The Qur'anic critique of apocalyptic ideas and a Christian response

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The paper tries to show how influential apocalyptic idea were in political theology in late antiquity and how much they shape political debates untill today. Following the Qur'an commentary from Zishan Ghaffar, it argues that the Qur'an criticizes the political use of apocalyptic ideas within imperial politics and presents an alternative of eschatological thinking without apocalyptic focus. Although this approach is very stimulating and helpful, the paper uses new political theology in the tradition of Johann Baptist Metz to defend the legacy of an apocalyptic thorn within eschatological and political thinking.

Key words: Apocalyptic, Herakleios, imperial theology, late antiquity, Messianic hopes, political theology, Qur'anic eschatology, third temple.

In my understanding, the first step of Comparative Theology always consists in choosing a very concrete problem, a problem recognizable from within the boundaries of your own confessional approach. At the same time, it is helpful if the problem is relevant not only for you and your community, but also for the public. Thus, comparative theology is public theology, in my understanding, not by transgressing the boundaries of a confessional approach to theology.[1] It also does not seek to create one global or interreligious theology. It simply tries to learn from another religious tradition and tries to solve a problem that is important for our society today.

Comparative theology addresses a problem by learning from another religious tradition. In this article, that will be modern Muslim Qur'an exegesis, and in this context, specifically, a recent Qur'an commentary written by Zishan Ghaffar.[2] After looking at the impact of the other religious tradition on the problem, and considering how it might influence your own theology, it is important to seek a third position that challenges the potential result of bringing your own theology together with the insights of another religious tradition. As we will see later, Christian political theology of the last century

[1] Pace Robert C. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 163.

[2] Cf. Zishan A. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext: Eschatologie und Apokalyptik in den mittelmekkanischen Suren*, Beiträge Zur Koranforschung 1 (Paderborn: Schöningh/ Brill Germany, 2020).

will be the third instance in this article. This third instance will be used to get a deeper understanding of the possibilities on how to solve your problem.

Apocalyptic thinking as challenge for Christian theology today

So, let me first try to explain the problem that I want to address in this article and let me try to show why it is a problem for both our Western societies and for my own confessional theology. In public debates in the West today, we witness a striking comeback of apocalyptic motifs, not only in popular culture, but also in politics. Let me briefly give two related examples:

According to Thomas Dine, executive director of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, Ronald Reagan said in October 1983 to the Jewish parents of a Marine killed in Beirut during a peacekeeping mission: "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're the generation that is going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but, believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through."[3] Actually the association of "Armageddon" with the final, destructive battle between good and evil is not in the Old Testament. The word "Armageddon" occurs only once in the Bible, at Revelation 16:16. In this context it is Jesus Christ who leads a heavenly army to victory over God's enemies (Rev 19:11-16, 19-21). At the same time, there are several Old Testament passages that can be referred to if you want to understand the apocalyptic motifs which are used here – such as Dan 2:44 or Ez 39:7.

I am not sure how widespread such apocalyptic motives are among right-wing populist politicians in the U.S. today, but they have become more and more important in Europe in recent years. Viktor Orbán used the image of the Islamization of Europe and the apocalyptic battle of Hungary against Europe as the sole focus in his election campaign in 2018, and he won the election with 66%.[4] His main idea was that there is an existential battle for the survival of Hungary and Europe ongoing even today. Whereas Western Europe has already lost, Hungary will stay the only and last country

[3] https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/01/19/reagan-and-the-apocalypse (11/11/2018).
[4] Cf. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/hungarys-viktor-orban-promised-revenge-against-his-enemies-now-theyre-preparing-for-it/2018/05/11/b31377b2-4d69-11e8-85c1-9326c4511033_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4a5b4c48e952 (11/11/2018).

which resists; it is “a last bastion in the fight against the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe.”[5] In several encounters in Hungary in 2018 I learned that Orbán thinks that many people from Hungary will lose their lives in this last battle against the Islamicized Europe. But because of God’s intervention Hungary will win, Muslims will convert to Christianity and the millennium will start.

I do not want to go deeper into those political contexts, but I hope to show sufficiently how important apocalyptic motives are in right wing populism today, and how influential they are in politics. And it is also clear that it is specifically Islam that is often seen as the main enemy of Christianity and the Western world today.

If we look at the apocalyptic heritage of the Biblical tradition, we will see that most theologians try to avoid the subject because they cannot make sense of it. They will appreciate that apocalyptic thinking was important for oppressed peoples in times of struggle and persecution, but at the same time many theologians have difficulties explaining the relevance of apocalyptic ideas for us today. While they criticize imperial powers using apocalyptic images,[6] I am not sure whether they have a constructive way of dealing with the power of these apocalyptic motifs.

Thus, this chapter deals with apocalyptic motifs in the Qur’an for two reasons: first, Islam is challenged by right wing populism as the apocalyptic threat of Europe. So, it makes sense to ask how a Qur’anic theology can deal with that accusation, and whether the Qur’an might be helpful in the research for a good response to such apocalyptical interpretations of Christianity. Second, Christian theology can try to figure out whether the Qur’an can be helpful in finding a new approach to the apocalyptic texts of the Bible.

The presence of apocalyptic motifs in late antiquity

If we deal with the time of the occurrence of the Qur’an, we will quickly see that apocalyptic motifs were very prominently debated both within Judaism and Christianity.

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[5] Cf. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/15/hungarian-leader-says-europe-is-now-under-invasion-by-migrants; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/18/orban-claims-hungary-is-last-bastion-against-islamisation-of-europe (11/11/2018).

[6] Cf. for example the criticism of Ronald Reagan in Jürgen Werbick, “Widerstands-Gewissheiten: Apokalpytische Vergewisserungen Einer „anderen Welt“,” in *Glaubensgewissheit Und Gewalt. Eschatologische Erkundungen in Islam Und Christentum*, ed. Jürgen Werbick, Sven Kalisch, and Klaus von Stosch, Beiträge Zur Komparativen Theologie 3 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011), 73-74.

The historical event that caused this widespread occurrence of apocalyptic motifs was the conquest of Jerusalem by the Sassanid Empire in 614 AD.[7] In late antiquity most Christians thought that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in 70 AD were punishment for the Jewish people. Since the end of the 4th century, Israel was understood as the Holy Land and it was considered to belong to Christianity. Hence, when the Sassanids conquered Jerusalem and killed so many Christians, it was seen as a great disaster for Christianity, with traumatic consequences. It evoked apocalyptic motifs of destruction, punishment and ruin.[8]

On the other hand, many Jews were enthusiastic about this development. Some were even thinking of rebuilding the Temple as an eschatological sign of hope to mark the starting point of the Messianic era. The fact that the Sassanids gave the Jews control over the Holy City of Jerusalem encouraged them to think that their exile might have finished. They even linked Messianic hopes with the event and thought that the Messiah, the son of David, would come.[9] Jewish-apocalyptical scriptures such as the *Sefer Zerubabbel* and liturgical texts (*piyyutim*) witness the messianic hopes which were developed through the conquest of Jerusalem.[10]

But Christians developed different shapes of messianic hope as well. The Emperor Herakleios used apocalyptic images and motifs to mobilize his population and his troops against the Sassanids. This was already part of his propaganda shortly after the conquest of Jerusalem and the defeat of Byzantine troops against the Sassanids. By using King David as prototype of his own messianic hopes, he tried to give confidence to his people by evoking apocalyptic ideas.[11]

Herakleios, like David, was not the rightful heir of the Throne, and had killed his predecessor Phokas in 610.[12] As David legitimized his claims through prophetic justifications, Herakleios tried to use the reference to David for a religious legitimation of his power. As David's marriage with Batseba was highly disputed, but in the end legitimized, Herakleios hoped that his disputed marriage with his niece Martina would be accepted. When he finally won the war against the Sassanids and was able to bring the Holy Cross back to Jerusalem in 630, his supporters compared him with King David

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[7] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 5-6.
[8] Cf. Ghaffar, 5.
[9] Cf. bSanhedrin98a.
[10] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 8-9.
[11] Cf. Ghaffar, 68–74.
[12] Cf. Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

bringing the Ark of the Covenant after the final victory against the Philistines.[13] Herakleios tries to evoke the idea that the Byzantine Empire was the millennium, and he was the messianic king. The time after the loss of Jerusalem was to be understood as a time of temptation, with the Sassanids and the Jews acting as Antichrist.

Thus, in the Middle-Meccan period, apocalyptic ideas were very present in the Qur'anic milieu – at least as present as they are today in Hungary or as they were in Ronald Reagan's thoughts. So, it is interesting to see how the Qur'an reacted to this challenge of apocalyptic thinking. Whereas some scholars such as Shoemaker try to argue that the Qur'an somehow adopts apocalyptic ideas,[14] I think that Zishan Ghaffar has convincingly shown in his commentary of the Middle Meccan Surahs that this is not the case, and that the Qur'an develops a strategy against apocalyptic thinking that can be very helpful in addressing contemporary assessments.[15]

Qur'anic arguments against Messianic hopes associated with the Temple

As I explained above, the hope for the reconstruction of the temple after the conquest of Jerusalem was the main content of the Messianic hopes within Judaism in late antiquity. In one of the Middle-Meccan-Surahs, Q 17:4-7, we have a clear reference to the two destructions of the Temple in 586 BCE and 70 AD, explaining the connection between human deeds and salvific or destructive consequences.[16] But all eschatological associations are eliminated. The text talks of the last destruction of the Temple and obviously wants to decontextualize the apocalyptical hopes that were associated with the Temple. Instead, the text stresses the mercy and justice of God are stressed, as well as the possibility of a personal conversion (Q 17:8). Hence, the apocalyptical ideas are individualized and decontextualized. The entire Surah makes clear that it is not appropriate to have any eschatological or apocalyptical association with the Temple.

At the same time, the eschatological decontextualization of the Temple does not imply any condemnation of Judaism. The Qur'an still accepts Jerusalem as center of

[13] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 71.
[14] Cf. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
[15] The following three paragraphs are in many respects dependent on the insights of the commentary of Zishan Ghaffar (cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*).
[16] For the exegesis of Qur'an (Henceforth,Q) 17:4-8 cf. Ghaffar, 15-26.

its cultic orientation in Middle-Meccan times. Hence, the Temple maintains its spiritual importance, highlighted by Muhammad's night journey in Q 17:1; yet the spiritual importance is disconnected from its apocalyptical implications. Moreover, it is noteworthy that there is no accusation against Israel for killing God's messengers. Whereas many Christians in late antiquity thought that the destruction of the Temple was Israel's punishment for killing God's messenger, and that it implied the complete repudiation of Israel, the Qur'an still has hope for Israel and encourages Jews to trust in God's mercy (Q 17:8).

The same line of thinking can be found in Q 19:1-33.[17] In late antiquity the Christian reading of the Bible implied that the Jewish Temple and the Jewish cult have been replaced by Jesus Christ and the Holy Eucharist. That is why – in the New Testament perspective – John the Baptist, as son of the priest Zakariya, does not continue to do the service in the Temple, but surrenders all his deeds to the announcement of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. In this approach the old covenant has been abolished and the symbolic representative persons of the old cult, Zakariya and John the Baptist, die.[18] The new cult that becomes reality through Christ in the church is represented in Mary who is the icon of the new community of believers. That is why Mary is raised in the Temple, and in Christian typological thinking, she becomes the new Temple. As the Eastern gate of the forthcoming Temple will only open for God's coming to Jerusalem (cf. Ez 44:1-3), the womb of Mary will be closed in her virginity – except for the birth of the Messiah. Thus, there are a lot of allegorical associations of Mary and the Temple and, in the end, all eschatological hopes change their orientation and become transformed christologically.

It is interesting to see how Jewish apocalyptical texts in late antiquity respond to this attempt at replacing the Temple with Mary. As Ghaffar points out, in the *Sefer Serubbabel,* for example, the Messiah ben Joseph restitutes the ancient cult.[19] After his resurrection through the Messiah ben David he fights together with Chephzibah until God will send the Temple from Heaven. The Eastern gate of the Temple, which is allegorically associated with Mary's virginity, is under the control of Chephzibah who defends the gate against the Antichrist Armilos. There seems to be an allegorical fight

[17] Cf. for the following insights Ghaffar, 27–48; Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran Als Text Der Spätantike. Ein Europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), 472–89.
[18] Cf. Mark 6,27; Matthew 14,10; Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 30.
[19] Cf. Ghaffar, 33-34.

between Christians and Jews, who use different symbols to justify their opposed eschatological and apocalyptical hopes.[20]

The Qur'an tries to see the legitimacy of both sides. On the one hand, John the Baptist is the legitimate successor of Zakariya and both are not killed, but remain as symbols for the old cult. His name *yaḥyā* instead of *yuḥannā/yūḥannā* makes clear that the old covenant is still valid and continues to be there.[21] John the Baptist is rehabilitated; he is not only the announcer of Jesus Christ, but he has his own authority.

On the other hand, the Qur'an still recognizes the special place of Jesus.[22] Moreover the legacy of Mary is defended. She lives in the Temple and this Temple in Q 19 is not – as in Q 17 – denoted as *masjid,* but as the *miḥrāb*. Hence, Mary represents something new. She is not merely an idol as the Jewish apocalyptical literature claims. She guards her chastity (Q 22:91), but this does not imply that her virginity is everlasting. The Qur'an only mentions her virginity before giving birth. Contrary to most Christian sources, the Qur'an has no problem accepting that Mary experienced the pains of birth, as every woman experiences them (Q 19:23). The allegorical connection with the closed Eastern gate becomes impossible, but Mary's integrity is defended.[23] Later in the Qur'an, Mary is even portrayed as the image of the ideal believer. Her movements represent the movements of Muslims during the ritual prayer (Q 3:43). As Mary can be associated with the new liturgy, Zakariya's request to praise God in the morning and in the evening fits better with the post-Temple liturgy, and makes clear that the Qur'an does not defend the ancient Temple cult.

Thus, the Temple no longer has any importance in the Qur'an, and every messianic hope for a third Temple is rejected. This is not necessarily a criticism of Judaism as Jewish worship had not been focused on the Temple for centuries. Rabbinic Judaism is also on the side of the new liturgy which is portrayed in the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not criticize Judaism here, but the apocalyptic hopes associated with the Temple. The cult is spiritualized and decontextualized from its apocalyptical

[20] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*.
[21] Cf. Ghaffar, 44-45.
[22] Cf. Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus von Stosch, *The Other Prophet: Jesus In The Qur'an.* Translated by Simon Pare. London: Gingko 2020.
[23] Angelika Neuwirth, "Imagining Mary – Disputing Jesus: Reading Surat Maryam and Related Meccan Texts within the Qur`anic Communication Process," in *Fremde, Feinde Und Kurioses: Innen Und Außenansichten Unseres Muslimischen Nachbarn*, ed. Benjamin Jokisch, Ulrich Rebstock, and Lawrence Conrad, Neue Folge 24 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 383–416.

implications. At the same time, the Qur'an does not follow the Christian theology of substitution and defends the legitimacy of both ways of believing in the one God.[24]

Qur'anic arguments against Messianic hopes associated with a person

If we keep in mind how much the legitimacy of the Empire of Herakleios was grounded on the kingdom of David, it is interesting that the Qur'an downplays his role as a king and a successful war hero. It is especially striking that the Qur'an does not mention the idea of an eternal kingdom as a promise to David and his heirs. David is portrayed in such a way that all Messianic concepts, especially those that can be used for the legitimization of imperial power, are dislocated. If we look at the portrayal of David and Solomon in the Middle-Meccan surahs, we notice that both are characterized as modest people who come back to God after having committed evil (cf. Q 38:21-40). Hence, both figures are typologically connected with the prophetology of the Qur'an. Their genealogical reference to Messianic hopes and to the Temple are downplayed or even eliminated.[25]

Whereas the Talmud has a lot to say about the question of how Solomon succeeds in convincing demons to help with the building of the Temple – an aspect which is even more highlighted in the apocryphal literature in late antiquity – this power over demons is not mentioned in relation to the Temple in the Qur'an (cf. Q 38:37; 21:82). Obviously, the Qur'an wants to downplay the salvific role of the Temple. And this is also why Solomon's power and significance is downplayed.[26]

Moreover, it is interesting that in the Middle-Meccan surahs the aspect of war is not important any more. Contrary to the propaganda for war in the Byzantine Empire, the Qur'an shows how the conflict between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba works as a purely intellectual encounter and debate.[27] Thus, the Qur'an tries to delegitimize the war propaganda of the Empire and suggests diplomatic and dialogical efforts as the alternative. Obviously, this is only the case in the Meccan surahs. The Qur'an does

[24] This becomes even clearer in Q 3 when the legitimacy of the two houses of Imran and of Abraham is defended. Cf. Neuwirth, 383–416.
[25] Cf. for the role of David and Salomon in the Qur'an Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 57-74. For the general prophetology cf. Khorchide/ von Stosch 2019, 119-156.
[26] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 64–66.
[27] Cf. Ghaffar, 96-97.

not remain pacifistic in Medinan times. But it still tries to replace the Emperor Herakleios and his Messianic ideas with Muhammad who is portrayed without any Messianic associations.

It is interesting how closely the dating of early Muslim history reflects the relationship between Herakleios and Muhammad.[28] It is 610 when Herakleios becomes Emperor and when Muhammad receives the first revelation from God. In this perspective, power does not come from human efforts and political strategies, but from the grace of God. It is God's revelation that is the cornerstone of Muhammad's mission, not the unjust usurpation of the Throne.

Herakleios needed six years to win the war against the Sassanids (622-628) – just as Muhammad needed those six years to win the war against Mecca. In 624 Herakleios crossed the Persian border and had his first major victory – just as Muhammad won the battle of Badr. At the same time, they both developed the idea that martyrs will go to Paradise. Both needed two years until the negotiations with their enemies were accomplished. And as Herakleios went in peace to Jerusalem in 630 and brought back the Holy Cross and the Christian cult, Muhammad went in peace to Mecca and restored the true cult at the Kaaba. It is interesting that the great importance of the cross in the propaganda of Herakleios contrasts with the complete absence of the cross in the Qur'an. Obviously, the imperial misuse of the cross makes it impossible to see its original significance. And that is why the Qur'an tries to deliver the message of the cross without mentioning the cross.[29]

It is clear that these parallels do not make the historicity of the Muslim ways of retelling the story of Muhammad more likely. But for our context here it is only important to see the theological implications of those parallels. All deeds of Herakleios are also true for Muhammad. That is why they cannot be the legitimation of Messianic hopes. If Muhammad is as successful as Herakleios, the deeds of Herakleios are not the starting point of the millennium, but something that is purely political and that should not be associated with eschatological hopes.

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[28] Cf. for this comparison Ghaffar, 254-256.

[29] The message of the cross is in my opinion the message of a God who suffers because of our sins and who tries to overcome our sins through his suffering. As I have argued somewhere else, God suffers also in the Qur'an because of the rejection of his word (cf. Khorchide and von Stosch, *The Other Prophet*, 186-187). His reaction here is not violence, but patience and the call for repentance. Hence the Qur'an seems to be highly sympathetic with a merciful God who tries to convince his people with arguments and compassion. In a time where the cross is misused as a symbol of the Empire, it makes sense to replace it with another symbol.

Why the Qur'an is so critical of apocalyptical ideas

It has become clear so far that the resistance of the Qur'an to apocalyptical ideas is also a resistance to the political theology of the Empire. But there are more reasons why the Qur'an is so critical of apocalyptical thinking. Ghaffar convincingly suggests that the main characteristic of apocalyptical thinking consists in the idea that God will distance herself from history for a while to let evil grow.[30] It is exactly this distance between God and humans that the Qur'an does not want to accept. For the Qur'an God is always the Lord of history and nothing happens that is not compatible with God's good will (cf. Q 8:17; 3:145). Hence, it is precisely the autonomy of apocalyptical processes which is against the Qur'anic world-view. The Qur'anic theology of creation just as the Qur'anic eschatology will always stress God's prerogative and sovereignty. Hence there will not be an eschatological last battle to determine the destiny of the world, but everything has already been settled by God's power.

Another point in the apocalyptical dimension of the Gospel that is strange to the Qur'an is the imminent expectation of Christ within Christianity. The fact that Jesus is not only starting the kingdom of God, but also made present the imminent breakthrough of the kingdom of God is something uncommon for the Qur'an. Q 18 for example reflects on the epistemological quality of our knowledge of the end of this world and makes clear that we simply do not know when the Judgment day comes.[31] We simply have to know that an eschatological judgment will happen and that we are responsible for our deeds. Hence, we should act in the consciousness of being judged one day. For the Qur'an, it is not important when the judgment will be. Only the definitive truth of the judgment is important, not the time when it comes.

This kind of thinking helps the Qur'an to recognize the autonomy of worldly events. When the Qur'an announces the victory of Byzantium against the Sassanids in Q 30:2-6, it is not important for the Qur'anic world-view to prove God's foreknowledge here. The event, which was so decisive for Christians to gain hope again, and which was the cornerstone of the Messianic propaganda of Herakleios, becomes something merely profane. It belongs to the political sphere and it has to be kept out of all eschatological hopes.[32] The reference to eschatological language in Q

[30] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 91.
[31] For the exegesis of Q 18 cf. Ghaffar, 111–166.
[32] For the exegesis of Q 30:2-7 cf. Ghaffar, 167–186.

30:4 does not intend to create a link between the victory of Herakleios and the Judgment Day, but simply shows that Muhammad's community feels some solidarity with the Byzantine Empire in its war with Persia. This is not surprising if we see how much Mecca had always opposed the Byzantine Empire.[33] There is at least some evidence that the polytheists in Mecca understood the victory of the Sassanids against Herakleios as a victory of their own polytheism against monotheism and also against Muhammad.[34] Hence, the supporters of Muhammad who were oppressed in Mecca, and who had to emigrate to the Christian King of Ethiopia in the Middle-Meccan-period,[35] seemed to recognize the Byzantines as their allies in their resistance against Mecca.

Yet what is important for the Qur'an at that time is not the worldly question of alliances and wars, but the fact that, in the end, God is the eschatological hope for everybody. He invites people to become aware of their responsibility for their deeds. Against the *carpe diem*-mentality of the Pagans in Mecca, the Qur'an stresses the importance of thinking of the hereafter (Q 30:7). But it is going in this direction without any reference to imminent expectations.

So, on the one hand, the Qur'an deals with worldly matters and encourages the supporters of Muhammad by announcing the victory of the Byzantine allies. But on the other hand, it criticizes not only the apocalyptical, but also the messianic hopes that are associated with the reign of Herakleios. Thus, the victory of Byzantium will not usher in a messianic time, nor will there be a beginning of the resurrection, or a fight between Gog and Magog.[36] All this vocabulary of apocalyptic and eschatological reflections which is typical for Byzantine propaganda is missing. Instead the Qur'an tries to develop a theology of promise with reference to prophets like Moses and Aaron, Abraham and Lot, David and Solomon. But it does not refer to the apocalyptical and Messianic expectations that are associated with some of these names. No reference to the Temple is associated with Solomon and no comment on its possible rebuilding

[33] Already in pre-Islamic times, namely in the sixth century, the Christian king Abraha – who was an ally of Byzantium – tried to conquer Mecca and to destroy it as a center of pilgrimage because he wanted to make out of Sanaa the main center for pilgrimage in the region. He did not succeed and the victory of the inhabitants of Mecca against him was so important for them that it is still reflected in the Qur'an itself (in Q 105). Cf. Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures*, 2nd ed. (London: Psychology Press, 1968), 40; Khorchide and von Stosch, *The Other Prophet*, 35.
[34] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 170-172.
[35] Cf. Khorchide and von Stosch, *The Other Prophet*, 82.
[36] Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in Seinem Religions- Und Weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 239-240.

can be found. David is simply the paradigmatic *khalīfa* of God and the paradigmatic king – without any allusion to his messianic role.[37]

This rejection of apocalyptical tendencies does not imply any distance from the Biblical tradition as a whole. The promise of the victory against God's adversaries in Q 21:105, for example, is correlated with the promise of the heritage of the promised land and clearly refers to Ps 37:29. Thus, the Qur'an refers to the Psalms to give hope to all believers. The promise of the land in this passage is especially meaningful for the oppressed Muslim community in Mecca and for the community in exile. In a powerful metaphor, the transgressors and their idols are presented as fuel for Hell (Q 21:98).[38] Their audible suffering and groaning is portrayed in contrast to the silence of the blessed people who will not hear the slightest sound from Hell but instead will hear from the angels about their reward (Q 21:102f).

Thus, the Qur'anic hope is very concrete and meaningful, consistent with Biblical metaphors and language. At no stage does it refer to a certain date or other details of the last judgment (Q 21:109). The Qur'an is simply interested in hope for the believer's movement that originates through its proclamations. The basic idea in this context is that the very last reckoning will be after death, relevant and inevitable for each individual (Q 21:34f). Each person will have to die; judgment and reckoning will be universal.

If we try to summarize the Qur'anic approach towards apocalyptical ideas, we will find many points that are convincing for us today. The Qur'anic insistence on judgment and justice is very much consistent with the Biblical heritage. Even more convincing for Christians is the Qur'anic critique of the war propaganda of Herakleios. Moreover, it is powerful how the Qur'an tries to privilege arguments – and not violence! – in cases of conflict. Finally, the way apocalyptical messages are transformed into eschatological truths reminds me very much of today's mainstream theology in Christianity. The apocalyptical images of the Bible and of Herakleios are very far away from us, and, especially in liberal theology, many scholars try to argue against the apocalyptical heritage as well as the imminent expectations within eschatology. Hence, we could happily close this article with many convergences between both religions, especially if we recognize how helpful these kinds of agreements are in responding to right-wing-populist arguments against Islam. But I do not think that such a radical

[37] Ghaffar, 235.
[38] Cf. Ghaffar, 249.

departure of apocalyptical thinking is possible from within the Biblical world-view. Let me try to make a case for not completely renouncing the apocalyptical tradition.

The legacy of apocalyptical ideas in new political theology

Johann Baptist Metz – and the new political theology that was very much inspired by him in the 1970s – insisted very much on the apocalyptical character of Christian eschatology. For Metz, this character has dramatic consequences for the temporal structure of Christian hope. In his perspective, this hope is an imminent expectation that needs to be fulfilled here and now in concrete history.[39] In this context he criticizes what he calls the "detemporalization of Christianity," and the change of the imminent expectation into an existential concept focusing on individual death as the moment of judgement.

Metz complains that most theologians today have given up any concrete hope for change in this history through Divine action and that they do not continue to have imminent expectations. The critique by Metz makes clear how influential criticisms of apocalyptic ideas and imminent expectations are today. His critical interventions show that the Qur'an is in great harmony with mainstream theology today. But Metz has serious misgivings with this liberal turn in theology. He thinks that timelessness has become a system governing our thinking of the Divine, and that we need apocalyptical hopes again to bring God back into history – especially because of the needs of those who suffer in the here and now.

Metz is afraid that the loss of apocalyptical thinking will lead to the predominance of the survival of the fittest in theology. He criticizes the pseudo-religious power of the conception of history as an evolutionary process without fixed end and without interruptions or suspensions, which paralyzes the Christian will to change our world politically.[40] Metz is aware of the fact that imminent expectations are like archaic myths for modernity, but, like Søren Kierkegaard, he is of the opinion that Christianity is constituted by the reference to those expectations.[41] In his perspective, the call for the imitation of Jesus is so radical that it cannot be fulfilled without shortening time. The

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[39] Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte Und Gesellschaft: Studien Zu Einer Praktischen Fundamentaltheologie.*, 5th ed. (Mainz: Grünewald, 1992), 87.
[40] Cf. Metz, 167.
[41] Cf. Metz, 168.

call of Jesus: “Follow me!” cannot be separated from the Christian response “Come, oh Lord Jesus!”[42] In his perspective, only imminent expectation pushes us not to postpone our activity to cure the world. The world is in such a bad condition that we will not be able to do what is necessary without the help of apocalyptical hopes.

Imminent expectations help us to oppose injustice and to give all our effort toward those who are oppressed. Imminent expectations can become as weapons in the hands of the marginalized. Therefore, Metz makes clear that the Biblical God is not the fulfillment of time, but its breakdown.[43] God causes discontinuance and rupture and makes a harmony between this history and its end impossible. Metz reminds us of the challenge of Jewish Messianic hope expressed in Walter Benjamin’s thinking that every second can become the second that will help the Messiah to enter through the door of history and to bring it to an end.[44]

Metz is aware of the fact that there is the danger of misunderstanding the apocalyptical texts of the Bible in the way that we try to determine when and how the end of history will be realized. He also knows that interpretations can be misused politically – as it was the case in the time of Herakleios. But in his opinion this risk must be taken because our world is in such a bad condition that we are compelled to risk everything. We simply have to become aware of the fact that our history destroys humans all over the world. We cannot ignore the catastrophic nature of a reality that condemns so many innocent children to death from starvation. We must not forget how many innocent people die in wars and are endangered through climate change. Therefore, Christianity needs apocalyptic ideas to develop strength and urgency in helping those who are oppressed. For Metz, only a real apocalyptical shift can protect theology from becoming a middle-class ideology of those who are successful in history.[45]

His theological vision has nothing to do with eschatological curiosity and he explicitly affirms that we have no knowledge about the end of time. But nevertheless, we have to be aware of the “catastrophic nature of time.”[46] And we have to mobilize all our capacities to repair the world. Moreover, Christians need their expectations and hope to be able to fight against any apathy and to memorialize the suffering of the world. Even if we cannot change something politically, Christians must have an

[42] Metz., 171.
[43] Cf. Metz, 169.
[44] Cf. Metz, 170.
[45] Cf. Metz, 170.
[46] Metz., 171.

awareness in order to be in solidarity with those who suffer. And even this solidarity is very difficult without consciousness of the apocalyptic nature of time. For Metz, apocalyptical consciousness will help our theology to be vulnerable and at the same time accessible for the marginalized. Moreover, it will help Christians to develop concrete expectations and hopes for our time. It will allow theology to suffer more under the terror of injustice and to overcome its wide tolerance for frustrations and irritations.[47] From Metz's perspective, the main aim of theology should not be a coherent and smooth apology of God's love, but a desperate longing for God's justice.

New political theology and the Qur'an

It is obvious that this kind of insistence on the importance of divine justice has resonance within the Qur'an. And it is also clear that there are tendencies within modern Muslim theology that are very close to the efforts of new political theology for the oppressed and marginalized. We have only to think of the theology of liberation developed by Farid Esack.[48] Like the new political theology of Johann Baptist Metz, the theology of liberation of Farid Esack is formulated from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed. It is a political theology that develops practical reason as a priority, and that has many resemblances with Christian political and liberation theology. It even uses some of the narrative materials of the Biblical tradition – such as the image of Israel's Exodus from Egypt – as powerful images of hope for those who are in chains and slavery.

But Esack does not refer to imminent expectations in order to strengthen his theology. Like the Qur'an, he seems to recognize the dangers of this aspect of the Biblical tradition and tries to avoid it. This Qur'anic and Muslim abstinence is a powerful danger signal for Christianity and, if heeded, can help Christians to maintain reservations against a too-strong mobilization of imminent motives through political theology.

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[47] Cf. Metz, 172.

[48] Cf. Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997); Esack Farid, "Unterwegs Zu Einer Islamischen Befreiungstheologie," in *Gott Und Befreiung. Befreiungstheologische Konzepte in Islam Und Christentum*, ed. Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, Beiträge Zur Komparativen Theologie 5 (Paderborn et alia: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012), 19–42.

On the other hand, some of the main worries of the Qur'an against apocalyptical motives can be settled through a closer look at the Biblical tradition. We argued above that the Qur'an offers two main arguments against apocalyptical ideas:

First, the Qur'an argues against the typical apocalyptical idea that there might be a certain period of human history which has no connection to God. Hence, the Qur'an does not accept that God wants an apocalyptical situation as means of salvation. But such an interpretation of apocalyptic visions is not necessary and it is very much counter to the new political theology. For Metz, it is clear that the apocalyptic tendencies of our time are the result of sin. Capitalist egoism and other selfish desires in humanity bring about the desperate situation of our world today. And all the claims of new political theology aim at helping us to overcome this situation. Even if we are aware that we will not come to a good end through our own engagement, we still have to do everything to repair the world. Apocalyptical images and the imminent expectations push us to engage politically and to work for more justice. They are not used in the way that is criticized by the Qur'an and might in fact be helpful to motivate people in the inner battle for justice that is so important within the Qur'an.

Second, the Qur'anic critique of apocalyptic metaphors was also a way of resisting political theology, as the apocalyptic metaphors were used by the theologians and intellectuals of the Byzantine Empire. As the new political theology is also opposed to any imperial theological claims, it cannot be criticized in the same way that the theology of the Empire was criticized. There is some space for negotiations, potentially bringing some apocalyptical elements into Muslim theology. Hence, the rhetoric of the apocalyptical thorn which is so important for new political theology might also be inspiring for a new approach to the Qur'an.

This diagnosis fits well with the fact that the early Meccan Surahs especially use apocalyptic visions to underline their message. In his exegesis of those surahs, Farid Esack makes clear that these apocalyptic visions describe the confrontation between God and humanity at the end of history, and they present a vision of God's final response to human injustice.[49] As Esack points out, the apocalyptical character of these visions underline their absolute certainty and make them more urgent and relevant for us. They are meant as an intense warning, for the Meccan population then, and for us today, when we are not engaging enough for justice. Hence, they have a

[49] Farid Esack, "Die Feuerprobe Des Glaubens: Wirtschaftliche Gerechtigkeit in Den Frühen Mekkanischen Suren," in *Armut Und Gerechtigkeit: Christliche Und Islamische Perspektiven*, ed. Christian Ströbele et al. (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2016), 30–54.

very similar function as the imminent expectations in the Bible, and the Qur'an can encourage us to take this function seriously.

The Bible and the Qur'an also use apocalyptical images to encourage those who are oppressed and marginalized. For us in modernity, the archaic language might be embarrassing. But as we have seen, there are clear criteria that help us to understand how these images can be used productively and according to the main ideas of our scripture. Although the Qur'an remains critical towards imminent expectations, it can be seen to defend the idea of the apocalyptical thorn, which is so important for new political theology. When the Qur'an says, for example, that humankind's reckoning hour has drawn near (Q 21:1; 54:1), it is clear that there is also some tension and attentiveness to the last judgment in the here and now. At the same time, the Qur'an has the potential to help us not exaggerate apocalyptical language. The Qur'an states clearly that the time of the last Judgment is unknowable, which sometimes leads to a very abstract and individualized notion of eschatological expectation. Here, the Bible might be an inspiration for readers of the Qur'an not to forget the urgent and desperate longing for justice which is so important for Christianity and Islam, and which is so easily underestimated in modern middle-class theology – including my own.

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