseen, and the second public. ie, the righteous will be gathered to God first, before he arrives to being the events of the Apocalypse. The majority of dispensationalists hold that this comes just before the period of Tribulation, which is a relatively short period of time where people who follow God will experience world-wide persecution and be purified and strengthened by it.

Postmillennialists (such as some Presbyterians, and others), and Historic Premillennialists (such as Calvinistic Baptists, and others) hold that the return of Christ will be a single, public event. All passages regarding the return of Christ, such as Matthew 24:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, Revelation 1:7, etc, describe the return of Jesus in the clouds amidst trumpets, angelic activity, heavenly signs, a resurrection, and a gathering of saints. ie, all will happen at the same time.

For both groups of Christians, eternal punishment of the “unfaithful” is a reality. Those who are “in Christ” will be taken straight to Heaven, while those who rejected Christ will pay the price for their choice. This is difficult to reconcile with various other Christian beliefs such as Universal Salvation or Predestination.

Universal Salvation is the doctrine or belief of some Christians that all will receive salvation (go to heaven), regardless of belief, because of the love and mercy of God. Most forms of the doctrine state that the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the mechanism that provides reconciliation for all human-kind and atonement for all sins.



It is based on St Paul's teaching in Corinthians, which suggests that Heaven is available for all people, not only a select few.

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22)

Various theologians, including Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the 3rd century, all supported the doctrine of Universal Salvation and it remained a dominating belief in the Early Church until the influence of St Augustine who forcefully denied it and propounded Predestination instead. Through the time of the Reformation during the 15thC, Calvin developed the doctrine of Predestination still further with his teaching about the Damned and the Elect. Today however, many Christians are reluctant to accept Predestination as it creates many problems regarding the value of human freewill and the mercy and love of God.

So far, all of this explanation has been about a future event – physical resurrection and final judgment, resulting in an eternal destination of either Heaven or Hell. The events John describes are way off in the future: they have not yet happened. This belief is known as *future based Eschatology*. The End Times or *Eschaton* is yet to arrive. However, not all eschatology is about future based events – according to some scholars, the “future” is now. This is known as *Realised Eschatology*. (Take it slowly, it's going to get complicated...)

Realised Eschatology

The Gospel writers were not only influenced by the Judaism they had been familiar with before the time of Jesus. Given their geographical location, they were heavily influenced by many different philosophies and belief systems, including Greek philosophy. It is the mixture of these two very different systems of thought which give rise to the difference in belief between future based and realised eschatology.

Realised Eschatology is the belief that entry into the Kingdom of God is not a future event, instead it *transcends* time. According to Jesus in the Gospel of John,

*²⁴"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has** eternal life and will not be condemned; **he has crossed over** from death to life"* (John 5:24).

The implication here is that it has already happened – anyone who believes in Christ will not die, instead they are already in the Kingdom of God.

It is an idea which is fairly common throughout the New Testament:

¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, (Colossians 1:13)

²¹nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21)

So, what can this mean? Many Biblical scholars (such as Rudolf Bultmann) have suggested that it is a metaphor for the quality of life that a person leads. If we live the right life then we are living as God intends us to live – living under God's rules as subjects in his Kingdom. But what about the dying part? Are we to live forever? Clearly not, as we will obviously physically die. However, perhaps this is a metaphor:



- We die to our previous sinful self when we accept Christ's word? (think about symbolism – light, life, truth etc)
- We become alive in the sense that we are living an authentic life rather than slaving away under false apprehensions that money etc will make us happy? (drawing on Christian existentialism)

There is much more of a dualist influence here too – our soul does not die with us but automatically lives on in Christ. Our soul is there with Christ (in a spiritual sense) from the moment we start to believe. Death cannot separate us as we will simply lose the cloak of our physical body. Judgment is not a future event – it is immediate from the moment we hear Christ's word as it is the choice that we make whether to accept it, repent and believe or reject it and continue as before.

This understanding is a far more philosophical understanding of the text and it is not without its difficulties. It demands that the entire body of Biblical text which is concerned with physical resurrection (including the resurrection of Christ) and future judgment be treated as myth and interpreted by stripping away the picture language to leave the essential message beneath. This is exactly what Bultmann thinks we ought to do, and Tillich and Braithwaite would agree. (clear link [here](#) to Unit 3, Religious Language).

But what "essential message" does this leave us with? Christianity becomes no more than a moral code dressed up in pretty pictures and an interesting story.

TASK: What would A.J. Ayer say about Eschatology & the language of Apocalypse?

What would Wittgenstein say about it?

If there is no final judgment, is there any incentive to live in the right way? On the other hand, is fear of punishment the *right* incentive to have? Perhaps Pascal's Wager comes to mind:

"do not hesitate to believe that God exists for if you win, you win all and if you lose, you lose nothing"

I'm not sure that if I was God, I'd accept this as a valid reason to believe in me – in fact Pascal didn't think it was sufficient to be saved from the fiery furnace either but it's one to comment on in essays 😊

<p>Future Based Eschatology (Jewish influence)</p> <p>Physical Resurrection of the dead (Monism)</p> <p>Armageddon – resulting in the triumph of God over Satan</p> <p>The 2nd Coming of Christ</p> <p>The final Judgment (Rapture)</p> <p>Literal interpretation of Biblical texts</p>	<p>Realised Eschatology (Greek Philosophy Influence)</p> <p>All language regarding "end times", judgment and resurrection is symbolic/myth.</p> <p>Eternal life = being <i>in the Kingdom</i> – a spiritual experience not physical</p> <p>Judgment is immediate – a direct result of the choice made on hearing Christ's word</p>
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So, what conclusions can be drawn? How are we to understand the eschatology of the New Testament? Is it a future event or is it already happening? Inevitably, different Christians will believe different things. However, Jurgen Moltmann suggests that it is meant to be understood to be a bit of both – in many ways, the vision that Jesus preached regarding "the Kingdom of God" has been started, but not completed.



It is concerned with morality – the way we behave, but also concerns our eternal destiny. According to Moltmann, Eschatology is both 'now' and 'not yet'. What is started in the now will be fully accomplished with the return of Christ, in the future. It is present in its spiritual and mystery form, but awaits the return of Christ for its full manifestation.

Secular Apocalypticism

It's not only religious people who are concerned about where humanity is headed. Clearly, given the prolific number of various theories about the end of the world, it is a topic which ranges from the mildly interesting for some to the grave concern for others. Secular Apocalypticism is the belief that a crisis is imminent, brought about by any of a number of possibilities:

Global Warming, Nuclear Holocaust, Population explosion (even alien invasion, but please let's not go there!)

The advent of the new Millennium sparked renewed interest in the Mayan Prophecy and the apparent ability of the ancients to predict events in the future. Michael Drosnen's book "The Bible Code" alleged to uncover various messages hidden within the text of the Bible which made accurate predictions about various events including the assassination of JFK and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. There are many philosophical issues with being able to predict the future as obviously, if the future can be predicted, then the future is fixed and I am not free. If the murder of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust had been predicted thousands of years before it happened then Hitler cannot be held responsible for this as he was only fulfilling a role which had been set from time immemorial. If I am not free, then I cannot be punished nor rewarded for my actions.

The increasing concern for the state of the planet and **Global Warming** has raised awareness about the destiny of mankind – the suggestion is clear that life as we know it is soon going to change as a result of our actions. Sea level could rise between 7 and 23 inches (18 to 59 centimeters) by century's end. Rises of just 4 inches (10 centimeters) could mean the Maldives are lost altogether and may flood many South Seas islands and swamp large parts of Southeast Asia. Strong hurricanes, droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and other natural disasters may become commonplace in many parts of the world. The growth of deserts may also cause food shortages in many places.

In addition, the legacy of the Cold War in the 1970s has been to raise awareness of the possibility of a **nuclear holocaust**. (The UK alone, even if it does get rid of one Trident submarine, has enough nuclear warheads to destroy the planet several times over. The USA has considerably more.) Despite the imminent threat of nuclear warfare having been evaded for the time being, there remain nuclear warheads trained on all major cities in the world which can be deployed at a moment's notice. The Nuclear bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had TNT yields of 12.5 and 22 *kilotons* (thousand tons of TNT). Nuclear bombs today can now be several *megatons*. In 1961 the USSR tested a nuclear weapon of 56 megatons (million tons of TNT) One megaton explosion over a city of around 4 million people would kill 470,000 people instantly, injure 630,000 as well as the unforeseeable long term effects of radiation. Casualties would be estimated in tens of millions. Modern Weapons have the capacity to place many warheads, bound for different locations on one missile to targets great distances apart.

Population growth is also a possible factor which some identify as a possible contributor to the end of the world:

- The world is at its highest population ever.
- The rate of growth is more than 75% higher in less developed countries than that of more developed countries.
- Our average life span is higher than that of our ancestors.
- The number of young people is at an all-time high.



In 1798 Thomas Malthus incorrectly predicted that population growth would outrun food supply by the mid 19th century. In 1968, Paul R. Ehrlich revisited this argument in *The Population Bomb*, predicting famine in the 1970s and 1980s. Neither prediction came true. However, by the year 2000, there were 10 times as many people on Earth as there were 300 years ago. The United Nations did determine, and celebrate, the "Day of 5 billion" (July 11, 1987), and the "Day of 6 billion" (October 12, 1999). The "Day of 7 billion" has been targeted by the Census Bureau to be in February 2012. This is pretty scary stuff and as Sir David Attenborough said in on Radio 4's The Today Programme, "the world cannot sustain such a rate of increase".

It seems clear that the future of man and the end of the world continues to be a concern to a great many people, however the ways in which that concern manifests itself is extremely diverse. Have a look at the following are questions which you will need to consider carefully as part of your preparation for an essay on this topic. I have pointed out whether they would need to be included as part of a section A question (A01) , or a Section B (A02).

Questions:

Section A: (these are not whole questions, they are to help you sort out what needs to be included)

1. Give an account of the Biblical basis for Christian beliefs about the end of the world
2. Explain the difference between future based and realised eschatology
3. What differing scholarly views are there concerning the nature of eschatology?
4. Outline the views of different Christians regarding judgment
5. What philosophical problems are raised by eschatological beliefs?

Section B:

1. Is it reasonable to believe that the Apocalypse will happen as John describes?
2. Is the end of the world something that is only of concern to religious people?
3. Are the teachings about the end of the world relevant to people in the 21st C?
4. In what way do eschatological beliefs affect the way someone lives their life?
5. To what extent should people worry about the end of the world?