Marek A. Cichocki

The One Who Restrains

DOI: 10.35757/CIV.2009.11.01

The People of God, the religious community which identifies itself as the community of saints or of citizens of "the Kingdom which is not of this world," can be considered above all as an incessant march of pilgrims (peregrini) for whom the historical and secular space they pass through has no autonomous inherent value. Its value necessarily remains very small in comparison with the main goal of the pilgrims' march. However, can it really be devoid of value? Can it simply be regarded as an empty, meaningless expanse? Do Christians make their pilgrimage through the world by some "extraterritorial channel" so that, being children of God, they pass through the river of history without ever wetting their feet? If this were the case, we would have to admit that the relation between the community of the faithful, the People of God, and the historical world of politics, states and nations is in essence completely incomprehensible and perhaps even outright damaging. Thus comes the temptation to simply accept that both these spheres, the historical and the divine, never interact. It is a noteworthy fact that Christian thought, its internal struggles notwithstanding, finally ends up rejecting this temptation.[1] A definitive separation of the two orders would not

Marek A. Cichocki – Ph.D., works at University of Warsaw in Institute of Applied Social Sciences. Research director at Centrum Europejskie – Natolin (Natolin European Centre), editor-in-chief of the "Teologia Polityczna" (Political Theology).

[1] Even St. Augustine, often portrayed as the Christian thinker who radically separated the divine and earthly orders and expounded uncompromising teachings on grace, thus paving the way to a full secularization of the public sphere (this is the general thesis of the final passage of Kurt Flasch's *History, State, Society*, part of the book about Augustine. K. Flasch: *Augustin. Einführung in sein Denken*, Reclam, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 368–402), writes: "The

only be opposed to Christian doctrine, but would also contradict the experience of every believer in whose concrete existence these dimensions come face to face.

Can we assume, then, that more than the doctrine of faith, it was this lived experience which placed the Christians ever anew before this difficult question: Of what use are history and politics to Christianity? Can we not make do without them? Tertullian's famous question – "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? [...] So, then, where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? between the disciple of Greece and of heaven? between the man whose object is fame, and whose object is life? between the talker and the doer? between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down? between the friend and the foe of error? between one who corrupts the truth, and one who restores and teaches it? between its chief and its custodier?"[2] – began a centuries-old dispute about the relation between theology and philosophy, between faith and reason, which became a principle axis of tension between Christianity and the Hellenistic legacy.[3] But Tertullian's question can also be understood as pertaining to the problem of Christianity's relation to history and politics: What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Agora with the Temple, the polis with the Church? Thus the tension between Christianity and the classical world takes on yet another dimension. It is the conflict of faith and eternity with history and politics, of the faithful pilgrim member of the People of God with the loyal citizen of a political community.

house of those who do not live from faith seeks the earthly peace which stems from things and the comforts of this life. The house of those who live from faith bears in mind the eternal promises of the future and treats earthly things as transient to prevent them from ensnarling men and from distracting him from the path of God that he walks upon, but instead so that they comfort them to carry their burden more easily and not increase the weight of the corrupt body which weighs upon the soul." St. Augustine: *City of God*, p. 784.

[2] Tertullian: *De praescriptione haereticorum*, vii; *Apologia,* xlvi, translated by Sidney Thelwall and Philip Holmes (*Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh).

[3] Cf. Werner Beierwaltes: *Platonismus im Christentum*, Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 3–11.

Christianity attempted to resolve this conflict by reformulating the fundamental concepts of classical politics and philosophy, but the main doubts still remained, and led to new tensions and currents within Christianity itself. Cochrane notes: "We are faced with an extremely interesting and important question. It consists in whether there exits any real possibility of reconciling classicism with Christianity, of reconciling the system which strives to attain peace on earth with the system whose aim it is to implement a peace which is not of this world. Perhaps a conclusive answer to this question is not possible at all."[4]

*

One of the New Testament's most important passages for explaining Christianity's understanding of history and politics and its relation to eternity and the divine plan of salvation is St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians. Let us recall briefly the circumstances in which the letter was written. Thessaly, a free city with an autonomous government (*civitas libera*), the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, which was an important economic and cultural center on the principle route connecting Rome and Byzantium, became the site of St. Paul's intensive missionary activity around 50 AD. This resulted in the creation of quite a sizeable Christian community of converted pagans. Based on what the Apostle wrote to the Thessalonians (both in the first and second epistles), we can suppose that the pagans were particularly attracted to Christianity by the promise that the end of the world, the consummation of history and time, the second coming of Christ and the Final Judgment were imminent. In other words, they were attracted the apocalyptic aspect of faith. The Greek meaning of Parusia (παρουσία) – the Second Coming of Christ – was understood as "the triumphal return of a general

[4] Charles Norris Cochrane: *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1944, p. 356.

from a victorious campaign. Just as important personages usually accompanied the victor as he rode into the city, all the Christians who had persevered in obedience and charity would form Christ's closest entourage at the moment of his Second Coming."[5] This glorious return of the Lord was directly linked to the Old Testament Jewish vision of the gathering of the entire Chosen Nationat the end of time.[6] This vision, and the desire to participate directly in this great triumphal return and final gathering of the faithful, exerted a profound influence on the Thessalonians who converted to Christianity. This, at least, is how we can explain why these apocalyptic and eschatological reflections, together with the belief in an imminent end of the world which would be replaced by the eternal Kingdom of God, became one of the dominant themes of both of St. Paul's letters. It follows that the prolongation of the wait and the consequent doubts of the Christians who had converted from paganism became the main object of dispute among the freshly converted Christians in Thessaly. The ensuing fear and apprehension was mixed together with a state of euphoria, and their hope became even more understandable if we consider that the conversion to Christianity carried with it the threat of exclusion, persecution, imprisonment and even martyrdom. For example, the Christian martyrology would receive new significance through faith in the imminent coming of the Lord and the definitive end of the world, because of the belief that Divine justice would thus be carried out. St. Paul's absence (he was on his missionary journeys) undoubtedly only served to increase the anxiety and confusion among the Thessalonians. He was a charismatic leader for the community and guarantor of authenticity for the faith he proclaimed and worked to spread.[7] So even though during his stay

[5] *Komentarz praktyczny do Nowego Testamentu* [Practical Commentary on the New Testament], Pallottinum, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów w Tyńcu, Poznań – Kraków 1999, vol. 2, p. 349.
[6] Craig S. Keener: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill. 1993, p. 463.
[7] Peter Neuner: *Ekklesiologie*, in: Wolfgang von Beinert (Hrsg.): *Glaubenszugänge. Lehrbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, Johann-Adam-Möhler Institut, Paderborn 1995, Bd. 2, pp. 325–333.

in the Thessalonian community the Apostle had explained that in fact no one knew, nor could know, when the end of the world announced by Christ[8] would occur, as soon as he left fear and doubt began to spread anew among those Thessalonians who had lost hope that they would live to see the Second Coming and be able to participate in Christ's glorious return. At the same time, euphoria and excitement grew among those who still believed that the awaited moment would soon arrive. The direct consequence of this universal turmoil, of the fear mixed with expectation, was the total disorganization of the community and to some extent of the entire city as well. According to commentaries to the 2nd epistle to the Thessalonians, the Christians would abandon their temporal responsibilities, refuse to work, and live mainly on alms and begging, either falling into a state of apathy or living in a constant excitation and ecstasy. False prophets began to appear, divulging a fake letter, supposedly written by Paul, which proclaimed that the end of the world was nigh. The situation in the community must have truly been critical, since the Apostle decided to address the Thessalonians in a second letter in order to definitively clear up any doubts which could have contributed to social unrest in the city. Only here does St. Paul situate hope in an imminent Second Coming and the fear resulting from its unexplained delay within the framework of a specific Christian vision of history, continuity, and the end of time, which provided a basis, among other things, for the entire interpretation of the relation between the eternal and timeless absolute and that which is historical, accidental and fleeting.

St. Paul describes in detail the circumstances of the Second Coming, and first cautions against putting faith in spreading sensationalist stories on this matter. He states that the end of time will not occur "unless there come a revolt first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition who opposeth and is lifted up above all that is called God or that is worshipped,

[8] 1 Tes. 5, 1–3.

so that he sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself as if he were."[9] Invoking the popular, Old Testament vision of the apocalypses from the Book of Daniel, the so-called vision of the four beasts,[10] the Apostle paints a picture of the Antichrist which would later be widely commented upon and would inspire the imagination of many posterior generations. His coming was to be accompanied by tepidity in religious sentiment, mankind's fall, and a widespread rejection of God. This coming of the Antichrist, the absolute opposite of God, evil incarnate, would mark the true moment when time was near completion and humanity would face the end of the world. According to St. Paul, at that time no one except for God himself would be able to withstand the might of evil which "the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and render powerless by the manifestation of his coming."[11] All of this would be like a tremendous, global and conclusive battle between good and evil, marked by "the working of Satan, in all power and signs and lying wonders and in all seduction of iniquity to them that perish."[12] The victory would be Christ's glorious return, the Parusia, which, as has already been said, would be like the triumphant return of a general from war. However, much time could still pass before this culminating clash occurs. In fact, the definitive end is constantly being postponed in time. Absolute evil, whose coming is indispensable for the consummation of history, cannot simply rule and subject everything to himself right away. History continues, and can do so because a mysterious power which Paul named when he spoke to the Thessalonians, but which he does not refer to by name in his letter, constantly restrains the evil and postpones the moment of its total domination of the world. "Do you not recall that while I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that

[9] 2 Tes. 2, 3–4.
[10] Dn. 7, 1–14.
[11] 2 Tes. 2, 8.
[12] 2 Tes. 2, 9–10.

he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. But the one who restrains is to do so only for the present, until he is removed from the scene. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth."[13]

The basic difficulty which Paul of Tarsus faced was how to reconcile time with the promise of an imminent end, the necessity of divine eternity with the inevitable presence of human history. To resolve this difficult problem, which touched the Thessalonian community in a dramatic way, Paul made use of an original formulation of the notion of time which, one has to admit, is quite mysterious and unclear. It meant first and foremost that the Parusia would not occur soon and that many generations of Christians would not experience it during their earthly lives. In this way Christianity ceased to be a matter of just one generation of the faithful, whose thought could dwell only on the expected, imminent end and the ensuing salvation. An uncharted expanse of historical time, a time lasting many generations, opened up before Christians. Moreover, if Christianity was to be prevented from becoming a destructive factor of chaos in society, then it had to answer how this unexpected and gratuitous expanse of time was to be used. Human life could no longer be limited solely to an eschatological expectation, to a Christian contemplation of the end. "For also, when we were with you, this we declared to you: that, if any man will not work, neither let him eat," Paul admonished the Thessalonians. "For we have heard there are some among you who walk disorderly: working not at all, but curiously meddling. Now we charge them that are such and beseech them by the Lord Jesus Christ that, working with silence, they would eat their own bread."[14] In the face of a prorogated end of the world, Christianity's most pressing need became the question of how to fill the expanse of human time while taking

[13] 2 Tes., 2, 5–8.
[14] 2 Tes., 3, 10–12.

into consideration two goals: their own salvation, but now also the salvation of the future generations, and thus salvation in the historical context. Consequently, eschatological expectation had to be complemented with concrete activity on behalf of a humanity now viewed as a historical phenomenon, and not just as the People of God. In this way, a dichotomy appeared in the aim of human existence, or rather a two-fold understanding of the end as the *telos* of concrete action and as the *eschaton*, that is, the definitive end of all action.

One of Christianity's undeniable achievements, impressive even today, was the attempt to unite these two ends in the life of concrete persons. This opened before them possibilities which had been unprecedented in the classical pagan culture. This does not mean at all that in so doing the fundamental antagonism between these two ends disappeared. As Robert Spaemann notes, concrete historical human action (this includes the political sphere) focused towards a certain end (*telos*) aims to maintain being in its essence (*eidos*). Thus, it is man's constantly renewed effort to counteract the natural forces of destruction and chaos to which he is continually exposed. The history of mankind is a stormy process of natural disintegration and of continuous efforts to stop it. "The fulfillment of the *telos* of a living being amounts to a postponing of the end, restraining of the fall,"[15] delaying of the arrival of the *eschaton*. However in the Christian, Pauline perspective the historical *telos* is not decisive but rather the final end, the *eschaton*. The uncharted expanse of time which we have been given cannot be an end in itself, nor can it be the ultimate end, for the ultimate destiny of history is disintegration. No human effort to maintain one's *eidos* and to resist disintegration can save him from the *eschaton* for ever. Does this mean that all our efforts are pointless? Are we back to where we started, and have Paul's admonitions and

[15] Robert Spaemann: *Ten, który powstrzymuje – i ostatni bój* [He Who Restrains – and the Final Battle], in: *Koniec tysiąclecia. O czasie i drogach nowoczesności. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo* [End of the Millennium. About Time and Ways of Modernity Conversations in Castel Gandolfo], Znak, Kraków 1999, p. 67.

recommendations to the Thessalonians turned out to be wrong? True, the Christian *eschaton*, the inevitability of the definitive disintegration and end, relativizes the meaning of the concrete *telos*. However, it does not eliminate the sense of the human activity itself directed towards the *eschaton*. Historical time is necessary for man so that he can remind himself through action about his participation in eternity, in God, and can realize that he is an image and analogy of the absolute. Spaemann explains that one of antiquity's most important myths, the myth of Sisyphus, takes on a whole new meaning when seen from this perspective.[16] The Christian concept of time and action frees Sisyphus from his pagan *fatum*.

The linking of human time to God's eternity, inasmuch as it was not supposed to lead to complete doubt, focused attention on a wholly new meaning of human action and revealed its previously unknown meaning. This was possible because of the new vision of time which was found in the fragments the 2nd epistle to the Thessalonians cited above. They contain a Christian vision of history, its duration and its political meaning, and deal with the relation between human history, human destiny and God's plan of salvation, which is rich in meaning, but also partly ambiguous. Three concepts found in the text – *chronos*, *kairos*, and *katechon* – are key to understanding this vision. They now require closer examination.

It is a significant fact that in the relevant fragment of St. Paul's Letter we simultaneously find two different approaches, borrowed from the Greek tradition,[17] to the understanding of time. These have a fundamental importance for the formation of the Christian vision of history and of its end. The letter speaks of the successive events which build a linear understanding of time on earth, of human time, as a becoming and passing. This time

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 72.
[17] The fundamental text for the Christians was certainly Plato's *Timaeus*, translated into Latin and exhibiting strong links to the *Book of Genesis* from the Old Testament.

was often referred to as the Greek *chronos* and it had a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. However, in the letter it is also stated that the end of the world and the Parusia will arrive "in their own time," therefore in some other time, their "own," which is governed by its own logic and by principles unlike those of secular time. They will arrive in God's time. Here the concept of *kairos* appears in the Greek text of the epistle to signify this other unearthly time. In the Greek tradition *kairos* meant the best moment for carrying out a particular act in the best and most perfect way.[18] At the same time, the fact that this moment has arrived cannot be perceived using secular, linear time, even though its manifestations can lend support to intimations that that perfect moment for acting has just arrived.

The Apostle borrows both understandings of time from the Greek tradition and modifies their mutual relationship in a completely novel, Christian way. The word *chronos* (χρόνος) referring to time appears very early on in the Greek tradition. It is already present in Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*. The connotations used there prompted the hypothesis that, for the author of the Greek epos, time primarily had a negative meaning[19]. It was an empty time, with neither substance nor its own dynamics. We could say that the Homeric concept of time as *chronos* was of a flowing and passing emptiness in which man had been imprisoned. It has also been noted that this negative meaning of time is most easily felt in the experience of waiting: time becomes a burden for those who wait, an external condition which must patiently be borne.[20] So *chronos* is expansive time which drags on (*polun chronon),* but importantly, it is also a time of expectation. The fact that we have to wait through it makes it empty, neutral or even useless for man. Moreover, in this context time acquires a special

[18] Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998.
[19] Cf. Hermann Ferdinand Frankel: *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*, C.H. Beck, München 1995, p. 1.
[20] Cf. Michael Theunissen: *Pindar*, C.H. Beck, 2nd ed., München 2002, p. 24.

authority and rule over man. It is something man must subject himself to. Therefore *Chronos* is primarily experienced by others as a dominating force[21] to which they are enslaved. In the Homeric vision, therefore, time is a type of unpleasant existence. It is like the immobilization of a man swimming in a river of useless, neutral *chronos,* which only inhibits the focused energy of human life. This situation is best illustrated by those fragments of the *Odyssey* which describe Homer's heroes imprisoned on a ship in the midst of a windless sea.

The meaning of the word *kairos* (καιρός) is more complicated, and only appears much later in the works of Solon and Pindar. It constitutes a sort of synthesis of the meanings of the earlier words *hora (*ωρη) and *aion (*αἰών). In contrast to *chronos, kairos* is a time of expectation. It is also non-linear, and rather can be viewed as a certain point or moment. It is always a particular moment, since it brings the fulfillment of earlier expectations. Therefore it is a moment of fulfillment but also of fullness, the most conducive moment for the execution of some specific act. It is an event.[22] The meanings of the root words which contributed to the meaning of *kairos* reveal the deeper meaning of that specific event. *Hora* sometimes simply signified the springtime as a moment of the full manifestation of life-force and, like *kairos* later, the best-suited moment for completing some act. *Aion,* on the other hand, meant life for Homer, vital forces as an efficient power, freed energy to act, or simply life as a time of intense action. However, it is significant that *aion* also made reference to the notion of eternity (for example as *aiei* – always), either as the constantly renewed vital forces in man's action, or as the eternal fire, or as the forever existing gods.[23] So one can conclude that in this concept a special connection between human action

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 23.
[22] Cf. Gerhard Kittel: *Theologisches Wörterbuch*, Stuttgart 1938, vol. III, pp. 456–463.
[23] Cf. Michael Theunissen: *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29; Geoffrey R.L. Lloyd: *Czas w myśli greckiej* [Time in Greek Thought], in: *Czas w kulturze* [Time in Culture], Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1988, p. 209.

and eternity occurred: the vital forces which become manifest in concrete action opened the person to the eternal and divine. He is thus freed from the burdensome reign of *chronos.* In Pindar's poetry all of these meanings culminate in the *kairos,* a notion of time different from *chronos* and sacred in character. The kariotic moment appears when the forces of life break through the rule of time. It is a moment which is described by Pindar as a watershed or a turning point in time, which thus acquires access to eternity and obtains an unequivocal sacred character. This very understanding of *kairos* is perfectly exemplified in *Olympian Ode 10*.[24]

This basic difference between the two conceptions of time, expressed with two completely different concepts, usually prompts the formulation of the hypothesis that a fundamental conflict existed in the Greek tradition between sacred and historical time, in which the notion of eternity was opposed to the explicitly linear, human time of history, which was thus devoid of any greater meaning or value.[25] Only with Christianity and its own concept of time, eternity and history do we see this ancient conflict resolved.

As already mentioned, Christianity changes the relation between *chronos* and *kairos*, if only following St. Paul's example, and enriches the meaning of those two Greek concepts. *Chronos* is secular time. One could even say it is physical time, objective

[24] Cf. Michael Theunissen: *op. cit.*, p. 31. *Interpretation of Olympian Ode 10*, *ibidem*, p. 595––688. The way in which Heracles creates Olympus is especially interesting in the Ode. This act is preceded by a series of bloody disputes and wars, betrayals and deaths, which only end when Heracles creates Olympus. The way in which he does this is akin to the building of a temple. (Pindar: *Olympian Ode 10*). In fact, wars and disputes were suspended the Olympic games; they were first and foremost a sacred event and only secondarily a physical or sports event.

[25] Cf. Germano Pàttaro: *Pojmowanie czasu w chrześcijaństwie*, in: *Czas w kulturze*, *op. cit.*, pp. 299, 300, *Czas w kulturze.* Michael Theunissen (*op. cit.*, pp. 30–31) proposes the thesis that "in the context of time a tension between the concept of ruling and the concept of life" was inserted in the antagonism between *chronos* and *kairos.* "An antithesis between time--*aion* and time-*chronos* occurs here: life which with all of its strength seeks its fullness in time is conquered by time which is alien to it in such a way that it is damaged, shrinks and falls apart."

time, time subject to the mechanistic rule of actions and reactions of human deeds. That is why Gregory of Nyssa was later able to call time thus understood a "type of vessel," a form whose end was to contain the empirical world.[26] We can attempt to measure this vessel to determine its approximate volume. People have tried to do so throughout the ages when they created different types of calendars and more or less complicated methods for measuring time. Essentially, however, the measurability of time on earth was always a matter of convention. This is why we can never precisely measure the volume of the vessel referred to by St. Gregory, just like St. Paul, who in the epistle to the Thessalonians states that people are not able to indicate the exact moment when time will end. In the end, man is not the lord of the *chronos,* which often appears to him as an unpredictable fire of successive events, or like interacting blind forces of fate.

Kairos, on the other hand, is divine time, although this definition should only be considered conventional, because already very early on, in part resulting from the disputes with various types of Aryanism and gnosis, Christianity adopted the principle that no relations of time – neither a before nor an after nor a now – exist between each of the individual Persons of the Holy Trinity. In this sense the Christian God is eternal and, according to Augustine's later formulation in his *Confessions* (Book XI), God did not create the world in time but with time, and therefore He himself "precedes time, but He does not precede it in time, for there was not time before time." Thus, revelation and the Incarnation had to appear in this perspective as an exceptional intrusion of the eternal absolute into the sphere of the common, material world. It was a moment in which the *kairos* and the *chronos* intersected.[27] However, a fundamental theological and philosophical problem

[26] Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan: *Czas i Trójca Święta w tradycji chrześcijańskiej* [Time and the Holy Trinity in the Christian Tradition], in: *Koniec tysiąclecia...*, p. 15.

[27] Germano Pàttaro (*op. cit.*, p. 305) notes: "*Kairos* is then a key word for the entire hermeneutics of the New Testament and especially for a true understanding of the concept of time in the Bible."

arose from this conception and needed to be resolved: How is it at all possible for eternity to manifest itself in ordinary, human, historical time? Christianity remained faithful to the dogma of divine eternity as something absolutely free from the principles of secular time, which itself was a creation of God. It undertook with great effort to show at the same time the necessity, the eschatological sense, of permeating this secular time with the divine eternity. One of the great attempts at demonstrating this relation was the fragment of Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians presently under consideration. In his vision, human history is placed between the vise of two events as a direct manifestation of eternity's presence in time. At one end is the divine incarnation and the birth, life and crucifixion of Christ, which takes place in concrete linear time (the rule of Augustus and Tiberius). At the other, the day of salvation and the Final Judgment, which will also take place in a concrete moment of linear time, and whose details are only known to us through the prophecies of a collapse of faith, a rule of the Antichrist and of his final demise. According to Walter Benjamin,[28] a secular time spans between them which appears to be empty and dark. Christianity's idea of sanctifying the present world with God's eternity by making itself present in it, essentially eliminated any Gnostic speculation about the world as the creation of an evil demon-god fromwhose rule mankind will only be rescued by the liberator-God. In this way the unity which had been absent in pagan antiquity was restored.[29]

Inasmuch as the concepts of *chronos* and *kairos* described the Christian understanding of the relation between human time and God's eternity, the concept of *katechon* was supposed to explain why human history was still even possible after Christ's coming, and what its meaning could be in the context of the Incarnate

[28] Walter Benjamin: *On the Concept of History*, translated by Dennis Redmond, 2005, chapter 13 (http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm).
[29] Cf. Charles Norris Cochrane: *Christianity...*, p. 360+ and *On the Error of Antiquity*, p. 410+.

Revelation. The notion of the one who restrains[30] (*to katechon* or *qui tenet*) was later the subject of many interpretations, some of which dealt with philosophical aspects and referred to the Christian understanding of time and history, while others dealt with more political meanings of the *katechon*. Interest in this notion of the Apostle's was stimulated not only because of the key role of the figure of the Antichrist, which became popular in the rich, posterior Christian and non-Christian demonological tradition,[31] but also by the significant and mysterious fact that, in his letter, St. Paul in no way explains whom or what exactly he has in mind when he speaks of a force which restrains evil in history, while at the same time he notes that further explanation is not necessary, since he had already explained to the Thessalonians exactly what he had in mind. This fundamental ambiguity in the letter contributed to the multiple interpretations of the role of the one who restrains, and of his identification. This is why, at one point, in the *City of God* Augustine refers to the *katechon* fragment with full resignation (or perhaps with a certain self-restraint): "I frankly confess I do not know what [St. Paul] means."[32]

This concept had no particular meaning in ancient Greek and most probably it was Paul who conferred on it the whole mysterious context from which the numerous interepratations and conjectures were later derived. Thus, for example, in Euripides's *Bacchae* κατέχειν refers to the "ecstatic moments." These are states of ecstasy and enthusiasm, and thus of being visited by a god into which people fall. Thus he describes a situation in which someone possesses a divine power, through whom a god speaks,

[30] More precisely, the Letter first speaks of an impersonal restraining force referred to in the neutral gender: "…now you know **what** is restraining". Only afterwards is the subject in the masculine gender used: "But **the one (he)** who restrains is to do so…".

[31] In later interpretations of the Gospel, the figure of the Antichrist practically completely overshadowed the problem of the *katechon*. "Regarding the Middle Ages, the centre of attention is no longer the *katechon* but mainly the figure of the Antichrist occupies most people's attention." Alfons Motschenbacher: *Katechon oder Großinquisitor?*, Tectum Verlag, Marburg 2000, p. 204.

[32] St. Augustine: *The City of God*, XX.19 (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm).

whom a god guides and cares for. Its counterparts are *possessio* in Latin and *possession* in English.[33] As we see, it is difficult to detect here any direct relation to the meaning which Paul conferred on this term in the second letter to the Thessalonians.

This new meaning was often interpreted in one of three ways: in its Theocentric meaning, its evangelical-ecclesial meaning and its political meaning. The Theocentric interpretation of the *katechon* supposes that the restraining force to Paul's mind is simply God himself, in the sense that this force as a purely formal created principle functions because God has willed it so. However, it does not have any concrete content, political or otherwise, beyond what could be directly ascribed to it on the basis of the divine plan of salvation.[34] The restraining force is necessary on account of the redemption of sin itself: "Man's sin and the liberating purpose of God – these only require and justify historical time. Without original sin and final salvation the intermediate time period would not be necessary."[35] At the same time, the formality of the *katechon* explains why Paul spoke so reservedly about it in the second letter to the Thessalonians, even though this contradicts the Apostle's declaration that he had previously already explained to his listeners exactly what he had in mind.

Another very widespread interpretation was of the *katechon* was that it is the Gospel or that it is the Gospel-proclaiming role of the Church in the world and in history. "And unto all nations the Gospel must first be preached," proclaims St. Mark (Mk 13:10), whereas Matthew writes that Christ will be present through the proclamation of the Gospel "for all days, even to the consummation of the world." (Mt 28:20). The expanse of historical time appears

[33] Cf. Walter Burkert: *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2001, pp. 111–112. Unfortunately the Polish translation of the *Bacchae*, 1124 (Euripedes: *Tragedie*, translated by Jerzy Łanowski, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1980) does not fully convey this meaning.

[34] More on the theocentric interpretation of the *katechon* in authors such as Wolfgang Trilling or August Strobel can be found in Motschenbacher: *op. cit.*, pp. 188–191.

[35] Karl Löwith: *The Biblical View of History*, in: *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1957, p. 178.

here as indispensable, so that the mission which Christ entrusted to the Church of proclaiming the Gospel to all men can be fulfilled. As long as this mission remains uncompleted, time cannot end. This interpretation of Paul's "that which restrains" and of "he who restrains" was to be present in Christian thought starting with Theodore Cyrus, later in John Alvin and finally in Oscar Cullman, for whom "the age of messianism, including the Final Judgment, cannot begin until the Good News has been made known to all."[36] Attention was drawn to the fact that the Holy Spirit, the Johannine Paraclete, understood as a comforter, intercessor or even advocate of mankind,[37] often appears in the New Testament in the neutral or the masculine gender, which would correspond to the double gender used for the *katechon* and lend credibility to the idea that Paul was thinking of the unity of the Gospel, Holy Spirit and Church, which was supposed to progressively embrace all of mankind throughout the ages. Thus, "the teaching on the Holy Spirit itself became a principle confirmation of the gradual development of Holy Tradition in history" or even possibly the main justification for the Christian understanding of progress as the progress of the work of evangelization in historical time.[38] Following the Evangelist's words, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the Paraclete (in the most popular translation "counselor," or more precisely, "the one summoned for help, advocate, protector, intercessor, succorer") will, following Christ's ascension, be sent to earth permanently, until the end of time (*eschaton*) so that mankind will not be completely abandoned. This conviction about the presence of the Spirit of Truth was so strong among the Christians that, as Pelikan writes, it was later

[36] Theodoret of Cyrus, Comm. 2 Tes 2, II.6, in: *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles;* on Calvin and Cullmann's doctrine see Motschenbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
[37] Tadeusz Zieliński: *Chrześcijaństwo antyczne* [Ancient Christianity], Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 1999, p. 265.
[38] Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan: *op. cit.*, p. 19. Pelikan also recalls the formula used in Church councils: "We have decided, the Holy Spirit and us" which expresses the full unity of the Church and the Holy Spirit in time.

transformed into the proverbial formula often used during the Church councils: "For we have decided, the Holy Spirit and us." It finally became the basis for the doctrine on the infallibility of decisions collegially taken by the gathering of the Church's bishops.[39] In this context, a sign of catastrophe, of the end times and of the decisive battle between God and the Antichrist is the disintegration of the unity between the Spirit and the Church, which is especially substantiated in verse 7 of the epistle which states that the restraining force will be "removed from the centre" (ek mesou genetai). In other words, the Holy Spirit will cease to be active in the Church's structure and in the world.[40] Origen's view expressed in the *Against Celsus* can be understood in this perspective: "For men of God are assuredly the salt of the earth: they preserve the order of the world; and society is held together as long as the salt is uncorrupted."[41]

In contrast to Theodoret, some Fathers of the Church interpreted the *katechon* in political terms, believing that the force restraining evil is the State or, more precisely, the Roman empire (that which restrains) or the emperor's rule (he who restrains). This thesis was supported by the fact that when Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonians, the Emperor of Rome was Claudius. His name was theoretically related to the Latin word "restrain," and he was the immediate predecessor of Nero, who epitomized evil and the persecution of the Christians.[42] Nevertheless, there was a fundamental ambiguity in this attitude that the empire was the evil-restraining force, especially considering that the successive waves of persecution, beginning with Nero and Domitian in the 1st century, up till Diocletian in the 3rd, made the Christians associate the Roman empire with the Whore of Babylon from John's Book of Revelations. So the problem arises of how the

[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] Charles Caldwell Ryrie: *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody, Chicago 1959, pp. 111––114.
[41] Origen: *Against Celsus*, VIII, 70 (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04168.htm).
[42] Craig S. Keener: *op. cit.*, p. 464.

ambiguous fragment of Paul's letter (especially 2, 6–7) could refer to the Roman empire, and more broadly to political authority? Was this authority the restraining force, or was it rather the Lawless One, the Antichrist, striving to supplant God, and in so doing, foreshadow the end of the world and of time? The Roman empire gave the Christians many reasons to think the latter. This is why Ireneus of Lyon and Hyppolytus of Rome had no doubt that certain aspects of the Roman empire's actions, especially those directed against the Christians, could be interpreted as signs of the Antichrist corresponding to St. John's apocalyptic vision.[43] The Old-Testament Book of Daniel was also read in this light, especially the apocalyptic fragment of Daniel's vision which speaks of four beasts, of which the last, "terrifying, horrible, and of extraordinary strength; it had great iron teeth with which it devoured and crushed, and what was left it trampled with its feet" (Dn 7:7), was identified with Rome.[44] The analogy was all the more convincing because the historical context of the Book of Daniel, the cruel persecution of the Jews under the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the profanation of the Temple of Jerusalem he conducted in the year 169 B.C. (erection of an altar to Zeus in the Temple),[45] corresponded to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Tytus and the rendering of divine honors to the Emperor Vespasian's insignia upon the temple's smoldering ruins.

So the Christians were faced with a tremendous temptation to simply identify the State and politics as *civitas diaboli*. Surely many of them were inclined to take this point of view since Paul had to emphatically admonish them against the political disobedience which was beginning to creep in (Rm 13:1-7). This danger of the Christians' rejection of politics and the State

[43] Cf. Wincenty Myszor: *Europa. Pierwotne chrześcijaństwo* [Europe. Original Christianity]. *Idee i życie społeczne chrześcijan w I i II wieku* [Thought and Social Life of the Chrisitans in the 1st and 2nd Centuries], Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa 2000, p. 62.
[44] Hyppolytus: *Commentary on Daniel*, IV, 8–10.9.
[45] Cf. Paula Clifford: *A Brief History of End-Time*, Lion Hudson Plc, Oxford 1997, p. 54.

was removed by two phenomena: the Manichean heresy and Constantine's revolution. These two presented powerful arguments against a complete condemnation of the political sphere and the State, and they forced Christianity to define the meaning and goal of the political which had been inherited from pagan antiquity in a positive way. The concept of the *katechon* allowed this definition to be formulated so ambiguously that Christianity, while recovering a positive attitude towards politics, did not at the same time lose forego its characteristic reserve in this matter.[46] The search for a new Christian formula for the State and politics was accompanied by an evident change of mood in eschatological matters. This can be seen very well if one compares the writings of Hippolitus of Rome (*Commentary on Daniel*) with Tertullian's *Apology*.[47] The more the vessel of time spoken of by Jerome was sanctified, that is, the more historical time lost its sinful character of *profanum*, ceased to be empty and worthless and became filled with divine grace, the more the apocalyptic sentiments and the expectation of the end of the world decreased. Hyppolytus, though conscious of the terrifying events which will accompany the end of time, awaits them with peace and tranquility: "Even if the end of the world is now delayed, not wanting that the judgment arrive before its appointed time so that in this way the Father's will be fulfilled, it will nevertheless surely arrive painfully and will render to each according to his actions."[48] Tertullian's work manifests a different emphasis. His *Apology* speaks of "terrible falls" at the end of time which "we do not want to experience," of the end time as a "terrible blow threatening the entire world," and says that we should desire to delay that final moment. "We have no desire, then, to be overtaken by these dire events; and in praying that their coming may be delayed, we are lending

[46] Cf. Wincenty Myszor: *op. cit.*, p. 63.
[47] *Ibidem,* p. 76.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 82.

our aid to Rome's duration."[49] In the *De Pallio* he develops his vision of the Roman empire as a true earthly blessing not opposed to Christianity. One even comes away with the impression that it actually supports Christianity: "How large a portion of our orb has the present age reformed! how many cities has the triple power of our existing empire either produced, or else augmented, or else restored! While God favors so many emperors unitedly, how many populations have been transferred to other localities! how many peoples reduced! how many orders restored to their ancient splendor! how many barbarians baffled! In truth, our orb is the admirably cultivated estate of this empire!"[50] One would almost be inclined to exclaim that it is a paradise on earth! Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that this praise of the Cesar was written by the same man who believed that "One soul cannot be due to two *masters* – God and Cesar."[51] Little in Tertullian (at least in the cited fragment of the *Apology*) speaks of apocalyptic satisfaction, of an impatient and joyous expectation of the end of the world as the moment of justice and of Christ's second coming. The world has become too dear for him, even if it is not the sensual world of pleasures and comforts of this life. Nor is this due to fear of the terrible cataclysm which the end of the world will bring. His fear springs from a different source: from the irrevocability of the final end and of the Final Judgment. Afterwards, it will not be possible to save even one more soul. This horrific vision of a permanently closed ledger of good and evil is what frightens him the most. For he has discovered that the world and its history is not an empty void, but rather a field on which the battle for every soul is waged (whence an apology – apologetics –makes sense). As long as history continues, no soul is definitively lost. In the words of Jacques Le Goff, "The Christian should renounce the world which is only his temporary

[49] Tertullian: *Apologia,* xxxii.
[50] Tertullian: *De Pallio*, ii.
[51] Tertullian: *De idolatria,* xix.

abode, but at the same time he should fight for it, accept it and participate in its transformation because he is like a coach while the history of salvation is played out."[52] Thus, an infinite space of action opens before the Christian (just as Jerome's vessel of time is essentially immeasurable) because "new citizens must be won for the Kingdom of God." In this way the apocalyptic tension which was present since the beginning of Christianity was attenuated.[53] It seemed that Christianity discovered historical time for itself as a time sanctified by the mission of the Gospel and the growing glory of the Church, and found here the definitive explanation for the delayed end of the world. The Roman empire was the political structure which let Christians begin to use historical time for the good of salvation. The *Pax Romana* found its definitive justification as a reinforcement for the *Pax Christi*. From the year 313 A.D. onward, one could even have thought that the path to the Gates of Heaven truly led through the gates of *Roma Eterna*. The economy of salvation which fulfills itself in mankind's present world clearly was in need of permanent structures, and these were provided by Roman politics. In the 4th century this conviction was so widespread among Christians that when the Roman Empire fell, many of them truly believed that this was a sign of the imminent end, because the condition which facilitated the further proclamation of the Gospel by the Church had disappeared. This is why St. Jerome writes: "I shudder when I think of the catastrophes of our time. For twenty years and more the blood of Romans has been shed daily between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Dardania, Dacia, Thessaly, Achaia, Epirus, Dalmatia, the Pannonias–each and all of these have been sacked and pillaged and plundered by Goths and Sarmatians, Quades and Alans, Huns and Vandals and

[52] Jacques Le Goff: *La Bourse et le vie: economie et religion au Moyen Age*, Hachette Littérature, Paris 1997.
[53] Peter Neuner comments: "With time hope itself became of secondary importance. Now the Christian is no longer a man of hope, of expectation, but foremost a man of faith," *Ekklesiologie...*, p. 257.

Marchmen. How many of God's matrons and virgins, virtuous and noble ladies, have been made the sport of these brutes! Bishops have been made captive, priests and those in minor orders have been put to death. Churches have been overthrown, horses have been stalled by the altars of Christ, the relics of martyrs have been dug up. Mourning and fear abound on every side. And death appears in countless shapes and forms!"[54]

However, the relationship between the economy of salvation in man's historical time with the necessary political conditions and the recognition of the State's structure as a force restraining chaos, decadence and, consequently, the end of the world, also bore certain important dangers. An example is the problem of the change in eschatological attitudes represented, for example, by Tertullian's writings. The change of focus to historicity, permitted by the concept of the *katechon*, of the one who restrains the coming of the end of the world, opened Christians to the possibility of acting in society and politics in a way which no longer comported a conflict with revelation. The age of this world was thus "redeemed," saved from a Gnostic understanding of evil in which the world was evil from the moment it was created. But at the same time, another danger resulted from the change in eschatological attitude, one which was no less threatening from the Christian point of view: it was the thought of the possibility of self-salvation. This provided the immediate impulse for a degeneration of early-Christian apocalyptic thought into millenarism and revolution.

This does not change the fact that the political interpretation of the *katechon* was extremely popular both in late antiquity and in the early Middle Ages.[55] Much later, in the 20th century, Carl

[54] Saint Jerome, *Letter LX to Heliodorus,* 16.

[55] Among the classical Christian authors, besides Tertullian and Jerome, the political interpretation of *katechon* was also accepted by Irenaeus, Lactantius and John Chrisostom. Among medieval authors, mainly by Haimo von Halberstadt and Otto von Freising. The extent to which the vision of the *katechon* as a force restraining evil and thus also the end of the world in early medieval Europe can be seen in the remains of Romanesque architecture

Schmitt made the *katechon* explicity political, writing in 1947 in his *Glossarium*: "Regarding κατέχων: I believe in the existence of Katechon; as a Christian this gives me the only possible explanation of the sense of history. Paul's mysterious teaching is no less and no more mysterious than every Christian existence. He who has not met the κατέχων in concreto cannot explain this fragment of the Epistle." And he continues, "Who is the κατέχων today? After all, it is neither Churchill nor John Foster Dulles [...]. One should be able to name the κατέχων of every period of the last 1948 years. This function has never remained empty, for otherwise we would not have been here for quite some time already. Every great medieval Christian emperor believed with full conviction and faith that he himself was the *katechon*. And so he was. The history of the Middle Ages cannot be written without considering this central fact. There were also those who carried out this function for only limited, fragmentary, scattered periods of time. I am sure that if we would clearly define this concept then we would surely agree on many specific names up to present times."[56] Schmitt took a lively interest in the Pauline concept of *katechon* and believed that only thanks to a "faith in a force which restrains the end of the world can a bridge be built between the eschatological inertia of all human action with the impressive historic forms of power such as the Christian empire of the German kings."[57] Speaking in more general terms, he believed that the *katechon* provides the only convincing explanation for a Christian of the relation between early-Christian eschatology and later Christian politics. Even though some may think this matter irrelevant to Christianity, from a political philosophy standpoint the postponement of the end-time is "the basic structure of any reasonable politics whose objective is not eternal but enduring peace."[58]

in Czerwińsk on the Vistula River, where one of the capitals of the two conserved columns shows a figure with a beard (symbolizing authority) restraining two beasts.

[56] Alfons Motschenbacher: *op. cit.,* p. 187.

[57] Carl Schmitt: *Der Nomos der Erde*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1997, p. 29.

[58] Robert Spaemann: *op. cit.*, p. 80.

All three of these interpretations depart from similar, if not even identical, assumptions that the *katechon* should be understood as a restraining force, a factor which permits the postponement of the end of time and, in so doing, opens before man the space of history and action. Finally, it is a condition for restraining the chaos, decadence and disintegration which would doubtless immediately engulf the entire world if only the restraining force was to cease acting. None of the three interpretations of the *katechon* give a conclusive and satisfying answer to the question which so troubled the first generations of Christians: Why does God really delay the moment of his second coming which, after all, is to be his final triumph and jewel in the crown of his entire work of creation. It is also noteworthy that these three main interpretations need not treated separately, as if they were competing against each other.

These three concepts constitute the Christian understanding of history and time, in which the *katechon* is the force which restrains the inevitable process of disintegration, collapse and finally, chaos. This force is necessary to make it possible for historical time exist at all after Christ, as mankind's time, which shifts the Final Judgment and the consummation of time into a hazy future which nonetheless must inevitably arrive. Thus we arrive at the fundamental question of what this time of man's acting in history is in the Christian perspective. It is a question which, despite Carl Schmitt's emphasis, subordinates the question of who specifically fulfills the function of the *katechon*, of the force restraining chaos, in this particular moment. The problem which so strongly captured Schmitt's attention obviously retains its significance, especially from the perspective of the history of each concrete person standing before the threat of confusion, chaos and annihilation. It allows him to glimpse the ambiguous relations between the concrete political greatness which restrains these dangers in a given historical time frame, and the declaration made in the Gospel that the Kingdom of Christ is not of this

world. A certain assumption can therefore be made about why Christianity needs politics, since its message is obviously eschatological by nature. But the question of the *katechon* does not fully explain the essence of the Christian understanding of time and history. This is only possible with the concepts of *chronos* and *kairos.*

Following the various theories about the *katechon*, if we assume that this force either directly or indirectly proceeds from God, we come to a situation which Hans Urs von Balthasar described as "the opening of God through time" to man and "the accessibility granted by Him to Himself."[59] And Karl Löwith writes of God's entrance into history as an act of self-revelation.[60] This opening or self-revelation is carried out in the Incarnation, that is, in the eternal God's taking upon Himself a mortal human form and nature. This act of love of the Creator toward his Creation, which as Balthasar writes, makes God accessible to men, grants mortal and finite beings access to the absolute and eternal Being, nevertheless creates a problem which Christianity has attempted to resolve since its first days: How does this interpenetration of the eternal God with historical time filled with human actions actually take place, and what are its consequences?

Historical time, man's time, the time of nations, states and politics, is from the Christian standpoint a non-autonomous dimension. It does not constitute any natural quantity or measure. Walter Benjamin notes: "Nothing historical can of itself desire to relate itself to God. Thus the City of God is not the *telos* of the dynamics of history. It cannot be regarded as an end."[61] Karl Löwith, in turn, writes: "For the believer, history is not an autonomous Kingdom of human endeavors and progress but a city

[59] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar: *A Theology of History*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994, p. 44.
[60] Karl Löwith: *op. cit.*, p. 188.
[61] Walter Benjamin: *Theologisch-politisches Fragment*, in: *Sprache und Geschichte*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2000, p. 132.

of sin and death which requires liberating. From this standpoint the course of history could not have been experienced as decisive."[62] This time is a time of sin,[63] a time belonging to the Old Testament, which results from the incurable sin and fall of man, ever renewing itself in successive generations.[64] The appearance of sinful time is a fruit of man's turning away from eternity and of God's leaving His Creation to its own designs, to the destructive dynamics of disintegration and chaos. In this sense, the time of sin is a time of punishment. Time without God, time cut off from eternity, an eminently human time becomes a prison for man. Locked inside this vicious circle of necessity and determinism he cannot escape past the horizon of his own human nature. He is condemned to live out events which appear to him as an incomprehensible fatum. Berdyaev notes in *The Meaning of History:* "Only those who refuse to see the historical process as the fulfillment of a great human destiny and are content to regard it as a mere superficial and exterior process will behold the void of history and not its truth."[65] The time of sin can therefore be, as in the Old Testament, full of various and seemingly grand experiences, but at the same time remains essentially empty and homogenic.

How is this possible? How can a multitude of experiences increasing at an ever-quickening pace at the same time remain a void? How can the dominant feeling of the emptiness of history be reconciled with its irrefutably growing dynamicity? In his essay *On the Concept of Time*, Walter Benjamin undertook an explanation of this paradox by invoking the vision of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus." The homogeneous and empty time he describes,[66] whose "method is additive" and which "offers a mass of facts"[67] in order to fill its own emptiness, is based on a concrete vision of

[62] Karl Löwith: *op. cit.,* p. 188.
[63] Hans Urs von Balthasar: *op. cit.,* p. 45.
[64] Cf. Ecc 1:3–11; Syr 3:27.
[65] Nikolai Berdyaev: *The Meaning of History*, Transaction Publishers, Edison 2006, p. 38.
[66] Walter Benjamin: *On the Concept…,* chapter 13.
[67] *Ibidem*, chapter 17.

progress as an endless, unrestrained, and thus autonomous and independent materialistic process. Progress thus understood can be called, following Hans Blumenberg, an "increase of goods,"[68] whose direct consequence is the growing condensation of man's world and time, an accumulation of things, events, thoughts, and substantial and spiritual tradition and knowledge. This process, which from the perspective of materialism and of the positive sciences could have easily been hailed as a triumph of humanity over the obscurity of nature and history (confirmed by increasingly bold technical, scientific and social achievements), can also be a source of veritable doubt, frustration and rebellion. The condensed, homogeneous time of material progress warps the meaning of man's destiny and existence and transforms man into a slave of events. It repells metaphysical or religious profundity from the world and consequently becomes empty and meaningless.

In order to fully comprehend the emptiness of homogeneous, accumulated time we should also notice its internal paradox, which is not only incomprehensible to itself, but also places it in a permanently losing position. This paradox, which is the "bad" or even "deadly" principle of linear, condensed time,[69] consists in the unresolved dispute between its parts, the past and the future. From the perspective of the person imprisoned in the circle of material time the contradiction between past and future is not only incomprehensible, but moreover, it is direct proof of the hopelessness of human existence in time. It is a paradox which Plato attempted to resolve in the *Timaeus* and St. Augustine in the *Confessions.*[70] Both gave very important reasons why they

[68] Hans Blumenberg: *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 63.
[69] Nikolay Berdyaev: *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[70] Here especially St. Augustine's statement that, "What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are. Nor is it properly said, 'there be three times, past, present and to come;' yet perchance it might be properly said, "there be three times: a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future," Augustine, *Confessions*, John Henry Parker 1853, p. 239.

opposed the tripartite division of time into past, present and future. The future, which never is, constantly devours the past, which becomes its unresisting victim, and the present creates a *de facto* non-existent and illusive point between what was and what is to come. When we reflect more profoundly on the essence of linear and material time, we are forced to fall into doubt, because what seems so certain and obvious, what in our daily actions is our constant point of reference in time, turns out to be essentially an emptiness. "The future is the murderer of every past instant. Thus false time is divided into past and future, between which lies a certain illusive point. The future devours the past in order to be transformed into a similar past [...]. Our world time brings life only in a superficial way; in reality, it brings death because, in the process of creating life, it precipitates the past into the abyss of non-being. Thus every future must become past and must sooner or later fall under the dominion of this devouring torrent of the future."[71]

This situation can produce a stoic contemplation of the incomprehensible accumulation of events and things and of their passing. It can also can lead to activism, to a superhuman effort in order break apart the meaningless circle of empty time by one's own power; to "explode out of the continuum of history" by some great, creative and revolutionary act.[72] The problem of the empty and condensed time of the profanum is therefore not just Christianity's problem, but also the problem of every philosophy constructed on the idea of free human action.

Christianity proposed a way for breaking asunder the continuum of history in a different manner than superhuman emancipating force, revolutionary effort or creative rage. The key is the joining of material, linear time, of the time of human events with eternity, which is also expressed in the fact that Paul uses the terms

[71] Nikolay Berdyaev: *op. cit.*, p. 70.
[72] Walter Benjamin: *On the Concept...*, chapter 14.

chronos and *kairos* interchangeably. The removal of the opposition between world time and eternity, and also between the past, present and future, which has been achieved most of all by the teaching on the Incarnation, continued later with the teachings on the Paraclete and on divine miracles, allowed Christians to believe that world time was neither empty nor hopeless. Nor was it solely a time which crammed material events together.[73] For Christians it was rather a sanctified time through which the rays of eternity shone more or less clearly, as if through thick smoke. This fact of interpenetration, regardless of how specifically we formulate this mysterious process, essentially changes the meaning and role of secular, linear time. It deprives it of its autonomous character and breaks the hitherto closed circle: "Being relevant only through such relation, the profane events cease to be absolutely profane. They are open to allegorical and typological interpretation. As a history of salvation, the history of the world is a 'parable' (Mk 4:10–12) manifested in hiddenness."[74]

One more aspect should be added to Löwith's important statement. The Christian understanding of union between linear, material time and eternity does not pertain to the material, "objective" events themselves. This process does not proceed as in the Old Testament, based upon the principle of occasional Divine intervention in secular events. The world is not a great chessboard, with the people as pawns which God moves one way or the other for the purposes of His own unfathomable will. At least since the moment of the Incarnation such as vision of divine intervention is unsustainable within the framework of Christianity. For Christianity the field of interpenetration of *chronos* and eternity are not the events themselves, but every living, believing human being, every living human community. According to Paul's recommendation in his epistle to the Philippians, it is living

[73] Karl Löwith: *op. cit.*, p. 178.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 185.

human beings who are the open windows towards the *fanum*: "Do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world."[75]

Translated by Paweł Janowski

First edition: *To katechon*, "Civitas. Studia z Filozofii Polityki" 2004, vol. 8, pp. 83–112.

[75] Phil. 2:14–15.