

## **Erik Peterson's concept of eschatology**

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Especially during the Weimar Republic Erik Peterson (1890-1960) was one of the most influential Theologians. Based on a short introduction into Peterson's turbulent biography (he converted from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism in 1930) and an integration into the exegetical discussion of his time the paper presents Peterson's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (published in 1997) – with a focus on Peterson's differentiated concept of eschatology.

### **I.**

In 1891 already, as the thirteenth point in his doctoral thesis, Ernst Troeltsch stated: “as far as it is recommendable under any circumstances to systemize the Christian beliefs, eschatology must be the centre of all relationships.”<sup>1</sup> In his programmatic essay “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” the Tübingen New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann spoke of apocalyptic as the “mother of all Christian theology.”<sup>2</sup> He found the centre of original Christian apocalyptic relating to John's Revelation and the synoptic gospels, in “the accession to the throne of heaven by God and by his Christ as the eschatological Son of Man - an event which can also be characterized as proof of the righteousness of God.”<sup>3</sup> The central motif of post-Easter apocalyptic is not the teaching of retribution but “the hope of the manifestation of the Son of Man on his way to his enthronement.”<sup>4</sup> Käsemann, in his characterisation of the rank of apocalyptic, focused on a decidedly historical theology, and in this context, he proposed “that it was apocalyptic which first made historical thinking possible within Christendom.”<sup>5</sup> Historical thinking, based on the foundation of canonical and extra-canonical scriptures, he claimed, was the prerequisite for theology. Using ancient Christian apocalyptic,

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<sup>1</sup> Thesen zur Erlangung der theologischen Lizentiatenwürde an der Georg-Augusts-Universität zu Göttingen 1888-1893. With an introduction, ed. by Horst Renz, in: Friedrich Wilhelm Graf/Horst Renz (ed.), *Troeltsch-Studien. Untersuchungen zur Biographie und Werkgeschichte. Mit den unveröffentlichten Promotionsthesen der „Kleinen Göttinger Fakultät“ 1888-1893*, Gütersloh<sup>2</sup>1985, pp. 291-305; Troeltsch's theses there: pp. 299 f.

<sup>2</sup> See Ernst Käsemann, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology*, in: Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, Philadelphia, Pa., 1969, pp. 82-107, here p. 102; also compare Käsemann, *On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 108-137, here p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Käsemann, *The Beginnings*, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 96.

Käsemann made use of Richard Kabisch's, Johannes Weiss' and Albert Schweitzer's thoughts.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the developing "school of history of religion," they, vehemently moralising, put the eschatological and apocalyptic aspects of Jesus' and the apostles' message in the foreground, whether in the emphasis on the futuristic character of eschatology in its reference to the proclamation of the Lord's Kingdom by Jesus, or in the statement of a consequent eschatology, the apocalyptic short-term expectations of which had been disappointed. To their aid came the circumstance that the situation in regard to the sources, in particular to the early Jewish apocalyptic apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, had changed dramatically, not least due to the manifold new discoveries in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which heralded a revision of the contemporary state of the discipline. Eventually, however, Käsemann saw Schweitzer's efforts in regard to the apocalyptic as being of little help, since "every departure from historical criticism, distinguishing as it does between authentic material and what dates from after Easter, prevents a proper interpretation."<sup>7</sup> This criticism, which penetrated deep into the basic understanding of New Testament theology, may appear justified, but it must not obscure the view on the then-revolutionary character of the activation of the apocalyptic element.

"Terms," Reinhart Koselleck states with, "are concentrates of many semantic contents."<sup>8</sup> The possible meanings of a word face the union of various constituent semantic elements within the term. "Meanings of words can only be exposed by way of definitions, terms can only be interpreted." The theoretical premise of a history of a term, in Koselleck's sense, is "the convergence of term and history."<sup>9</sup> It aims for an interpretation of history through its respective terminologies and uses their position in the intersection of many lines of influence to achieve this: chances in semantic and real areas flow into the individual term; the term is

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<sup>6</sup> On Kabisch, Weiss und Schweitzer compare especially: Richard Kabisch, *Die Eschatologie des Paulus in ihren Zusammenhängen mit dem Gesamtbegriff des Paulinismus*, Göttingen 1893; Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, 3. Aufl., ed. by Ferdinand Hahn, with an introduction by Rudolf Bultmann, Göttingen 1964; Albert Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (1906), Tübingen <sup>9</sup>1984. On this, compare especially Werner Georg Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament. Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme*, 2., reviewed and expanded edition, München 1970; Johann Michael Schmidt, *Die jüdische Apokalyptik. Die Geschichte ihrer Erforschung von den Anfängen bis zu den Textfunden von Qumran*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1969; Alf Christophersen, *Die Begründung der Apokalyptikforschung durch Friedrich Lücke. Zum Verhältnis von Eschatologie und Apokalyptik*, in: *Kerygma und Dogma* 47, 2001, pp. 158-179; Jörg Frey, *Die Apokalyptik als Herausforderung der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft. Zum Problem: Jesus und die Apokalyptik*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 23-94.

<sup>7</sup> Käsemann, *Apokalyptik*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Einleitung*, in: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. von Otto Brunner, Werner Conze und Reinhart Koselleck, vol. 1, Stuttgart 1972, XIII-XXVII; here: XXII.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, XXIII.

subject to both changes in the situations in which it is employed and an unpredictable drive for the development of new terminologies. This history of terminology, free from philological limitations, is not about the exploration of matters of fact through findings in the history of language. Neither is it about self-sufficient eagerness to collect terminologies in the spirit of lexical completeness. It is about an introduction to “the experience of the respective terms and the theory contained therein.” “Thus, those premises which are suitable for theory,” whose metamorphosis is at the core of the debate, are being exposed. Categorical semantic contents experience a process of contemporisation, and traditional terms regain a dimension beyond the purely functional level in the realisation of past expectations. In the so-called *Sattelzeit* around 1800, terms began to crystallise which define historical eras themselves – development, history, revolution: they “are distinguished by temporal definitions, which concentrate process-based meanings and experiences.” At the same time, the potential to (ab)use many terms for ideology is growing. Collective singulars – like progress or freedom – become more prevalent. They need to be qualified by new predicates in order not to remain in a state of an “empty and blind formula.”<sup>10</sup> Structural change is visible because an “increasing removal from compact circles of life, relative in length” becomes prevalent “while the increased degrees of abstraction of the terms (...) define new horizons of possible experience.”<sup>11</sup> Eventually, the pluralisation of the social world, according to Koselleck, highlights the importance of the location in which a word is used, and thereby facilitates situations of rivalry and enforces a politicisation, as a chance but also as an obligation.

On this background, semantic history always also appears as political history. As soon as terms reach into the political realm, they necessarily have a border-defining and a situation-based quality. Put differently: the quality of the terminology of political debate is to be seen in its access to current reality and in its promises of future-shaping power. Depending on the degree of semantic charge it contains, it becomes an offensive weapon, a means of propaganda in the parties’ conflict about the supremacy in the interpretation of times, about the possessive interpretation of the past, the present, but also of the future. Temporally defined terms, in particular, and the concepts related to them are an expression of expectation, guiding anticipation of what is to come, and they thrive, exactly as demanded by the respective constellation of conflict, on their precision or their lack of focus. They remain tied to an

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, XVII.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, XVIII.

internal and to an external perspective. The self-understanding of an individual or a group expressed by those terms does not necessarily match the external perspective, and vice versa. The political use of terminology attempts to activate such conflicts, which lie hidden under the surface of a deceptively one-dimensional clarity of language. It uses the opposition of connotations in order to establish or maintain the strong position of one's own position. In other words: the fight is about the imposition of claims to rule and to realise one's visions, about the imposition of clarity to delimit contingency.

Not every era grants access to the factories of terminology and the armouries of language of the individual combatants in the fight for public opinion to the same degree. The history of terminology, too, knows "ages of security" (Stefan Zweig), phases of exhausted linguistic fantasy and largely undisputed, consensual rhetoric, on which, then, new dynamics of conflict arise – be it slowly, or accelerated by the catalysing effect of a catastrophe. He who, in the knowledge of these changes of the tides, wants to study the laws of motion of the history of terminology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will find a particularly rich terrain for investigation in the Weimar Republic. In the short years of its existence, the controversies on the design of the state, the re-orientation of economy and science, cultural life and social order, condensed into aggressively fought intellectual feuds with a very distinct quality of conflict. It would be misguided to force all the preachers, propagandists and self-declared ambassadors of salvation into one hermeneutic bed; to understand the more or less arbitrarily defined caesuras of political history as beginning and end of personal and collective processes of development. The boundaries or eras are not boundaries of discourse. The mythological potential of magic numbers representing certain years, the conventional textbook orderings and the pressures of the didactics of history should not deceive us into believing that the Weimar Republic will lead an existence beyond a precarious state in a realm between fact and fiction if it reduced to the dates of its foundation and its fall, while ignoring the developments which preceded her, and which followed her. The analysis of the discussions on the interpretations of times, in particular, loathes a superficial fixation on two punctually isolated events. Far more important are the transitions and unclear elements, the early signs and the late consequences, the confluence of manifold, interwoven strands of development, with all their sticky parts and knots – in short: everything which is removed from simple chronological expositions. In this way, the stability of the known and usual elements, the calming aura of a compact and orderly world which allows the following generations clear moral attributions, may disappear. But the

whole picture could only be harmonised retrospectively by paying the price of a loss, if not destruction, of substance. Politically correct patterns of thinking are not suitable to understand the complete, contradictory nature of the past, the dissonance of proudly intoned programmatic cornets, the lacking parts in – seemingly – perfect biographical textures, the dynamics of the unexpected. Only in the combined analysis of the disparate signatures of a remote era become visible.

“Constellations” was Dieter Henrich’s chosen title for his programmatic investigations of the “Problems and Debates at the Origin of Idealistic Philosophy (1789-1795)”. It is clear that the instruments he employs in the service of the history of philosophy can also be used for an analysis of the discussions of the interpretation of times in the Weimar Republic. Both cases are about the measurement of force fields within which the achievements of individuals need to be determined. Certain problems and perspectives need to be identified as urgent, bound to “a willingness to re-organise the own point of view, which is derived from the force-lines within this field, known to everybody.”<sup>12</sup> The “motives and problems of the constellations within which an author was moving, and within which he become independent”<sup>13</sup> are all but to be taken for granted. The classical categorisation of an author and his work in a biographical context, “doxography relying on detailed research, and individual thinkers’ history of motifs”<sup>14</sup> have served their time and are obsolete. The works of individuals cannot remain a fixed point, they are always part of a complex, dynamic, whole development. The thinking space created by constellations, into which the works have been written, needs to be explored and interpreted synthetically.

Exploring such thinking spaces restores past constellations, it calls them back to our attention. “History,” as Koselleck simply comments, “is always more or, maybe, less than can be said about it in terminology – just like language serves for more or less than is contained in real history.”<sup>15</sup> This is why any approach necessarily remains fragmented and cannot be reduced completely to a term. But the constellations gain a new presence on the stages of the history of science and intellectual history in the reconstructive process of the archaeology of thought. In

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<sup>12</sup> Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789-1795)*, Stuttgart 1991, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Stichwort: Begriffsgeschichte* [2002], in: Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*, Frankfurt am Main 2006, pp. 99-102; here p. 102.

this field of constellations, fights over terminology and rivalries on the interpretation of an era, Erik Peterson played a leading role during the Weimar Republic.

## II.

Erik Peterson was born in Hamburg on 7 June 1890 and died, also in Hamburg, on 26 October 1960. From 1910 onward he studied Lutheran theology in Strasbourg, Greifswald, Berlin, Göttingen and Basle. He returned to Göttingen from Switzerland and worked as the deputy inspector of the *Theologische Stift* from 1915 to 1919. With his dissertation, which was also recognised as his *Habilitation* publication, “*Heis Theos. Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*“, written in 1920 and published six years later, Peterson quickly gained international reputation as a specialist for the history of religion of the Near East in the era of ancient Christianity. From 1920 until 1924, he worked as a *Privatdozent* in Göttingen in the areas of ecclesiastical history and Christian archaeology. In 1924, Peterson followed a call to Bonn, where he took a chair for ecclesiastical history and New Testament studies. There, he gained a profile as a decided enemy of dialectic theology (Karl Barth had been his colleague in Göttingen for a time) and caused considerable turmoil, in particular, with his polemical tract “*Was ist Theologie?*”. His short study “*Die Kirche*”, too, caused deep strains in the theological landscape in 1928/29. In 1929, Peterson asked for temporary leave and resigned a year later. In 1930, he converted to Catholicism – with strong symbolism, in Rome, where he also founded a family. As a convinced enemy of Italian fascism and German national-socialism, he was not given an academic position befitting his intellectual potential. After years of misery and distress, with temporary teaching posts and cover duties, he became assistant professor for Patristics with an emphasis in the area of ‘antiquity and Christianity’ at the Papal Institute for Christian Archaeology in Rome in 1947, and became a full professor in 1956. He earned particular merit in the area of ancient Christian history of religion and the church.

Peterson’s influence on many contemporary theologians can hardly be underestimated; Karl Barth, Ernst Käsemann, Heinrich Schlier and Joseph Ratzinger, in particular, need to be mentioned. A critical edition of his works and the, up until now, unedited lectures is being produced since 1994 under the responsible editorship of Barbara Nichtweiß. The lectures on the Epistle to the Romans, edited by Nichtweiß and Ferdinand Hahn, and the lectures on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, in particular, need to be

mentioned. In the present context, especially Peterson's interpretation of the role of eschatology within systematic theology demands closer inspection, and I wish to condense my results into seven theses, due to the time constraints.

1. Eschatology, especially in the shape of apocalyptic, occupies a central position in Peterson's theological works.
2. There is a close connection to the idea of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God began with Jesus' work and proclamation, but could not be achieved completely, since not all Jews wanted to be converted to Jesus the Messiah. Thus, the history of mankind could not be finished. God decided to convert the heathens through the apostles. A church came into existence, with binding laws and binding offices, equipped with authority and power – the power of God and the power of Christ.
3. The deciding point of orientation is the concept of the history of salvation of the Epistle to the Romans, or, as Peterson put it in a better way, its history of revelation. The purpose of history is developed from its foundation in revelation of God. It is only thus that it achieves a context, which is founded in the person of Jesus Christ. After his proclamation of the Kingdom of God and since his death at the cross, history can only be conceived from its end point. Christ brought with Him the coming of a new aeon.
4. History – as becomes clear, too, in Peterson's remarks on John's Revelation – takes place between the currently existing human beings and the returning Christ. This gives a perspective to history. The human being is, as Jesus has been already, bound to an eschatological struggle. The martyrs occupy a prominent place.
5. In his lecture on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Peterson emphasizes: "Christians are the generation which exist where the aeons meet, namely this aeon and its end with the future aeon and its beginning." The cosmological aeon loses its force for history by virtue of the next. Deciding is not the fixation of eschatology on the individual, but on the entire cosmos. Humanity is represented in the church. Christianity appears as a political factor.

6. The eschatological, limited time between the first coming of Christ and His return comes into existence. The new aeon, in the *Kairos*, takes over from the wrong aeon of this world. The political power ruling the world is stripped of its influence and broken by Christian eschatology.

7. In his lecture on the Epistle to the Romans, Peterson stressed one point: “let us thus not forget: The universality of the apostolic revelation precedes the universality of eschatological proceedings. Nobody can remove himself from these universal proceedings and from this universal sermon, least of all the Jews, in the middle of whom this all happened.” For him, therefore, the following is true: Ekklesia and Synagoge “are to be together, not for historical reasons, but for the sake of eschatological history. Of course, there is a weighty theological problem in the replacement of Judaism by Christianity, which Peterson propagates.

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