



CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY EXAMINED

by Sara Tusek

“STUDY OF THE LAST”

Christian eschatology is not as abstract a topic as it may sound. “Eschatology” means “study of the last” and is associated with such fundamental questions as “Will the world continue indefinitely?” and “How should we live our lives if the world that is coming to an end?”

Since the days of the earliest Christians (many of whom believed Jesus would return to Earth in their lifetimes), the notion of history as having a definite end-point has raised various theories as to how and when God will bring this world to a conclusion. Clearly our beliefs about how the world will end, and how Christians will participate in this end, are crucial to our daily choices in living as a Christian.

THREE ESCHATOLOGIES

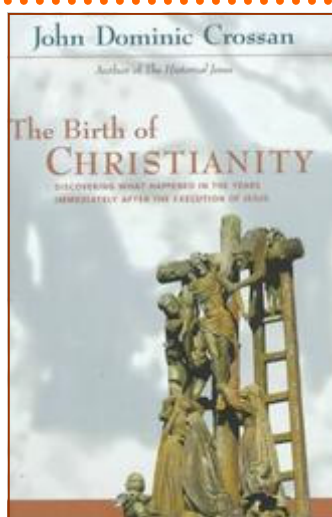
In his book *The Birth of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), Dr. John Dominic Crossan

(see box) distinguishes between three kinds of eschatology: ascetic, apocalyptic, and ethical. Sociologist Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler (in a review of *The Birth of Christianity*), outlines these three eschatologies. (information from www.whosoever.org)

1) Ascetic eschatology

“An ascetic eschatology involves looking back to the Golden Era, the Garden of Eden, the Primal State where all was perfect before the ‘fall’ took place,” says Udis-Kessler.

People following this eschatological worldview are apt to withdraw from their surrounding culture, in an attempt to return to



Dr. John Dominic Crossan is the author of *The Historical Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, *The Birth of Christianity*, and *Who Killed Jesus?* Dr. Crossan was born in Ireland, and received a Doctorate of Divinity from Maynooth College in Ireland; he did post-doctoral research at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and at the École Biblique in Jerusalem. Dr. Crossan joined DePaul University in Chicago in 1969 and remained there until 1995; he is now Professor Emeritus in its Department of Religious Studies.

a more pure state that supposedly existed in the past. “Celibacy and the monastic life represent historically popular forms of turning away, but others are possible as well, with workaholism and exercise addiction among the current manifestations of ascetic eschatological practice,” says Udis-Kessler.

One could add to the list of ascetics those who voluntarily practice severe dietary restrictions, insist on home (non-public) schooling, refrain from watching TV or movies, or have excessively reactionary political beliefs. What these people have in common is a negative viewpoint that finds fault with the world as it is, but doesn’t engage its problems, preferring to withdraw.

Regardless of their particular values and creeds, Utopian communities are often purposely designed to allow their members to live out an ascetic eschatology. What they share is a strictly principled rejection of “normal” life (as defined by the dominant culture around

them) and a vigorous belief that they alone are living rightly—everyone else has it wrong. Historically, the Puritan settlements of New England fell into this category, as did Mennonite, Amish and Mormon communities in their purest forms.

“Such practices are problematic because they represent, in effect, a relinquishing of any participation in actual struggles for justice, and because of their implicit rejection of people as well as troubling practices,” according to Udis-Kessler. She adds, “While I know some joyful ascetics, it is hard to believe that asceticism is not, at least some of the time, a form of sour grapes.”

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2) Apocalyptic eschatology

"Apocalyptic eschatology, in contrast, looks ahead to the 'end-times' (usually right around the corner) when God will restore justice and punish the wicked and unrighteous," says Dr. Udis-Kessler. "It is also a kind of giving up on human improvement, based as it is on waiting for God to break in and make everything right again."

In regard to apocalyptic eschatology, Dr. Crossan says, "'There is too often a transition from justice to revenge, a divine vengeance that results in human slaughter': If God is ready to restore justice, why not give Him a little help? Mobs and vigilantes often takes this position, reasoning that they are doing God's work and anyone who tries to stop them is really stopping God."

Dr. Crossan goes on to state, "When those two aspects are combined, apocalyptic eschatology almost inevitably presumes a violent God who establishes the justice of nonviolence through the injustice of violence ... Apocalypticism is perceived as a divine ethnic cleansing whose genocidal heart presumes a violent God of revenge rather than a nonviolent God of justice."

This idea of wiping out wicked nations is the mainspring of every ethnic war, as inevitably each side sees itself as God's favorite. Abraham Lincoln, in "Meditations on the Divine Will," says, "The will of God prevails — In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time."

3) Ethical eschatology

Jesus, according to Dr. Crossan, practiced a third type of eschatology, one that may be termed "ethical." Ethical eschatology brings hope into the dilemma of how to live in a dying, sinful world. Unlike ascetic eschatologists, who withdraw from the world and scorn those who don't join them, or apocalyptic

eschatologists, who think the world is just about to end and therefore not worth bothering about, ethical eschatologists believe that they can change the world for the better.

"The idea that human beings could actually create such a just, peaceful world is almost unbelievable. We've never been able to do so in the past. However, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., were among the ethical eschatologists that were able to accomplish at least some facet of their goals," says Dr. Udis-Kessler. "In both cases, success (such as it was) came because of the sheer number of people willing to put their bodies on the line for their cause."

Dr. Udis-Kessler goes on to say, "A tremendous number of people would need to gather together in order to create a significant enough tidal wave to wash away the rock of hardened hearts, stony political/economic/social systems, and rigid prejudices."

"But each person that joins in advances the possibilities a little bit further," according to Dr. Udis-Kessler. "Moreover, by letting lives lived nonviolently become a protest, ethical eschatologists begin to live in the world they wish to bring into being. It is in this sense that such an approach is eschatological."

The idea of ethical eschatology is that the world will end, but in the meantime, we humans can be powerful forces for good. Rather than withdrawing from the world, or living with one eye on the eminent return of Christ and expecting that God will make everything right, ethical eschatologists put tremendous effort into identifying injustice and trying with all their energy to end injustice.

Dr. Crossan contrasts John the Baptist, who was an ascetic eschatologist, with Jesus, who practiced ethical eschatology. John's baptism was for repentance, but the baptism we receive through the death and resurrection of Jesus is for entering God's kingdom on Earth. We must, then, tirelessly do our utmost to bring Jesus' principles of love, mercy, compassion, hope and new life into every part of the present sinful world.

