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Book Review
Political Eschatology
By Sean J. McGrath
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I.

In the discursive economy of the systematic theology, "eschatology" occupies its place as one doctrinal element among others. In the received history of this concept, eschatology implies nothing more or less than the doctrine of the end: the history of the world, understood in light of the divine "economy of salvation," is irresistibly drawn towards its end by a transcendent force. In the secularized transformation of this concept, which decisively constitutes the foundational principle of the discourse of modernity, such transcendence is transformed into immanence: a new "philosophy of history" announces itself whose metaphysical ground lies in a self-legitimizing ideology of progress, implying a certain conception of temporality that is at once quantitative and successive, temporality that grows and ripens on an immanent line of irreversible becoming that makes manifest, in its very unfolding, of its end immanent in it—and thereby needing no transcendent force. Such a transformation implies a certain "death of God," insofar as it consists of neutralization or liquefaction of transcendence: this is "experienced" as something truly emancipatory, even though it must pass through the abyssal "experience" of nihilism, a nihilism that not only

delivers all given, existing values to a "nihil," but also transforms them into something radically new. Sean McGrath shows that we are at once inheritors of this impossible "experience"—of modernity—, but also of something "more," something even more gigantic and abyssal that remains an undertow like a counterforce: this something "more" is at once sought to be erased by the discursive economy of modernity's philosophy of history in the very process whereby modernity tries to appropriate it. This double of inheritance—or, this doubling of inheritance—constitutes the paradox, where one is at once non-contemporary to the other, even radically dissymmetrical to the other, while speaking of the same thought (namely, "eschatology"): from this, Sean McGrath teases out the very future of a thought. This thought, at once enigmatic and yet simple, is the future of thought, insofar as it is the thought of the future *par excellence*. Such a thought of the future lets itself *come* in the event of disjunction or in the event of disparate between the received history of a thought, which is older than two millennia, and the originary spirit whose explosiveness infinitely overflows and exceeds our ability to receive such a thought, even though we have been trying to think it in the last two millennia. Sean McGrath thereby indicates—in a fashion that is nothing more or less than what we can call as *indicative*—the excess and the measurelessness of a thought, which, having been thought in the history of the last two millennia, remains nevertheless unthought and not-yet-thought, and thereby remains thought-worthy for our time. For McGrath, "eschatology" is nothing more or less than this index, which is pregnant with possibilities that do not annul themselves in having been "realized" in the history of its becoming. Such an index, explosive with nameless possibilities, cannot be one doctrinal element among others within the discursive economy of something like systematic theology. McGrath, following Jürgen Moltmann in this aspect at least, understands eschatology as the very heart of the *logos* of *theos* as such; and like Moltmann, McGrath purveys the whole *logos* of *theos* as an eschatological seeing, without minimizing *the paradox* that constitutes and de-constitutes the *eschaton*, without neutralizing the paradox that co-joins and dis-joins the end and the beginning, despair and hope, the thought-thought and the unthought-thought of eschatology. That the minimization of this paradox would effectively reduce the unnamed and unnamable possibilities into the sense that the received history of the concept offers itself to us: this is the lesson McGrath learns as a student of this history, which he carefully delineates in the very first chapter of his book. To receive the history of a thought in a responsible way would be to respond to what that history forgets to recount: this is the prodigious responsibility McGrath assumes in this exemplary work on political eschatology. To assume such a responsible task of responding to the call of thinking would be to open thinking itself to that, which exceeds the measure of the

thinkable in a fashion that does not so much negate but calls the task of thinking to be rigorous. Consequently, along with what McGrath calls "eschatology," the thought of the "political" itself must then undergo radical transformation. The term "political," put before the word "eschatology"—as one puts an adjective before a noun—is here not a mere qualifying word among others of what eschatology could be, as though eschatology could also be other than "political." Rather, it is precisely otherwise: eschatology for McGrath is and will always be political through and through. The "political" here for him is not understood to be a particular sphere of our social *being* and *acting* that is delimited from all sides, a sphere where we human beings—and we human beings only—are engaged in the dialectical, antagonistic negotiation of force with force with the aim of instituting a universal hegemonic power like the institution of the state. If the sense of the political is wholly determined by such a *telos* of legitimacy, then eschatology could perhaps also be otherwise than political, and then, "political" would be a mere adjective among other adjectives for eschatology. To show that this is not necessarily so, that "political" is not a mere adjective among others for eschatology—this is the task of political eschatology as McGrath envisions it. This task would amount to be nothing less than the radicalizing of the thought of transcendence itself, after the death of God as it were (if one permits to say so, for McGrath poses this difficult question for us: which God has died?), where transcendence advents, comes, arrives to interrupt, disrupt, rupture all politics of legitimation of earthly sovereign powers: such would be the sense of the "political," so difficult to think, when we speak of *the political* in terms of "political eschatology." Only then would eschatology be thoroughly political, and the political would be thoroughly eschatological. This means that *eschatology* would no longer be understood as a noun, as a substantive, but verbally in the infinitive sense, and that *political* would no longer be similarly understood as adjective, for the supposed noun has become verb in the infinitive sense. Eschatology, understood as the doctrine of the end, as it is understood in the received history of this concept, becomes for McGrath an infinite thought of the verbal: *coming, arriving, adventing*—to. This verbalization of the *eschaton* itself would be nothing short of being *political par excellence*. To lay bare this enigma is precisely the task that Sean McGrath gives himself in this recent work. Whenever we annex the infinitive "to" to the verb *eschaton*, then the end must open itself, from the very heart of its history, to an unthinkable and unthought *beginning* that is more than what something has-been in the history of its becoming: this *more* is its *possibility*. Possibility—a word that McGrath takes to be one of his *Grundbegriffe*—is something extra, something more than what-has-been, in such a way that what-has-been cannot measure up to it. That which cannot be measured by what-has-been is the futurity of

a prodigious beginning—as gigantic or even more gigantic than the end—, which, in *coming*, does not come simply to pass by and to become another has-been in turn. However infinite may be the series of what-has-been and what-is-available-present, where temporality is understood in a substantive sense, it cannot measure up to the *arriving* of the new *beginning* that would de-formalize all series in turn, by interrupting all such series. This impossible thinking is the heart of the political eschatology that would consist of *possibilizing* the forms of the world *in toto*. Such *possibilization* is the very possibility of messianic justice that political eschatologians may indicate or glimpse in the gleam of time, but without thematizing it in any form of axiomatic induction or deduction. If Sean McGrath undertakes a history of the concept of eschatology—and that he does so well in the very first chapter—, he does so not to apply to history an axiomatic of induction or deduction, but to expose those *possibilities* that are intrinsically otherwise than deductive or inductive.

II.

For McGrath, it is important to rigorously and carefully discern the true depth of futurity that lies at the very heart of the eschatological thought and to distinguish it from other alleged thoughts of the future, which, though they take their inspiration from eschatology, end up by distorting the true depth of futurity in its radical contingency, incalculability, and un-predictability. It is interesting how McGrath here re-stages the *polemos* between Hegel and Schelling around the crucial problematic of history. While Hegel's tremendously influential philosophy of history indeed provides the metaphysical foundation to the philosophical discourse of modernity, it is rather in Schelling's eschatological conception of history that McGrath finds the true thought of possibilities, and of the true thought of futurity. Such *possibilization* of the world, whose possibility is an *advient* from a radically incalculable transcendence, cannot be understood in terms of Hegel's *teleological* philosophy of history, insofar as such a teleological philosophy of history that seeks to preserve what it negates (as Hegel's *Aufhebung* implies) would not be able to open itself to the event of a radically new inauguration, coming from an incalculable future, for it would end up thinking the beginning as nothing more or less than an ineluctable consequence or an inevitable result of what-has-already-been. For only by transforming the apocalyptic sting of transcendence into an immanent metaphysical principle of time as a continuous series of incremental becoming could Hegel metaphysically ground modernity in terms of a teleological philosophy of history. The taking-over of the view of temporality from the

Judeo-Christian eschatological conception of history, and yet distorting its thought of break *as* break—in other words, secularizing the thought of epochal break through a process of immanentization—, this transformation, is for McGrath a *symptom* of our historical condition whose air we breathe today, finding ourselves, as it were, at the end of a movement whose contingency is visible to us only now. Thus, the teleological philosophy of history that takes over from the eschatological vision of history its temporality and yet transforms it by immanentizing the apocalyptic thought of the end into a moment of *telos*, this Hegelian metaphysics of Spirit, is more of a symptom for McGrath, of a metaphysical sickness—or a sickness of metaphysics—, rather than its redemptive-therapeutic possibility. McGrath's diagnostic analysis, which is much inspired by Max Weber's concept of "disenchantment," makes manifest not only the theological origin of this metaphysical sickness, but also the sickening oblivion of the redemptive-therapeutic possibilities that lie in the theological-eschatological vision, a vision that still finds its genuine expression—at the very heart of our modern historical condition—in the eschatological thought of Schelling. Here, I think it will be better for me to let McGrath speak for himself:

> To appreciate Schelling's alternative to the far more popular Hegelian philosophy of history, it is necessary to clarify a subtle distinction between teleological time and eschatological time. On this distinction, the fundamental claim of political eschatology rests. Teleology is final causality, directedness to an endpoint. But it is not determined by the future, for the end comes from out of the past. […] Eschatology, by contrast, is the time of the event. It is time in which the new negates what was. It is determination by possibility rather than potency, by that which is genuinely futural, new, and irreducible to what has come before. Eschatology is not the actualization of potentiality but the time of the disruption that is not explicable in terms of what has preceded it and that occurs without direct causal relation to anything already underway— indeed, that brings all prior processes to a halt, not by fulfilling them, but by de-actualizing them, rendering them potency for the new real. The de-actualized time disrupted by the event is not in potency towards the disruption or to the new that follows it. The disruption or eschaton disrupts precisely because it is not a fulfillment or final causal consequent of what precedes it. The becoming potent of the de-actualized is the event of eschaton. (36)

In other words, teleological time with its logic of *Aufhebung* transforms the radical possibilities for the world into an apology for what-has-been; on the other

hand, eschatological time, on which McGrath constructs his political eschatology, is a radical disinvestment in the form of the world as it has been formed in the given history of its formation. This, in turn, enables us to think of interruptions as not mere attenuated variations of an even and ever more fundamental metaphysical continuum. Only thus can eschatology be what it is meant to be: "The anticipation of the end as the advent of justice [which] places the present under the strictest censure: the world as it exists is unjust and will be condemned as such by what is to come." (37) It is in Schelling's prophetic intimation of this *eschaton*—rather than in Hegel's teleological theodicy of history that deifies the form of the world as it exists—that McGrath hears this eschatological message of the coming Kingdom, of the coming of the Kingdom that renders the form of the world as it exists as truly *historical*, that is, as truly the transient order, the order that is *to* pass away. It is in this infinitive "to" of the verbal, explosively expressive of the eschatological spirit that renders the total order of creation as the order "to pass away": it is here, in the *transitivas*, where the total order of creation is in transit, that McGrath hears once again Jesus's eschatological message of *Basileia tou Theou*. The coming Kingdom renders the total order of creation as it exists into an order for passing away. With this, any theodicy that conceives the sedimentation of the form of the world as what-has-been as the very condition of possibility of what-is-to-come is transformed into eschatological hope. McGrath in this connection justly invokes Kierkegaard who speaks of such a theodicy (that conceives any what-is-to-come on the basis of what-has-been) as being existential in an unredeemable despair. In that sense, we can say, extending McGrath's analysis, that the fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) of our historical condition of modernity is despair. However, neither Kierkegaard nor McGrath remain stuck in the vicious circle of despair, trying to tease out redemptive possibilities from the myth of the eternal return of the same; Kierkegaard as much as McGrath, in truly eschatological spirit, hopes through despair and beyond despair, hoping what is un-hoped for. Only such hope can truly be hope, a thought that Saint Paul formulates in an eschatologically condensed paradox: "hope against hope" (Roman 4:18). That "the fashion of the world passeth away" (1 Corinthians 7:31) is neither for McGrath nor for Kierkegaard an occasion to remain eternally in despair, but rather the opportune moment to make despair itself into a *transitivas*, through this very despairing that nothing tangible now appears in the world that lets us hope for anything redemptive. For both McGrath and Kierkegaard, political eschatology is thus bound to a hope that can only appear to be a paradox for human understanding, not a thought-thought, but an unthought-thought, an unthought, not-yet-thought in the metaphysical history of being and acting. It is this eschatological paradox that Hegel's secularized theodicy of history

neutralizes: the result is a deification of the world as it exists. But McGrath reminds us, and Kierkegaard too, that Jesus spoke of something else, something more offensive to human understanding that cannot be smoothed out into a logical process of what-is-to-come as a mere consequence of what-has-been, something that is terrifyingly offensive to the world's hegemonic powers: that with the coming of *Basileus tou Theou* all principalities, powers, and dominions of the world will pass away. I quote McGrath:

> Jesus' eschatological message was simple, direct, and undeniably political: this world and its rulers are passing away; the *Basileus tou Theou* is coming. […] The transformation to come would indeed be political since it would overthrow all the kings of the earth and substitute for every earthly regime the reign of justice. But it would not be brought about through political means. […] The Kingdom would not come through military insurrections or even through any known form of political power. It would, rather, arrive with grace and mercy, overthrowing not only the kings of the earth but the earthly system of power that grants the right to rule to the dominant. The Christ would rule by making himself the servant of all, thus overturning the logic of earthly power itself. (39)

This paragraph speaks, in the most condensed formulation possible, about what McGrath means by "political" in his formulation of political eschatology. Political eschatology is *political* not in any recognizable sense of the term; it is political not in the sense of being the conditioned realm of negotiation of intra-mundane force with force. Seen from the perspective of our recognizable sense of the term, *Basileus tou Theou* is anything but political, for *Basileus tou Theou* is not a regime of power and force that can be accomplished and achieved by human beings on the basis of their own capacity and by virtue of purely political means. How, then, can we make sense of this political, which does not deploy political means? Yet, for McGrath this is precisely, where the true sense of the political lies, the political that does not deploy itself as a means. This paradox, like all those paradoxical formulations of Saint Paul (hope that can be hoped for is not truly a hope; faith that only believes in what is visible and intelligible in our knowledge is not truly faith; love that only loves the lovable is not truly love) and those of Kierkegaard, is that which shows the fecundity and complexity of McGrath's political eschatology. It amounts to thinking the political without means, that is to say, to letting the political emerge in its incalculable, irreducible, unpredictable possibilities, which are, first and foremost, eschatological ones, those possibilities that advent, eventuate, arrive without being "means": pure eschatological possibilities *as such*, neither *of* this nor *of* that, not the kind of possibility

of *this* new political regime of force in place of *that* old political regime of force. Here, if we let ourselves extend McGrath's political eschatology of events, a fascinating thought of event is gained: only those events are truly events, which are eschatological possibilities, precisely because they are possibilities as such—the very possibilities of events; for these events immediately—without mediation by force, without conceptual measure, without deployment as means—, and these events alone, establish justice, because they are not means at all. What does not have to be a means to an end at all is called *grace*. Force, on the other hand, establishes and is established, maintains and is maintained, by the deployment of itself as a means, and is without grace. This is why no worldly power can establish justice in any true sense of the term. Grace alone welcomes joyously the Kingdom of justice, because it does not deploy any means. Grace is not an adjective of a given substantive; rather, it is a pure verbal infinitive, gratuitously given at the limit of, and even beyond, human capacities to appropriate it. We are here not straying far from McGrath, for the *Basileia tou Theou* that McGrath awaits at the extremity of time is itself such a joyous eschatology of the event. Such an awaiting can only be a joyous one, the joy that has not shied away from the abyss of despair, but has learnt from it the eschatological joy of awaiting. McGrath writes:

> The key was political eschatology. This world would be transformed, and a new one would replace it, but it was indeed *this* world, this material and historical order that would undergo the change. If the transformation to come was of this world, this history, these bodies, these sociopolitical relations, then it was of utmost importance to attend to history, to the conditions of embodiment and social relations, and not, as the Gnostics argued, neglect the body, or even let it have its way, on the assumption that the true form of existence transcended it. It was not heaven and life beyond the body that the Christian hoped for; it was bodily resurrections and a "new earth." (40)

Such an eschatological awaiting—as Martin Heidegger speaks of it in his fascinating lectures on *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (and McGrath does not fail to discuss these lectures of early Heidegger)—is perhaps the most fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) of McGrath's political eschatology. McGrath's political eschatology is the eschatology of waiting. But such a waiting does not imply a passivity that would be the opposite of passivity; we do not have to choose between despair and naïve hope, the hope that one hopes for only that which can be hoped-for. Despair emerges as the ultimate sense and destination of human existence, when the human being can only hope for that which can only be achieved on the basis of the human

beings' capacity and potentiality: it is in this way that the utopian politics that governs the project of modernity actually turns itself into dystopian hopelessness, and the *auto-nomos* of modernity that promises to release us from the tyranny of transcendence ends up subjugating human beings to an even more terrifying tyranny of immanence. Eschatology, which, like utopian politics, thinks of the possibilities of the future, is not utopian in one fundamental aspect: it does not turn itself into dystopian despair. In the same fashion that McGrath distinguishes eschatological time from teleological time, he also distinguishes political eschatology from utopian politics:

> But where utopian politics arrogates to the human being the means to bring about the desired end, either political or technical, political eschatology invests in the still-unfulfilled promise of the beginning and anticipates a transformation, the origin and end of which transcends all human political potentiality and fulfills the human being's innermost drive for justice and freedom. (38)

Thus, McGrath distinguishes the future (eschatological) from futures (teleological, utopian): these rigorous discernments are so many singular moments of awaiting and hoping that would not despair in turn. Such discernments are moments of eschatological vigilance that enable us, so McGrath seems to be saying on these fascinating pages, to be attentive to the truth that the Kingdom of God is not to be confused with any legitimacy-seeking earthly sovereign hegemonies in place. Forgetting this truth has led human beings to pay the prices, which we cannot afford to measure by any human measurements. One chapter after another of McGrath's book shows the immense price humanity has to pay for forgetting this truth. Only an infinite eschatological vigilance, at once patient and attentive, may keep such truth in our remembrance: this is the responsibility of being human, to which Sean McGrath calls our attention in this work.

III.

Sean McGrath's *Political Eschatology* engages itself with some of the most urgent and important questions that concern us today: unspeakable ecological catastrophes that engage our attention; extreme forms of capitalism in today's world of mass-consumption; depletion of our inner life as the new form of barbarism; the recent pandemic that has destroyed millions of lives; raging international wars that radically

put into question modernity's faith in the teleological progress of humanity on a homogenous, irreversible line of our historical becoming; dissolution of all traditional values and constraining of all inter-personal relations that have made our personal lives lonelier than ever before, etc. McGrath's book is tinged with a profoundly apocalyptic note, as if he is writing from the very extremity of time, finding himself at "the time of the end or the time that ends" (1). It is not surprising that the very first chapter has for its title "Endtime." Yet—and this is perhaps the deepest paradox of this book—, this is an intensely joyous book, a joy that goes beyond any facile opposition between pessimism and optimism. The intensity of this joy is profoundly eschatological, very much Pauline and Schellingian, these two being his all-time favorite philosophers. Like Paul, McGrath contemplates—and this is a deeply contemplative book—that "the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Corinthians 7:31); but unlike Carl Schmitt, the German jurist who flirted (or, rather, more than flirted) with the Nazis, McGrath does not want to katechontically restrain this overwhelming passing away of the form of the world as it exists. Like Paul, McGrath welcomes this passing away, and immediately, just like Paul, teases out from this impossible experience of the utter transiency of the order of creation the very possibility of a new beginning, an entirely new inauguration, of a redeemed Kingdom to come. This joy, this peace that "passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7) is apocalyptic in the true sense of the term; for what is truly apocalyptic is not merely the catastrophic aspect of it, but along with it its "unprethinkable" (this is Schelling's word: *das Unvordenkliche*) transfiguration into a new joy in the arrival of redemption. McGrath contemplates this belonging-together of the disparate, this coincidence of the incommensurable that marks the apocalyptic moment, where the end and the beginning, despair and hope conjoin unthinkably, transfiguring all despair into joy, provided that we learn *to* let pass away what is *to* pass away. This is no stoic resignation, but an active hope that attends to the possibilities of incalculable transformations. For McGrath, more than anything else, it is this note that is genuinely "Christian": it consists of kenotically emptying out attributes of sovereignty, in order to release us for the joy in the "thy Kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). McGrath's contemplation is not an indifferent contemplation of the essences of the world, which seeks to grasp them in thought; rather, his contemplation is an "engaged" one that vigilantly attends to the possibilities of incalculable transformations. He thereby takes a step, which is neither the reactionary, regressive step of a conservative thinker who desperately tries to preserve the existing form of the world, lest the world sink in the whirlpool of impending destruction; nor is his step that of a so-called "secular-liberal-progressive" thinker who thinks that what has come to be must be of a higher stage that what-has-just-been. McGrath also dissociates

himself from those who find green grass on the other side and take solace in the mythical order of eternal return. Contra prevailing attitudes, which either retain only the catastrophic aspect of apocalyptic thought or neutralize the catastrophic to take away the apocalyptic sting, McGrath teases out the possibilities for us precisely at a time, when the world appears to be darker than ever before.