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The End of History — The Moral Necessity of Eschatology

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British author Ian McEwan is quite convinced that people who believe that history will end with divine judgment are dangerous — probably very dangerous.

McEwan is among the most influential authors and literary figures of our day. His novels like *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* explore the moral landscape of the postmodern age. He is also an atheist who, by definition, does not believe that the Creator will bring history to an ending that will include perfect moral satisfaction. For that reason, his novels end without the hint or hope of such satisfaction.

Writing in *The Guardian* [London], McEwan set out his concerns about belief in an apocalypse in two essays [see [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#)]. Rarely does eschatology receive such explicit consideration in a secular newspaper.

McEwan is concerned that, “Throughout recorded history people have mesmerized themselves with stories which predict the date and manner of our wholesale destruction, often rendered meaningful by ideas of divine punishment and ultimate redemption; the end of life on earth, the end or last days, end time, the apocalypse.”

He is certainly correct in affirming that what Frank Kermode called the “sense of an ending” marks virtually all worldviews. This is necessarily so, because the questions of where history is headed and whether there will be a moral judgment are asked by every sensitive and intelligent human being.

As McEwan sees it, belief in divine judgment at the end of history is inherently dangerous. In his words:

The apocalyptic mind can be demonising - that is to say, there are other groups, other faiths, that it despises for worshipping false gods, and these believers of course will not be saved from the fires of hell. And the apocalyptic mind tends to be totalitarian - which is to say that these are intact, all-encompassing ideas founded in longing and supernatural belief, immune to evidence or its lack, and well-protected against the implications of fresh data. Consequently, moments of unintentional pathos, even comedy, arise - and perhaps something in our nature is revealed - as the future is constantly having to be rewritten, new anti-Christis, new Beasts, new Babylons, new Whores located, and the old appointments with doom and redemption quickly replaced by the next.

There can be no question that a preoccupation with eschatology as a hobby reveals an immature theology. There can also be no question that various groups and individuals have claimed a specific apocalyptic knowledge — setting dates, etc. — and it is true that some religions and ideologies have taken the route to violence.

But what Ian McEwan rejects goes beyond a lunatic fringe. He rejects the very heart of Christian eschatology. He aims directly at the book of Revelation:

The cast or contents of Revelation in its contemporary representations has all the colourful gaudiness of a children's computer fantasy game - earthquakes and fires, thundering horses and their riders, angels blasting away on trumpets, magic vials, Jezebel, a red dragon and other mythical beasts, and a scarlet woman. Another familiar aspect is the potency of numbers - seven each of seals, heads of beasts, candlesticks, stars, lamps, trumpets, angels and vials; then

four riders, four beasts with seven heads, ten horns, ten crowns, four and twenty elders, twelve tribes with twelve thousand members ... and finally, most resonantly, spawning 19 centuries of dark tomfoolery, "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred, three score and six." To many minds, 666 bristles with significance. The internet is stuffed with tremulous speculation about supermarket barcodes, implanted chips, numerical codes for the names of world leaders. However, the oldest known record of this famous verse, from the Oxyrhynchus site, gives the number as 616, as does the Zurich Bible. I have the impression that any number would do. One senses in the arithmetic of prophecy the yearnings of a systematising mind, bereft of the experimental scientific underpinnings that were to give such human tendencies their rich expression many centuries later. Astrology gives a similar impression of numerical obsession operating within a senseless void.

McEwan is fascinated with the fact that, especially in America, the book of Revelation is still taken seriously. While his direct attention is given to religious forms of apocalypticism, he also acknowledges the fact that many secular ideologies end with an explicit eschatology. But Marxism and radical environmentalism do not threaten his peace of mind as Christianity does. Why? Because Christian eschatological beliefs still influence politics in the West (even as Islamic apocalypticism influences the Muslim world).

He writes:

Thirty years ago, we might have been able to convince ourselves that contemporary religious apocalyptic thought was a harmless remnant of a more credulous, superstitious, pre-scientific age, now safely behind us. But today prophecy belief, particularly within the Christian and Islamic traditions, is a force in our contemporary history, a medieval engine driving our modern moral, geopolitical, and military concerns. The various jealous sky-gods - and they are certainly not one and the same god - who in the past directly addressed Abraham, Paul, or Mohammed, among others, now indirectly address us through the daily television news. These different gods have wound themselves inextricably around our politics and our political differences.

The human mind cannot help but look to the end. For this reason, eschatology will always be a central feature of any worldview or belief system. The Christian doctrine of eschatology is necessary to the biblical story and to the Gospel narrative.

Put simply, the Christian story unravels unless God brings the entire course of human history under His visible and perfect judgment, unless God's justice is perfectly displayed, unless the Christ is revealed in glory so that every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father [Phil. 2:11], unless Christ claims His redeemed people, unless God's triumph in Christ over death, sin, evil, and injustice is made universal. Put simply, unless every eye is dry and every tear is wiped away.

There is no Christian Gospel if history simply unwinds into a meaningless puddle, if the cosmos simply escapes into a cataclysmic black hole, or if the universe finally dies of exhausted energy. Without belief in a biblical eschatology, there is no Christian hope. Without a sense of perfect moral judgment in the end, the human heart is homeless.

Ian McEwan fears belief in eschatology. We should be far more fearful of living among those who fear no judgment to come. History cries out for judgment, and so does the human heart. Atheism offers no final hope, and no hope of moral satisfaction.

The Bible ends with just such a hope, and this confident hope frames the Christian worldview in the end as much as the belief in divine creation frames the beginning. Even so, Lord come quickly.

