

The Christian Life into 2020: The End of Times?

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Introduction

The Christian Life into 2020: The End of Times? When I submitted this provisional title for my contribution to this congress, probably a year ago, 2020 felt a long time away intuitively. And I thought then that I would probably have to stir up some apocalyptic feelings in order not to make my contribution sound more alarming than would have been reasonable. But meanwhile, apocalyptic scenario's have come very close in the slaughter of Christians and the Christian tradition in the Middle East, which has no doubt shocked us all. And there is the war either looming or actually taking place at the borders of Europe, in Ukraine, which brings the old days of the Cold War back to mind, or even the days before the First World War marked the end of European culture as it was known up until then. And suddenly, 2020 seems a long way off in a different sense. A year ago, I thought that there were still many years separating us from 2020. But now, I wonder whether we will ever see the year 2020. So, although it sounds entirely different, at least to me, than when I drafted a plan for this paper, the title remains: 'The Christian Life into 2020: The End of Times?' Including the question mark, that is.

Let me briefly sketch the outline of my contribution. First, I will elaborate on some aspects of apocalyptic feelings in our time, particularly in Christian circles. Then, I will explore a variety of readings of the Apocalypse (or the book of revelation) and indicate in which way I think the Apocalypse needs to be read today. This will lead us, thirdly, to a discussion of a Christian attitude in our times and the times to come – or, more probably, Christian attitudes, plural, since our backgrounds, traditions, cultures and homelands differ considerably. Then, finally, I will highlight some relevant aspects of the Christian attitude(s) for educational contexts.

Apocalyptic feelings

Do we live in the end of times? Until 2001, this question seemed not urgent or even irrelevant, at least in the West. After the Berlin Wall had been taken down (25 years ago, next month), it seemed that liberal democracy was the only remaining option for humanity. Exemplary for the feeling of the times was Francis Fukuyama's book, published in 1992, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Though Fukuyama made his point far more nuanced than it has often been summarized, tensions that had reached various climaxes during the Cold War, relaxed. But the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001 and also the *déconfiture* of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and

the following financial and economic crisis, not to mention the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have made an end to that dream — if we ever believed it at all.

Presently, I discern four crises that give rise to apocalyptic feelings of whatever kind.

First, there is the crisis of our financial systems. The downfall of Lehmann Brothers was very symbolic: an icon of free market capitalism filed for bankruptcy as an indication of an entire system that has gone bankrupt. And while in the City of London, business is proceeding as usual again, there is a broadly experienced dissatisfaction with the way banks are run and are bailed out when necessary with tax payer's money, while the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Thomas Piketty has only demonstrated what many of us intuitively knew: capital grows faster than earned income, so without further measures capitalism stimulates inequality and all the social and political effects this entails. And while we cannot imagine a future without banks, we should realize that on the eve of the Reformation, people could not imagine a future without monasteries, central as they were to the old system. What will the financial world look like in 2020?

Then, there are political crises, of which I already mentioned a few. The important one I have not yet mentioned, is the ongoing critical situation of Israel and in Gaza. Recently, I read an interview with a young man in Israel. He fears both a Palestinian state and the prolonged absence of a Palestinian state. The latter will end up in another series of rocket attacks anywhere in the future, while the former will also end up in another series of rocket attacks. Meanwhile, the advance of the troupes of the Islamic State heightens the tension, since one of their main goals is ultimately the disappearance of the State of Israel. They will rape, torture, slaughter and crucify Christians and Jews alike. The fear this produces makes many people feel we are experiencing the end of times.

Thirdly, there is the ecological crisis - or maybe crises, plural. Although this only occasionally makes it to the front pages of our newspapers, we know that this is the most threatening of all. A Dutch artist named Tinkebell (her real name is Katinka Simonse) has made a documentary, 'Save our children', on the threatening shortage of phosphate, which is absolutely needed to produce enough food for the world's population. Her conclusion is that there should be far less humans than there are now. So, she underwent a sterilization to prevent her from having children. Drastically (and maybe you say: abhorrent) though her choice may be, it also seems a rational one. Just weeks ago, the United Nations' climate panel's report stated that global warming is now practically irreversible. This will change the face of the earth in many unimaginable ways. If a fifth of the prognoses comes true, the consequences will already be disastrous.

Fourthly and finally, there is the crisis that worries me most: the religious crisis, at least in the West. In the Netherlands, Church buildings are being closed at a rate of one per week. While in the 1950s, two thirds of the Swiss called themselves protestant, this has fallen to near 30% over the past years. After 500 years, the flourishing churches of the Reformation seem to have come to an end. Very few people from the outside world are attracted to our churches, whereas many younger people

leave the church and many others are only half-hearted. Moreover, aggressively secularist or even outright atheist models dominate society, administration and education, as we all know. Islam on the other hand, is on the rise in our Western cities, and experiments with sharia courts take place. Are we experiencing the end of the Christian West? Is there only a future for the Church east of the Oder?

All in all, there are many insecurities and many things to be feared. The combination of these four crises makes the question urgent: are we experiencing the end of times? And what are the consequences of the answer to this question, be it Yes or No?

Understanding the Apocalypse

Now let us turn to the Bible to understand our times. I do not mean this in any naive sort of way, as if simply opening our Bibles would solve each and every problem at hand. But we should not, on the other hand, disavow Bible reading as if the present situation would differ completely from the reality of the Bible. That would indeed be a capitulation for secularisation, for if God really exists and if He really is the same who revealed Himself to those who wrote the Bible, we may expect to find wisdom in the Scriptures. We will need to listen carefully, praying for the Holy Spirit and expecting His operations, that we may understand.

In the matter at hand, it seems fit to turn *the* prophetic book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse, or the book of Revelation. Of course, we cannot pursue an in-depth discussion of the various interpretative approaches of this book. Let me briefly state that exegetes generally tend to read this book in its own first-century context, and rightly so, for an important characteristic of prophecy in both the Old and New Testaments is that it directly addresses the hearers. Rather than giving a road map for the future of world history (which would be a rather unintelligible or at least multi-interpretable road map), the book of Revelation provides comfort for the Christians of the first century, who amidst their persecutions are comforted that the Lamb sit in the throne and that everything will end in the downfall of Babylon (Rome) and in the coming of the New Jerusalem. Christ reigns and the whole world and its entire belong to Him.

Now this does not mean that the message of the Apocalypse is limited to the first century alone. It is part of our Bible, it speaks to us. In whatever circumstances we may be as Christians, we hear the comforting message that the Lamb reigns. Let me briefly and generally highlight four things we can learn from this book of Revelation.

First, notice the cosmic disasters that are recorded in this book. In chapter 8, when the respective angels blow their trumpets, hail and fire are thrown upon the earth, so that a third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees and all green grass. A great mountain, burning with fire, is thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. And this goes on and on, people dying from undrinkable

waters. A little further on, we read: "In those days people will seek death and will not find it" (Apc. 9:6). Then a third of mankind is killed. It is horrible if we only imagine one of these plagues taking place in our times, let alone if these are all combined. Imagine a third of the ships that sail the oceans at this moment were destroyed. Thousands and thousands of people would be killed, besides the enormous economic damage. But what does this mean if it is not a prediction of future cataclysmic events – which I think it is not? These prophecies at least signalize the horrific nature of what happens to the earth and to humanity. This was the experience of people then and it is our experience now. We should not think that our times are unique in the sense of urgency, in cruelty or in the numbers of peoples threatened. Of course, we all know that more people inhabit this planet than did two thousand years ago, and we know that technical 'progression' has made it possible to kill far more people at once. But we experience the same sort of anxiety our brothers and sisters felt two thousand years ago. Moreover, the Apocalypse pictures God as opening up the gates of heaven for these many plagues. This is an aspect that we may well forget all too soon: that God's judgments not only take place at the end of times, but that His reign at this very moment not only means that He preserves the ones that are His, but also that He judges the earth and all its inhabitants. This does not mean that we can pinpoint exactly how God does this – for it seems that these judgments in large part come down on His very people, as they have often done.

Secondly, notice the measure of tribulation and persecution of the Christian church. Of the seven letters to the churches of Asia (Apc. 2-3), most churches have to deal with persecution and imminent death if they persevere. The ones that seem to be in calmer surroundings, are the ones that are criticized for a variety of reasons. This matches the word of Jesus: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart: I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). So, tribulation is the default position for the Christian church, so it seems. In the light of the Gospel and the epistles, it even is an honor to suffer for Christ's sake. Not an honor to be longed for, for sure. But then again, Jesus also says: "I have overcome the world". God takes care for those who suffer, although they will have to wait for God's final judgment. This shows in a most touching way in Apc. 6:9-11:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice. "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Let us add to this what the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews writes to people who themselves had to do with serious forms of discrimination, and often outright persecution:

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the

discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. (Heb. 11:5-6)

All in all: suffering for the Gospel is not an option, it belongs to the very structure of God's work in the present world. This is no encouragement to march directly into martyrdom or to seek as much pain as possible. That would not only be unnatural, it also disregards that the apostles themselves did not seek their own persecution, but sought to promote the Gospel. In doing so, we will experience forms of discrimination. Sometimes this takes the subtle form of lacking popularity, blocked career paths, ostracism of various kinds, which may be as effective a strategy of the living God's opponent in the Western world as persecution has been and is in other parts of the world. But let us keep in mind that it is communion with "the Lamb who was slain" (Apc. 13:8).

A third characteristic. Let me briefly note the international and catholic character of the Christian community. When John has just wept because no one is worthy to open the scroll (of history, that is: of God's mighty deeds and of deliverance), the Lion of the tribe of Judah steps forward. This Lion is the Lamb standing as though it had been slain. Then the four living creatures (representing creation) and the twenty-four elders (representing God's people from the Old and New Testaments) fall down and sing:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Apc. 5:9-10).

While we see growing nationalist tendencies in Europe, and racist tendencies in the Middle East and even in the United States (Ferguson), Christ the Lord brings together people from all sort of backgrounds, from all times and from all nations. For God is the God of the entire earth. As we gather in an international conference, it is important to note that nothing unites us so much as singing the praises of the Lion, who is the Lamb!

This brings me to a fourth and final point on reading Revelation. Notwithstanding the extremely serious and violent nature of the horrible events taking place, this is in fact a very comforting book. Though God's opponents will do everything they can, the Lamb will prevail. The Roman Empire finally fell, which no one could have imagined during that time. Many Empires have come and gone since then, but the Christian Church has remained throughout all tribulations. Ultimately, Babylon will fall and the marriage of the Lamb will come:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [...] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Apc. 21:3, 5)

This is a true comfort, not only for Christians personally, but also when we look at the various crises that threaten the world. God does not leave his created world behind, but He will renew her completely. And even until the final day will come, God already comforts those who have come from the great tribulation:

They are before the throne of God, and serve him night and day in his temple [...] For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Apc. 7:15, 17)

Now, after having pictured four crises (financial, political, ecological, religious) and have drawn four lines from the Apocalypse (the cosmic, the tribulational, the catholic and the comforting), it is about time that we seek to bring these together in what a Christian attitude could look like.

Christian attitudes

First of all, we can take heart and should not despair. The confrontation with unbelief is nothing new. This is not to say that we should not carefully study secularization processes, nor that we should forget that the present Western society is rather unique on a world scale in its culture of unbelief. Nowhere in the history of humanity has unbelief (either agnosticism or atheism) so massively been the default position in society as it is in present European societies. But while it is important to understand this and to recognize how difficult is therefore is to reach people with the Gospel or even to communicate one's own christian life to others, it is not the most important thing to do. Rather than predict which turns our societies will take, we better invest in truly taking a Christian stance. Or rather, in *receiving* a Christian stance, for it is more a matter of receiving than taking. It is God's grace.

We should not despair, because God reigns. This is a fundamental message of the book of Revelation. Although we cannot see it now, God reigns. Therefore, He will ultimately show His power. That is a matter of faith. Ultimately, the question is whether we really believe that God the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead. If that is the case, then He is mightier than death and mightier than any power in the present world and in the world to come. Than Jesus Christ is Lord and nothing will separate His sheep from Him, the Shepherd. This is, in a nutshell, the Christian message, the Gospel. The only thing that can really go wrong, is that we do not firmly believe this Gospel.

All too often, we feel intimidated by the numbers, the money, the intelligence and the power of secular powers. Let me remind you of a famous Old Testament passage: David's battle with Goliath. Goliath is extremely tall (three meters; 9ft 11in, that is) and strong (the weight of his spear). Besides, he has high tech gear (an iron point on his spear, at the beginning of the Iron Age), and looks stunning (he is all bronze from top to toe). Moreover, he is all self-confidence. All are intimidated, including Saul the king. David is not. Why not? Not because of his special weapon

(his weapon is not exactly 'special'), nor because of his armor (which he cannot even wear), but because of his faith.

You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. (1 Sam. 17:45)

In our time, there is much that can take our christian courage away. Churches are in decline, there are many financial struggles for christian institutions and so on. But let us not lose courage.

This brings me to a second point, which is strongly tied to the first. Discipleship. A disciple is a pupil. All too often, christians wish to become more than that. We want to be masters, if not of the universe, than of our little kingdoms. This is where many of us fail, even when we engage in christian education. While we may have started very well, we may eventually become prone to seek power, our own wisdom, money or whatever thing is valued by the people of the present world. But christians are called to be disciples. Calvin writes on various occasions: "All who wish to be masters need to be pupils first, and to remain pupils for the rest of their lives".

Let me state the obvious: Christian discipleship is being a disciple of Jesus Christ. He did not promise us any success. Rather, he said that a servant deserves nothing better than his master. So, discipleship comes at a high price: it costs our lives. This is the difficult part for Westerners (but not only for Westerners) in a culture of hedonism. Still, it is a matter of sheer joy, because discipleship originates in Christ's call in our lives. This means a reversal in many ways: He becomes the first, and I follow Him. No longer is God the problem or the question in my life, rather I am the problem, with my sin and my guilt. But Jesus Christ accepts sinners and renews their lives so that life truly is worth the name of life.

Let me zero in on one aspect of discipleship, for there are too many to be discussed in the present paper. As a disciple, a christian learns how to die and how to live. Learning how to die has long been an important topic in European history, even dating back to the old Greeks. Socrates counts as an example of dying sensibly. But since then, major shifts have taken place in Western cultures. The Stoic tradition has been overtaken by the Epicurean tradition (in a specific hedonistic key, but let us leave it at that), and quality of life has improved considerably. No longer are the lives of most people nasty, brutish and short, but many can afford life style that could not be imagined by kings only centuries ago. Whereas our ancestors had to deal with many pains and illnesses, good healthcare makes that we, on average, have more than sixty healthy years. No endless labor characterizes our lives, but technical inventions have made our lives comfortable or even snug. Death seems to have disappeared beyond the horizon. It has become the exit of the party of life, that lasted long, but had to end. This is, at least, the narrative of our societies. In reality, many suffer from mental illness, and the problems of elderly people. But the Enlightenment narrative cannot account so well for the imperfect. This may well be the background in the call for euthanasia, once people themselves think that their life is 'complete'. In the narrative of authenticity, we are all artist

or performers, crafting our own lives as a work of art. That already was problematic in itself, because what is the use of art if no one is watching you (hence the vast importance of being seen, also in social media, for our young people, and not only for them). But what if we cannot pay for good health care for everyone any more? What if we are confronted with many, many poor people rambling at the southern gates of Fort Europe? What if the end of history has not come and our economies need to deal with war of whatever kind? What if our freedom is threatened so seriously that we are called to fight for it? I ask these questions to indicate that if the luxury life is stripped of its luxury, many of our societies seem to have no story to tell, no comfort to offer. What is the alternative to consumerism? Here I return to the point I was making. The Christian can learn how to die. If dying means to go to the Lord, this can make a life meaningful which otherwise would have been deemed entirely useless. To my mind, this is the only true alternative to thoughts like that of Richard Dawkins, who thinks it is “immoral” not to abort a baby with Down syndrome.

When we learn how to die, we also know what is important in the light of death. Seldom do we hear of people wishing on their deathbeds that they had worked more hours or made more money. Rather, we see what matters most to us, mostly: other people, our loved ones. Eventually, this also learns us how to live.

The Christian life is primarily characterized by prayer, which is – as the Heidelberg Catechism says – the most important part of our gratitude towards God. Prayer expresses our utter dependence on the living God, marks the dedication of our lives to God, and gives voice to the expectation of God’s Kingdom. The Lord’s Prayer is the best guide to Christian attitudes in the present day. Not our activities or programs, not even our spiritual activities will bring us what we need, but God alone. The prayerful life is exact opposite of a life one designs for oneself, it is a protest against the thought that we as humans can form the entire reality after our wishes. A Christian, and particularly a Calvinist, is not characterized by his plans and acts, but by his prayer.

Let me add only one thing, without which the Christian attitude would not be complete: the church. As we have seen from our glance in the book of Revelation, the universality of the church is hinted at there. As Paul says, we “comprehend with all the saints” the breadth and length and height and depth. Against an overly individualist way of life, we may hold on to the fact that the Christian is part of the larger body of Christ. The Christian being is always a being in communion, namely in the communion with Christ and with others. This provides an antidote against egocentricity and narcissism, and against sectarianism.

Relevance for educational contexts

Let us now draw some lines to educational practices. First and foremost: if we wish pupils in our schools to be Christ’s disciples, we need to be disciples ourselves. You all know better than I do that pupils not only learn from what you say to them, but rather look at what you do. Obviously, this also implies prayer for pupils and teachers.

That being said, what kind of education fits the life just depicted? Let me give you three suggestions.

First of all, a key word is trust. If the world is the Lord's, if Christ reigns, if the Spirit of God is present, then there is no reason to become overly defensive or to rein our pupils in. Of course the caveats of this approach are apparent, since we probably all have experiences of young people wandering astray, never to come back again. But we cannot prevent our children by taking ever more care. It is a matter of trusting God. This not simply being naïve. Faith is never naïve, but it sees the reality sharper than any cynic can: when God reigns, the future is His. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead in this reality, then there is reason for trust in God, and for the future. This trust will provide an open space for children to explore, to test, to learn. Not all dangers can be warded off. Not everything in reality can rationally be explained. There is a mystery to reality that the world cannot grasp, but that lies in Christ alone. This 'mystery' is not at all magical, but it is the experience worked by the Spirit of the living God who works in numerous ways. "The wind blows where it wishes" (John 3:8).

A second keyword is responsibility. As a theologian and as a Christian, I think we should try to educate children to become responsible human beings. But, please us understand this idea of responsibility in a truly Christian way. Responsibility is – excuse me for the flawed etymology – the ability to respond, namely to the appeal God, the neighbor and reality do. It is obeying the call of Jesus Christ. This responsibility has as much to do with the Gospel as it has to do with the Law – and the core of the Law is love. Living responsibly means giving God and the neighbor a loving response. This response is both entirely dependent on God (and His call) and entirely human, and even at times: creative, through the Holy Spirit.

Christian education, in the Netherlands at least, is sometimes accused of focusing on external rules and on the own group only – and sometimes this criticism is true. The focus on trust and responsibility can help to counter this. Not as a way of warding off secular criticisms, but as a consequence of the Gospel itself. It is grounded in truth, which is the third keyword I wish to bring forward.

It is the truth that sets people free, the truth that makes people open, the truth that calls for obedient response. For in the Bible, truth is not so much a firm set of doctrines (sometimes it is), but it often is a 'way of life', the path one walks in obedience to God. It is being faithful, one of the reasons why God himself can be called 'true'. In a nutshell, the truth is that God raised His Son Jesus Christ from the dead. If that is true, death is not the definitive end, but there is the future of God's Kingdom. In theological terms: God's truth is an eschatological truth, the truth of hope.

Trust, responsibility, truth – these three are simply a reordering of faith (trust), love as the ground of responsibility, and hope since the truth of the Gospel will one day show fully in God's Kingdom.

It is my conviction that Christian education needs to be grounded in the very basics of the Gospel: faith, hope and love.

For those who would have wished a somewhat more practical approach, let me point some directions. Starting from trust that this world is God's world, the horizon broadens. There is a world beyond the naturalist idea that everything there is, can be explained from natural causes. There is a mystery, which can only be understood through love. Therefore, Christian education is not aimed at the maximum future wages of our pupils. Character is more important than money. And a sense of beauty in this world is no less important than a sense of economic resources. So, the arts, music, philosophy, theology – all these things that our predecessors found most valuable, but that seem to have diminished in importance because of the all-encompassing power of money – these can be very good practices to train openness for the living God. Pupils are often very good philosophers and theologians until their teacher point them in other directions. Why are we here? What is good and what is definitely bad? Who is God and who are we? Entering these kinds of questions (which is even more than merely discussing them) is extremely valuable. Reading pieces of literature that teach us more about the depths of our souls, excursions to musea and so forth may prove important in this respect.

Let me add as a disclaimer that this does not mean that we should stress the Bible less and spend less time in teaching the Bible and biblical doctrines. I trust that we all agree with that. But in this contribution, I have been trying to flesh out what may be extra relevant in the present day. If the time we receive on earth is God's time granted to us, we need not follow the hedonist part, but opt for true beauty. We need to pursue the economic logic of the present world, but may learn to reckon in a new way, in which money is means to an end, not a goal in itself. And above all, our lives and the lives of our pupils may be to the glory of the living God. "Unto Him who has washed us and cleansed us from sin, unto Him be the glory forever. Amen."