

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
«ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH»

Moscow, 14-17 November 2005 z.

Prof. Konstantinos Scouteris,
University of Athens

THEOLOGY OF EXPECTATION
SOME THEOLOGICAL COMMENTS ON THE ESCHATOLOGY
OF THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED

«We look for the resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the age to come»

(a) The question of eschatology

In 1964 the German professor Jürgen Moltmann published an important book entitled *Theology of Hope*¹ (*Theologie der Hoffnung*). In this work, Moltmann brought up afresh the question of Christian eschatology; he himself had introduced and was a fervent supporter of so-called «dynamic» eschatology. According to this view, eschatology forms the dynamic basis for the explanation of God's economy [*economia*] towards man and the world as well as of the historical process as a whole. One of the fundamental principles of «dynamic» eschatology is that to look at history through the lens of eschatology reveals the depth, the value and the dynamics of historical reality.

In his book the protestant Moltmann linked eschatology with Christology as much as with historical reality. He understood the whole discussion about hope in the context of the philosophical thought of his time. In fact, the idea of writing *Theology of Hope* came through the book *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, written by the German Philosopher Ernst Bloch, and published in 1959. The ideas contained in Moltmann's book on hope not only provoked a renewed discussion on the *eschata*, the last things, but also contributed to the evaluation of historical movements in the light of eschatological perfection. Thus, both the well-known «theology of revolution» and the equally well-known «political theology» recognised to a great extent that history is interpreted and affirmed by its end. The end of history gives meaning to, enriches and sheds light on the present. The *eschaton*, the last times, is the *entelechia* of history [when a potentiality becomes an actuality].

The idea of hope, as an eschatological category, sparked further theological discussion not only among reformed church theologians but more generally in the wider Christian context. An example of this is the «Faith and Order» Committee, the theological committee of the World Council of Churches in which Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestants take part. In the period 1971-1974, when the late Father John Meyendorff was president and with the late professor Nikos Nissiotis a member, the committee chose for its theme the passage «Give an apology for the hope that is in you»². This title is a Scriptural reference to 1 Peter 3:15: «Always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.»

Although the «Faith and Hope» Committee emphasised the ecclesiastical and anthropological importance of Hope, it did not ignore its eschatological dimension. Through the contribution most probably of the Orthodox participants, it underlined the fact that concern for ecclesiastical and anthropological matters cannot be separated from eschatological theology, since both are founded on eschatology. On this basis it was stressed that history and meta-history make up a unity. In this way, the Church, through faith, experiences in the present what it hopes for as anticipated and approaching. That is, the

¹ J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung. Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*, München 1964.

² For the proceedings of this committee see N. Nissiotis, "The Answer for Hope" [*«Η Ἀπολογία της Ελπίδος»*], *Theologia*, 46 (1975), pp. 41-61, 273-291, 482-510.

last things, the *eschaton*, are already present and they shape history and the ethos of the believing community. This conception elevates historical reality to its true worth. History is no longer something watertight and self-sufficient, but it is intrinsically linked to the *eschaton* and it acquires its real worth from its end. In the last decades of the twentieth century, and at the dawn of the twenty-first, in the Christian world everywhere interest in eschatology has not ceased. Of course in this period we have also seen a great increase in eschatological deviations. In any case charismatic movements and extreme Pentecostal groups, apart from concentrating especially on eschatology, attest, of course in their own way, that eschatology is an existential need and that reference to the last things is of fundamental importance, of an order that cannot be overlooked. Without the perspective of the end of history, ecclesiology and anthropology, work in the community and mission lose their evangelical vigour and become forms of humanism, slaves to the mentality of activism and secularisation.

(b) Theology of Hope or Theology of Expectation?

It is not my intention to give the current picture of [views on] the *eschata*, generally, nor to set out the discussions on eschatology, as developed in particular in the last few years in Christian circles. What I am interested in is to make some comments on the *Theology of Expectation*, taking as my starting point the discussion on the *Theology of Hope*. Therefore, what follows will be in essence theological observations on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, «We look for [expect] the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come», once I have already, of course, given some explanatory remarks on the meaning of the terms «hope» and «expectation».

It should be emphasised from the start that in the Orthodox Patristic tradition as a whole, reference to the last things is understood within the certainty of faith. This is indeed an absolute conviction, which is expressed through the scriptural term «expectation» [*prosdokia*] or the verb «to expect» [*prosdokan*]. It is about «the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth» (Luke 21:26). The members of the Christian community are made up of those «looking for [*prosdokontas*] and hastening the coming of the day of God... Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth» (2 Peter 3: 12-13)³. In the Constantinopolitan Creed the verb *prosdoko* [expect] parallels and precisely corresponds to the verb *pisteuo* [believe]. To expect means to believe with certainty, to expect something as an absolute certainty, about which there can be no doubt whatsoever.

There is a fine distinction between the meaning of expectation and hope. Expectation is anticipation with certainty, yet while hope can be identified with expectation, it can also be simply a psychological anticipation of the unattainable. St Gregory the Theologian, referring to this second meaning of hope, observes that «Hope is the expectation of something that is not there. When it does not come, the result is despair»⁴. There are occasions when hope leads to despair when it is not «certain» (2 Cor. 1: 7) but an illusory dream⁵. It is not, therefore, by chance that the Fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council use in their Creed the term «expect» and not «hope», in order that they refer to the meta-historical drama. For what the Church believes is that whatever comes at the end of historical time is not indeterminate, but specific, it is not invisible but visible to eyes that see with faith and expectation. St Ignatios writes: «Mark the seasons. Await Him that is above every season, the Eternal, the Invisible, who became visible for our sake»⁶.

Consequently, in order give an account of an eschatology that arises from the theological tradition of the East, we must give precedence to the phrase «Theology of Expectation», without discarding the expression «Theology of Hope». Expectation includes hope not as a possibility but as a certainty. This consciousness of the co-existence of certain hope and of expectation, in ecclesiastical experience, is reflected most finely in a text of the fourth century, *Apostolikes Diatages* [*Apostolic Constitutions*], where it is noted that «The hope of future joy, not only do we look for, but we already possess»⁷. St Basil the Great expresses the same belief when he says that «The sweet and sinless life has enjoyment already present and not as a looked for and subsequent expectation»⁸. Thus, the certainty of Christian expectation is interwoven with the «now» of the ecclesiastical communion. The real paradox of the life of a Christian is that he or she experiences the Holy Spirit, together with his brothers and sisters in Christ, here and now, at every historical moment; and this is the 'expectation' of his or her faith. The expectation of the end of history, as an existential certainty, is not cut off from the present, but through faith it illumines and gives value to the present.

³ The eschatological sense of the verb "*prosdokan*" [expect] is also found in Matt. 24:50, Luke 12:46 and Peter 3:14.

⁴ *Moral Poems*, 2, 34. PG 37, 956A-957A.

⁵ «Κοῦρον γάρ ἐστὶν ἐλπίς ἡμέρας ὄναρ». Gregory Theologian, *Moral Poems*, 2, 28. PG 37, 862A.

⁶ *To Saint Polycarp*, 3. Trans. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London, 1912), pp.160-161.

⁷ Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2, 7, 20. PG 85.1236D.

⁸ *In Psalms*, 1,5.

(c) «We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come»

The Christian philosopher and apologist Aristeides, already in the second century, identifies the Christians as those who are found at the meeting point between history and meta-history. «The Christians descend from the Lord Jesus Christ...[and] in searching for the truth they have already found it... since they know God as creator of all things, from Whom everything comes, in the only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit..., *looking for* the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come»⁹. It should not come as a surprise to us that the phrase «We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come» is already well-known by the second century, and what is more, in the exact words of the Creed. The Church, from the very beginning of its existence, already functioned as an eschatological community, in which the life of the last times begins, is inaugurated and experienced. This awareness, which was the very first conscience of the Church, is seen in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, when it refers to the Christians as «those who have already through faith reaped the eternal kingdom... [and are] heirs and participants all together of the beloved Son Jesus Christ»¹⁰.

It is clear that the eschatological confession with which the Nicene Creed ends is not a self-contained declaration, but that it is one that is intrinsically linked to the Person of Christ and that finds its basis in the Lord of glory who «shall come again». The expectation of the last times cannot be separated from the Christological confession that the Lord Jesus Christ, who became man and was resurrected from the dead, will come again «in glory to judge both the living and the dead». The expectation of the advent of the Kingdom is directly linked to the belief in the Second Coming of Christ.

In the truth of the Son of God, in He «[who was incarnate] of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary», as St Cyril of Jerusalem observes, «in a way all things are double». There is a «double birth, a birth from God before the ages, and a birth from the Virgin in the fullness of time». Two are the descents: «one is humble... and the second is in glory, the future one». In the first coming of Christ, the Son of God «was wrapped in swaddling clothes», and in the Second Coming he will «cover himself with light as a garment» (Psalm 103:2). In his first coming «he suffered the Cross and thought nothing of shame»; in the Second he will come «in glory escorted by the angelic hosts». In this way the believers «confess the Second Coming of Christ, which will be greater than the first». The first coming was a «demonstration» of patience and condescension; the Second will bring the «crown of the Kingdom»¹¹.

According to St Cyril of Jerusalem the fact that «we expect Christ coming from Heaven» denotes the divinity of Christ and signifies that his Kingdom is the state of an order without parallel. In the first apostolic times, and also later in the life of the Church, eschatological sermons were preached that were «from earth», that is human concoctions and fantasy. Christ, however, coming «from heaven, not from earth» inaugurates a kingdom of another order¹², never-ending even beyond the historical horizon and what this necessitates. This kingdom will be the assembly of all the people of God, as vividly depicted in the prayer of the Apostolic Church to God the Father: «As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever and ever»¹³.

(d) «The resurrection of the dead»

The resurrection is the good news [*evangelion*] of the New Testament. St Paul says that it is the «gospel which I preached to you» [«τὸ εὐαγγέλιον δὲ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν»] (1 Cor. 15:1). More especially, the Christian expectation of the resurrection of the dead is based on Christ's transcendence over of death and stems precisely from the resurrection of the *theanthropos*, the God-man. To the Sadducees, who doubted the resurrection generally, and more particularly to all those who were reluctant to accept the resurrection of the dead, Paul stressed the link between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of all, at the end of history, in his famous phrase: «But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain» (1 Cor. 15:13-14). A little further down Paul repeats the same to the Corinthians: «And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile» (1 Cor. 15:17). Lack of belief in the resurrection of the dead implies in fact the doubting of the resurrection of Christ. Belief in the resurrection is the key point of Christianity, at which

⁹ *Apology*, 15, 1-3.

¹⁰ *Book 1*, Introduction.

¹¹ *Catechism*, 15,1. See also C.B. Scouteris, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 2 (in Greek; Athens, 2004), p.319.

¹² *Catechism*, 4, 15. See also *Catechism*, 15, 26-27.

¹³ *Didache*, 9. Trans. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London, 1912), p.232.

it stands or falls. The conclusion is so absolute that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then there is no Christianity¹⁴.

The expectation of the resurrection of the dead denotes the character of Christian anthropology and eschatology, and that is why it has been included in the Creed as a declaration of faith. Belief in the resurrection of the dead confirms the Christian conception that man is, as St Gregory of Nyssa defines it, «on the borders [*methorios*]», that is to say he is found at the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds. His soul is «bodiless, intellectual and uncompounded», while his flesh is «bodily, material and irrational»¹⁵.

Belief, therefore, in the resurrection of the dead, beyond the fact that it concerns the future life beyond the limits of history, recognizes that the body of a person, as a creation of God, also shares in the call to participate in the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of the future age will not be solely and exclusively a spiritual state, but the assuming and transfiguration of the whole person. In this way the Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body opposes the Gnostic and Manichean dualist ideas.

In the teaching of the Fathers particular emphasis is given to the fact that after the resurrection, at the end of history, the bodies will not lose their particularity and they will remain real bodies; they will be immaterial and uncorruptable, spiritual and free from the thickness and heaviness of physical matter. They will not have imperfections, the marks of time, they will not be subject to the laws of material, earthly bodies and they will not be obscured and bound by the many different necessities that oppress the bodies before the resurrection. The bodies of the resurrection will be real bodies, without, however, natural imperfections, without corruption and without death. The bodies of the resurrection will be similar to those before the fall, and that is why the resurrection is termed the passing over from corruption to incorruption, as the return from the state of materiality to the state of the first human condition. «So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body» (1 Cor. 15:42-44)¹⁶.

The Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead is a challenge to a person's reason, for he or she has difficulty in giving assent to such a paradoxical idea, one that truly tests his mental limits. This natural resistance to this provocative doctrine is expressed in what the «certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers» said in Athens when Paul «preached to them Jesus, and the resurrection»: «What does this babbling want to say?» (Acts 17:18). Yet what exceeds the limits of human reason is for the Church an existential matter. The final resurrection of the dead is not, of course, a vision of the Church that stands by itself. It is directly and intrinsically connected to the Person of Jesus Christ, who already through his resurrection «as the lover of mankind, has raised up Adam, together with all humanity»¹⁷. With his rising from the dead Christ opened out a new road in human history, «he opened the way of resurrection to all flesh»¹⁸. In this way, Christ became the new Adam. «For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive» (1 Cor. 15:21-22).

The resurrection of the dead has, as we have already noted, a Christo-centric basis; it is the consequence of the resurrection of Christ, a gift and result of Christ's shattering of death. If the first Adam opened the door of death through the choice of his free will, the second Adam brought life to the world through his kenosis, his self-emptying. «For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order. Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ's at his coming» (1 Cor. 15:22-23). Therefore, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the kingdom is based on divine omnipotence. As at the creation of the world, when the omnipotent Word of God called everything from non-being into being, in an analogous way He will call the dead bodies to life. The dead and disintegrated bodies, through divine intervention, will be brought to life again. It will not be a creation from nothing, but a return to life for all those who have passed through the painful gates of death. Yet even if the creation of the bodies will not be repeated, there is an analogy between the creation and the resurrection. As when in the creation the Spirit of God «was hovering over the face of the waters» (Gen. 1:2) and gave being, image and form to the created beings, so in the resurrection, through His power, the disintegrated members and the scattered remains of the dead bodies will come together and be vivified.

¹⁴ See C.B. Scouteris, *op. cit.*, pp. 534-535.

¹⁵ *In Canticum Canticorum* 11, ed. H. Langerbeck, p. 333, 15-16. PG 44, 1009AB.

¹⁶ C.B. Scouteris, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

¹⁷ *Paraklitike*, Tone 1, Saturday Vespers, Sticheron.

¹⁸ Prayer of Anaphora of the Liturgy of St Basil the Great.

(e) «The life of the age to come»

The eschatology of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is completed with the reference to «the life of the age to come», to a life that will follow the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgement. A life of «the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world» (Matt. 25:34). What will be the quality of this life? What will be the character of the expected age? It is obvious that we cannot have a clear sense of this kingdom, which will be heavenly and without end, that is outside the dimension of space, as we perceive it, and outside the flow of time that implies change and alteration. It is to be expected that, living as we do within the constricting limits of time and space, we are unable to have any sense of eternity. Our knowledge of the future age can only but be limited, not so much because it has not yet come and we do not have any related experience but because the magnitude of the gift, glory and love of God, who will hold together this life, cannot really be conceived, understood or described.

The Apostle Paul, who had a revelatory foretaste of the life «of the age to come», wonders at the gift he has received and affirms his inability to describe this life even in a vague way. In fact, he could not even be sure about where this revelation had taken place. «Whether in the body, I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows» (2 Cor. 12:2). The only thing Paul was aware of was that «he was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter» (2 Cor. 12:4).

The non-dimensional and immutable life of the future age is described in Scripture as «future glory» (Rom. 8:18), «the glory of the celestial» and was understood in the East more as a dynamic journey and transfiguration «from glory to glory» (2 Cor. 3:18) than as a static spiritual state. The Cappadocian Fathers, who were closely connected to the work of the Second Ecumenical Council, stress the idea of communion with or participation in God, which will determine absolutely the state of the resurrected person in the future age. In this unique relationship, in «this expected life, which is simple and of one kind», where evil will be «non-existent», God will be everything for the human person. Communion with God will fulfil a person's every need. When one speaks here of 'needs' one does not of course mean the earthly needs of a person, but evidently we use here a language of analogy and speak in a 'divine manner'.

With the Second Coming of God, beyond the fact that sin and death will once and for all be cast out/banished, all needs and desires will be fulfilled. St Gregory of Nyssa uses symbolic language in order to describe the life of the future age and notes that life in the eternal Kingdom of God will be everything for man: «everything that seems necessary for life, in an analogous way, will be given to the human person in a divine manner. Thus God will be food, naturally to the degree to which we can talk of God as food, drink, clothes and shelter, air, place, riches, joy, beauty, health, power, wisdom, glory, blessedness and whatever is judged as good and that human nature needs. All this we say, of course, in a divine manner so that every person might learn that when they are with God they have everything, having God. To have God means nothing else than to be united with Him»¹⁹.

(f) Some final observations on the importance of expectation.

The Church, as a community of believers, journeys in a world that often sees destruction, division, violence and death. Within this world of self-centredness and insecurity the Church incarnates the life of the kingdom. In this way, the future Kingdom of God is present through the Church in the world. The Church, as an image and foretaste of the kingdom, «know[s] in part» (1 Cor. 13:12), that is to say it incarnates in history and foretastes, through the power of the Paraklete Who sustains it, the riches of peace, reconciliation, love and communion²⁰. This means that the Church, as «a little leaven», that «leavens the whole lump» (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9), can, through her way and her ethos, emphasise to those who are far and to those who are near that the gift of life is not limited to the narrow confines of our biological dimensions.

The Theology of Expectation, as expressed and above all lived in the East, leads us to another, new vision of human life and history. Life has value not because it is bound by certain limits, but because in and through it the limitless life of the last age is inaugurated. What Orthodoxy has given us, as expressed in the words of the Fathers, is that it views the present from the angle of the last times, that it proceeds towards the course of history from the end. In this way expectation is an integral fact of Christian existence. In the Orthodox East one cannot conceive of a Christian reality that lacks the certain hope that the last times have already, through the Holy Spirit, broken into history and are transfiguring it.

The whole message of the Church is the constant reminder that the present and the last times come together in the person of Christ. St Symeon the New Theologian notes that «Christ is the beginning, Christ is the middle, Christ is the perfection; he who is in the first, covers everything. He is both in the middle, and at

¹⁹ *In Illud...*, ed. J. K. Downing, p. 18, 5-15. PG 44, 1316D-1317A.

²⁰ *Confessing the One Faith*. An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), Faith and Order Paper No. 153, Geneva 1999, p. 101.

the end and at the beginning...Christ is everything and in everything»²¹. The incarnate Son of God accomplished in his Person not only the meeting of the created and the uncreated but, in consequence, of time and eternity. The Church believes that through the Resurrection of Christ the dimension of time, as confirmed by biological death, has already been elevated to a new quality of life. This belief is summarized in the Resurrection Hymn: «Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tomb he has given life».

The meeting of time and eternity, that is the transformation of the dimension of time from a course that leads to death to one that leads to life, is experienced by the Church at every moment and in every place in her Eucharistic communion. Eucharistic participation elevates the community of believers from the time of flux and transience to liturgical time, that is to time that is ever-present and permanent. The community of the Eucharist, the Church that is, is the most powerful demonstration that the life of the last times is a present reality of Christian existence. In the Eucharistic communion expectation of the life of the future age is witnessed to existentially and ecclesiologically. «**We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come**». This ethos is vividly expressed in the Eucharistic prayer of the *Didache of the Twelve Apostles*'.

«We give you thanks, Holy Father, for Your holy name, which You have made to tabernacle in our hearts... You, Almighty Master... did bestow on us spiritual food and drink and eternal life through Your Son. Before all things we give You thanks that You are powerful; Yours is the glory for ever and ever. Remember, Lord, Your Church to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in Your love; and gather it together from the four winds - even the Church which has been sanctified - into Your kingdom which You have prepared for it; for Yours is the power and the glory for ever and ever. May grace come and may this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If any man is holy, let him come; if any man is not, let him repent. *Maran Atha. Amen*»²².

²¹ Symeon the New Theologian, Chapter 3, 1.

²² *Didache*, 10.