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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

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In May 2025, an international expert meeting was hosted in Maynooth, Ireland to explore the apocalyptic and eschatological spaces between philosophy and theology in contemporary debates. The co-sponsored meeting emerged from a joint initiative among scholars from St Patrick's Pontifical University, the Institut Catholique de Toulouse, and the Relational Ontology network at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. The aim was to explore the viability of a network of strategic partnerships around urgent questions, and to strengthen interdisciplinary research exchanges between our institutions that empower academic research amid contexts of practical pastoral training and spiritual formation. Thanks to a generous invitation from the editorial board of *The Heythrop Journal*, a representative selection of articles from this collaborative event have been made available in this special issue, which I am delighted to gather together here.

In his provocative book, *Taking Leave of God*, the late Cambridge philosopher Don Cupitt argued that it was spiritually important *not* to believe in life after death.[1] Instead, Cupitt claimed that being Christian was a way of living life in *this* world, not an imaginary hereafter. Cupitt's challenging claim invites a contemporary theological and philosophical response. At first glance, Cupitt's remark stresses the importance of one's manifest life actually lived against the expressed ideal receding beyond the shore of its lifespan. As a result, metaphysical concerns are bracketed out beyond the bounds of phenomenological enquiry. On the other hand, one might ask whether Cupitt's disavowal of what is deemed as already imaginary also covers up what is not yet manifest. Thus, there may still be eschatological and apocalyptic features embedded in secularising tendencies that invite further examination.

David Aune has described the distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic in this way: eschatology refers to the theological study of the future of individuals (death, resurrection, judgement, eternal life, heaven, purgatory, hell), the Jewish people (the coming of the Messiah and the recreation of the universe), and the Christian church (the second coming of Christ). Eschatology in a prophetic modality explores God's restoration of all things through history, whereas the apocalyptic modality interrupts this optimistic aim with divine judgement at the end of history.[2] For Aune, apocalyptic discourse has been used by oppressed minorities and millenarian movements with supernaturally endowed charismatic leaders preparing for an imminent catastrophe. In biblical studies, the question of whether Jesus and Paul were apocalyptic is a contested topic.

[1]Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980).

[2]For more, see David E. Aune, 'Understanding Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic', *Word & World* 25, no. 3 (2005): 233-45.

But still, historians might remind us that the application of apocalyptic passages of the Bible to contemporary events is not a new phenomenon. For example, the 'presentist' interpretation of prophecy was common throughout Reformation Europe, and was used by Protestant soldiers, officials, and writers in Ireland from the time of the Desmond Rising in 1579 onwards.[3] By identifying the pope as antichrist and Catholics as his followers, apocalyptic discourse served to sharpen the antipathy between Protestants and Catholics, and justify violent actions leading up to the Early Irish Rebellion of 1641.

By framing contemporary events as a cosmic battle between good and evil, apocalyptic discourse has perpetuated violence to defend the true faith and maintain the divine order of the status quo. But not only Catholics in early-modern Ireland have been on the violent end of Christian apocalyptic discourse, but also Jews during medieval and modern pogroms.[4] Whether or not one reads a news article of current events, these concerns do not seem so far in the past.

I. OVERVIEW OF SPECIAL ISSUE

In his thematic treatment, William Desmond explores the usage of the term the 'edge' to illuminate eschatology's liminal character and to provide a metaxological framework as a genuine alternative to both classical substance metaphysics and modern process thought. Desmond argues that Christian eschatology requires both radical transcendence (God beyond us) and intimate immanence (God with us), while avoiding both deism and pantheism.

Giulio Maspero explores Gregory of Nyssa's theological innovation of the Holy Spirit as 'subsistent Kingship' (*basileia*) to establish the connection between trinitarian relationality and the eschatological dynamism of the Kingdom of God. Maspero argues that Gregory's view of spiritual development (*epektasis*) is grounded ontologically rather than in merely ethical terms. Likewise, Ilaria Vigorelli examines how Gregory transforms the classical Greek concept of *theoria* into contemplation of the divine *oikonomia*, which illuminates another aspect of Gregory's doctrine of the perpetual growth (*epektasis*) of the soul in relationship with the infinite God. Vigorelli argues that ultimately, Gregory's eschatology is a relational anthropology where perfection is understood in terms of a dynamic communion driven by *eros* rather than a static intellectual achievement.

Agata Bielek-Robson provides a sophisticated philosophical genealogy of apocalyptic thought throughout Jewish literature, medieval theology, German idealism, and twentieth-century political theology. For Bielek-Robson, apocalyptic negativity gradually morphs from annihilating vision into dialectical transformation through the concept of work, and yet it remains an inherently volatile contribution to the continental philosophy of history. Andrea Bellantone offers a thought-provoking philosophical meditation on marginalised existence as a site of eschatological judgement against the tendency towards an historicist totalisation in post-Hegelian philosophy of history. For Bellantone, 'the un-figured' (*in-figuré*) refers to counter-figures who, through their exclusion from world history, bear witness to transcendence and thus judge history 'from elsewhere'. The implication is that diminished, suffering

[3]For more, see Alan Ford, 'Apocalyptic Ireland: 1580–1641', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2013): 123-148, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140012472629. Many thanks to Salvador Ryan for this reference.

[4]For more, see Andrew Colin Gow, *'The' Red Jews: Antisemitism in the Apocalyptic Age 1200-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Also see, Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale, 2016) and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* (Princeton, 2008).

existence reveals the genuine human participation in the Absolute so that even the saints do the work of imitating Christ (the unfigured One) for us so we too might become saints (the unfigured ones).

In her contribution, Johanna Rahner issues several observations that address a profoundly important theological question: how can Christian eschatology conceive of reconciliation after the Shoah without violating victims' dignity or offering cheap grace to perpetrators? By engaging with Johann Baptist Metz's 'theology after Auschwitz', Hans Urs von Balthasar's hope for universal salvation, and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the other, Rahner proposes an eschatological approach that centres on the agency of victims in forgiveness while maintaining God's patient mercy waiting for all. In my own article, I examine how Søren Kierkegaard's theological anthropology furnished resources for reconstructing Christian humanism among mid-twentieth-century Catholic thinkers. Focusing on Romano Guardini (1885-1968) in Germany and Cornelio Fabro (1911-1995) in Italy, I demonstrate how each thinker creatively appropriated Kierkegaard's treatments of despair, interiority, and hope to address the fragmentation of modern Europe following the world wars.