Clemens Cavallin, »Consolations of a New Earth«

ABSTRACT

In a marginalized group, personal suffering is inescapably united to excluding social and political structures and situations. To provide consolation to an individual then also involves showing a way of how the group can escape its painful predicament, which in early Christianity took the form of an end times confrontation between good and evil; and the emergence of new heavens and a new earth. In science fiction literature, a variant on this theme of cosmic regeneration is the escape to an earth-like planet with the help of an interstellar space ship. An interesting recent case of such an offer of consolation in outer space is the novel, Voyage to Alpha Centauri, by Michael O’Brien, a contemporary Canadian author. The story is a commentary on the marginalization of traditional, especially Catholic, Christianity, and the growing strength of a liberal secular order.

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In a marginalized group, personal suffering is intrinsically united to particular social and political structures and situations. To provide consolation to an individual then also involves showing a way of how the group can escape its painful predicament, or at least includes indicating how he or she can create a stable *modus vivendi* in the midst of it all. Contemporary Christians in Mosul or Palestinians on the Gaza strip experience their individual sufferings also on a social level. Of course, this is not equally true of all sufferings or discomforts, but when marginalization and deprivation is severe few of the more serious causes of individual pain are without connection to this basic social distress.

In such situations, religions offer some particular solutions and consolations. In the midst of persecutions and martyrdom, the belief in a Hereafter directs the attention to a permanent shelter, which no sorrow can reach. The roadmap for the individual is then to proceed from the Church militant on earth to the Church triumphant of eternal beatitude. In contrast, a secular political or psychological solution has to focus on achieving a better situation here and now; and cannot refer the citizens to such a transcendent bliss.

Despite the proclivity for supernatural solutions, most religions are not so otherworldly that they leave the terrestrial societies free to form themselves at their own discretion, but include, if not a way to redeem human social life, then at least an ideal order to which society ought to adhere; for example, the Torah, Sharia or Dharma. Such a set of rules and role models function as a blueprint also for political action, including the revolutionary type as in contemporary militant Islamist movements such as ISIS.

In Christianity, in contrast to, for example, Hinduism and Buddhism, material reality is to be redeemed, not merely left behind by the one who has achieved enlightenment. This comes to the fore in the notion of the resurrection of the material body, which implies an idea of the human person as consisting of a unity of matter and spirit. In, for example, The Letter of Paul to the Romans, we can see how the author con-
nects this idea of the redemption of the individual body to the fate of the whole of creation.

— We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²

In traditional Christian cosmology, God thus redeems the whole of the material realm at the end of times; that is, through a kind of re-creation it is made perfect again. The Book of Revelation describes this as the appearance of a new heaven and a new earth:

— Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away; and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adored for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying.

— See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. ³

It is important for the theme of this article to note how God according to these Biblical texts consoles the faithful in connection with the recreation of cosmos. The text addresses humanity primarily on a social level, as the New Jerusalem, as a polis, and not as discrete individuals – though the tears are signs of personal sufferings. When this is combined with a postmillennial interpretation of the Book of Revelation, according to which human agency gradually perfects the earth, it can lead to an emphasis on mainly political action. ⁴ In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, on the other hand, it is maintained that this renewal of the material world only comes after a most serious crisis for humanity and the Church. The final fulfilment of the eschatological hope is described as due to divine agency acting even in opposition to the main direction of human societies at that time. ⁵

The idea of an end of history, according to which salvation encompasses also the material ever changing world, can be compared with Hinduism and Buddhism that operate within a cosmological framework of ages, which proceeds from the ideal to the increasingly worse, until, after a final destruction of the whole of cosmos, or only a part of it: the cycle begins again. An
individual achieves permanent salvation only by escaping reincarnation into this vicious cosmic circle.\(^6\)

Furthermore, one more consequence of the radical transcending of material reality in Indian religions, at least in most of their philosophical formulations, is a peculiar relation between individuality and collectivity in the ultimate redeemed condition.\(^7\) In both the Hindu philosophical schools of Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta, the spirit loses all individuality; as there is no material, individuating factor left after final liberation. All souls are completely alike; they constitute a perfectly pure consciousness. In Advaita this has the consequence that there is really only one spirit; and in Samkhya, which upholds a multitude of spirits, their essential identity makes it very difficult to imagine their interrelationship.\(^8\)

By this comparison, we can understand that the Christian idea of the resurrection of the body and of the cosmos provides its understanding of the end of history with both a marked individual and social character. It was this basic issue of personality and individualization that led Thomas Aquinas to consider each angel as a unique species, as they have no material bodies.\(^9\) The material body, at least, in such an Aristotelian metaphysics, is a prerequisite for individuality, and consequently necessary for the idea of a human society after the redemption of the cosmos.\(^10\)

The comparison with the ideal state of the perfect consciousness in classical Hindu philosophy provides us with an insight into an alternative vision of salvation; it is illustrative that the final destiny of the yoga practitioner, according to the yoga sūtras, is named *kaivalya*, isolation.\(^11\)

In the eschatology put forward in the Book of Revelation, the persecuted flock of the faithful can, after a series of very intense sufferings, plagues, persecutions and catastrophes, enter a resurrected cosmos. This means that when the worldly situation for committed Christians seriously deteriorates, it is natural for them, at least for those aware of the biblical eschatological narrative, to think that now we perhaps live in the end times and that there is hope for an imminent solution. In an American Evangelical context, the astonishing success of the Left Behind-series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (1995–2007) is a clear sign that an apocalyptic understanding of contemporary events is striking a chord with a large number of Christians.\(^12\)

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**SPACE TRAVEL AND A NEW EARTH**

In science fiction literature, a variant on the theme of cosmic regeneration is the escape by space travel to a new earth. The dream is to find a hospitable exoplanet circling a sun in a galaxy not too far away from us. This idea, however, is no longer only a theme in fiction, as astronomers are actively
searching for earth-like planets and maintain that they have actually already found some which are similar to Earth, at least when it comes to mass and distance from their suns.\textsuperscript{13} If we would find a Twin Earth in a natural and welcoming condition, humanity could start all over again. This is similar to the fantasy of being shipwrecked on a paradise island in the Pacific Ocean and thus forced by circumstances to restart civilization as in the Robinson Crusoe novel.\textsuperscript{14} In the will to let society begin again, to have a fresh start, this fantasy is similar to and at the same time different from the French and Russian Revolutions, which tried to violently destroy the ancien régime and to create a new society and a new type of human person from a clean but bloody slate. On another planet, as on the paradise island, we could just start all over again without any need for guillotines.

However, such a dream presupposes that the human persons colonizing the new planet do not carry with them seeds of the destructive forces that produced suffering on Earth in the first place. In Christian terminology, it becomes a question of original sin and its consequences.\textsuperscript{15} The idea of leaving the present society altogether due to religious persecutions and going to a new world was, for example, a strong motivating factor in the colonization of America. However, when the new world is already inhabited, the creation of a new society presents moral dilemmas, as brought to the big screen in the popular movie Avatar, in which the planet Pandora with its inhabitants is almost destroyed by greedy capitalists from Earth.\textsuperscript{16}

The notion of leaving for a new start in the form provided by space travel also opens up interesting possibilities for Christians to think about the end times and about consolation in the face of suffering brought about through marginalization and persecution. The basic idea is a longstanding one, that is, not to stay and act as leaven invigorating the pagan or secular society, but to leave and found a new city, the New Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, this option is powerfully described in the stories of the flight of Abraham from Sodom and Gomorrah before these cities are destroyed; or the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and their long travel to the Promised Land.

Interstellar space travel opens up interesting new ways to imagine such a modern Exodus. No longer is there a need for the Promised Land to be a place on this Earth; nor do the new heavens and the new earth have to be this earth transfigured.

C S Lewis explored these potentialities in his space trilogy (1951–55), where Mars and Venus are inhabited planets with intelligent creatures not touched by original sin. The planet Earth is though the »silent planet« due to its fallen nature.\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, the Swedish author Harry Martinson described a dystopian variant in his space-epos Aniara (1956): in which a
spaceship, leaving the destroyed Earth for Mars and Venus, by accident deviates from its course and runs out of control, continuing its journey into the unknown, without goal or end.\textsuperscript{18} Advances in astronomy make the setting of such a fictional theme in our own solar system not plausible anymore, and the author needs to place the earthlike planet much farther away, perhaps in a different galaxy even. Despite travel to such a planet is not technologically possible at present, it is not impossible in principle, yet such a journey would take a very long time.

Though the present article focuses on fictional writing, we have to mention that also within Christian theology there are attempts at reconciling the cosmos as explored by modern science with Christian eschatology. However, there has been a lack of interest in the question, as David Wilkinson in his book \textit{Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe} remarks «this lack of consideration of the end of the Physical Universe is a serious problem for theology. However much we want to stress the goodness of creation, we need to think seriously about the end.»\textsuperscript{19} As the secular imagination seems to dwell increasingly on post-apocalyptic imagery, we should expect this to change, and, of course, Wilkinson’s work is part of such a tendency.

\textbf{VOYAGE TO ALPHA CENTAURI}

An interesting recent case of a combination of a critique of modernity and the offer of consolation in outer space is the latest novel of Michael O’Brien, a contemporary Catholic Canadian writer, best known for his series \textit{Children of the Last Days} in which the end-times clearly take place on this Earth. In one of those novels, for example, the Canadian wilderness in the North functions as a refuge for social regeneration.\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Voyage to Alpha Centauri}, on the other hand, he takes on the science fiction genre for the first time.\textsuperscript{21} He describes the Earth as a secular dystopian society with no room for religion, managed by a totalitarian world regime, which is also in charge on the large spaceship, The \textit{Kosmos}, on its way to the newly discovered planet, named \textit{Nova}. A small group of passengers only slowly discovers the secret on board control and surveillance system; later, the reader understands that many of these more attentive space travelers are part of a Christian underground movement on the ship, which includes even a clandestine bishop. This is a result of that the underground church on Earth was transplanted to the ship without the knowledge of the authorities. The long journey to the Alpha Centauri star system, is described through the journal of the agnostic scientist Neil de Hoyos, who despite his lack of faith had a Catholic upbringing in poor circumstances in New Mexico.

The ideal society planned to be created on the new earth, is firmly under the control of the secular powers, with a sinister
secret police operating beneath the surface, but, of course, the Christian underground has its ideas of how to use this unprecedented opportunity as well. The confrontation of Hoyos with the authorities on board provides the basic plot until the arrival at the planet, but O’Brien weaves into it conversations with other passengers on many topics that together make up a mosaic of various reflections on Western Civilization. Through the influence of his friends and through emerging memories from his childhood, Hoyos slowly moves toward an increased appreciation of the Christian religion. Nevertheless, even toward the end of the novel, he keeps his skeptical stance:

»Where was God when Xue was burned to death and shattered on the pavement?«
»He was with him… and in him.«

I frowned thinking to myself that his theology or philosophy was a version of the endless variety of consolations humans clutch onto when the unthinkable occurs. I had mine, he had his.22

However, in the end through the sudden and unexpected reconnection to a central childhood memory, when faced with the seemingly unavoidable fact that the ship will crash into Earth, Hoyos goes through a conversion experience, on the very last pages of the journal.23 That is, in the face of Death, perspectives change.

After the discovery of a larger cosmos than that of the medieval period – thus opening up a dizzying seemingly infinite vista containing a multitude of earthlike planets – one crucial question for Christian theology is the significance of possible intelligent beings on such a planet for the salvation economy. Did Christ die for them too? Did original sin afflict them or do they still live in so many gardens of Eden? If they do, would not the arrival of earthlings only destroy this part of paradise as well? This is parallel to the discovery of new continents in the 15th century and the decisions made about the status of those living there. Were they even human beings? These new questions, which arise in the interaction between modern scientific cosmology and Christian theology, has prompted the theologian Ted Peters to propose a new field, that of astrotheology, which mainly is a theological reflection on the findings of astrobiology.24 The ethical dilemmas when confronting new intelligent species even requires, according to Peters, its own discipline; that of astroethics.25

O’Brien in a first stage makes the new earth appear to be uninhabited, which thus for a Christian understanding merely puts it on the same level as the discovery of a new island in the Pacific ocean on which no human being before has set foot. As the narrative develops, however, remnants of an ancient
civilization are uncovered, which raises the above mentioned astrotheological questions. Nevertheless, O’Brien introduces a plot twist, which defuses this question, when Hoyos reports the discovery that the ancient inhabitants of the new earth actually were antediluvian human beings from Earth, who came before the flood to this planet, but due to their radical thanatos drive their civilization eventually died out.

The ancient space travelers brought with them to this paradise snakes that kill some of the crew of the Kosmos; the snakes make up a clearly spiritually invasive species, as no other animals on the planet seem to be carnivores, or even aggressive. Though the ruling ideology of the space ship and on earth is clearly materialist, O’Brien hints in his novel that there is a strange preference for the occult in modernity: a kind of Faustian bargain. On this new earth, when the space travelers have discovered the ancient pagan culture that relied on human sacrifices on a massive scale, they thus create new rituals that symbolically connect back to the antediluvian civilization.

Nonetheless, the ancient earthlings had made a huge trap for the space travelers, which in the end destroyed a large part of the company. The surviving rest had to return quickly to Earth. At the same time, a group from the underground movement managed to smuggle themselves onto the planet and stay there to build a new society on Christian foundations. Tragically, the space ship with the other survivors never reaches earth but returns to orbit Nova until all its passengers die.

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**FINAL REFLECTIONS**

In one way, the novel *Voyage to Alpha Centauri* by Michael O’Brien is a commentary on the present marginalization of traditional Christianity, primarily in the west, and the growing strength of a liberal secular order. Such an analysis and the prospect of a total victory for a new atheist totalitarian world order, with nonetheless some neopagan affinities – in which Christianity has been forced to move underground – is obviously not in itself a piece of consolation. Far from it: this part of the narrative is a dystopian reflection on the road we are now travelling. However, the idea of a new earth, of a new beginning, in which modernity, even in its technological aspects, is undone, holds out a particular form of consolation. We can see similar ideals of a return to simplicity in the Old Order Amish or in the environmental movement.

A Christianity that has lost its belief in eschatology cannot provide consolation in the form of a divine re-creation. The alternatives are then primarily social work in combination with political action or interior piety. However, the first without a notion of sacred history increases secularization, as of course God becomes a Laplacian hypothesis of no consequence. Moreover, the second option of interior spirituality and indi-
individual transition to eternal life does not really address the social situation, which is the main cause of suffering.

Eschatology in the sense of sacred history is thus crucial for consolation when the Christian way of life and even existence as a group is in danger, as in Mosul in 2014, or in the Roman empire of the first two centuries. A New Earth is part of the futurology of traditional Christianity and stands in marked contrast to religions that see salvation solely in the form of individual spiritual liberation, or those millenarian movements that believe that through human agency we can actually create a perfect society.

My interpretation of O’Brien’s use of space travel to a new earth is that it constitutes an attempt to both imagine what an exodus from modernity could look like and how the eschatological idea of the recreation of the cosmos can be presented within the limits of the modern cosmos. In this way, the dichotomy between the alternatives of being in the world and not being of it,27 or to create a small world within the larger society is transcended. Not merely the world, but also the earth is left behind.

Perhaps such an exercise in utopology28 is a fruitful way to think through the rapidly changing social milieu of traditional Christianity. In Europe, the decoupling of national identities (mediated through ethnically related religiosity) from the old Christian churches is continuing as an unrelenting juggernaut, seemingly impossible to stop. The logical result of such a development is the reduction of former national churches to small religious associations with little impact on the political or cultural scene. The situation right now for these ethnic churches is like giant balloons with a thin skin, but without much substance within, maintained primarily through state subsidies or the taxation of passive members. The situation in, for example, Lutheran Sweden and Catholic France or Italy is similar though of course different in many ways. When these churches will have to rely solely on the active contributions of their committed members, which presently is not above 10% and shrinking, these balloons will burst and there will be an acute demand for consolation and rethinking of the relation between church and state. Perhaps a sojourn on the Kosmos will then be a fruitful means to meet this new social and cultural reality.

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ENDNOTES

1 At the same time, Hinduism is very much a religion of the law in meticulously regulating individual behavior, but its notion of salvation transcends such regulations, epitomized by the ascetic who leaves society for a single-minded focus on spiritual salvation. This ideal of renunciation exists in a fruitful tension with the ideal of dharmic life in society. See, e.g., Patrick Olivelle: Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu scriptures on asceticism and renunciation (New York, 1992), 78–81.
5 Catechism of the Catholic Church (London, 1994), 238f.
6 See, for example, Karl Potter’s discussion of Karma and liberation in Indian philosophy, Karl Potter: »The karma theory and its interpretation in some Indian philosophical systems« in Wendy Doniger (ed.): Karma and rebirth in classical Indian traditions, Indian ed. (Delhi, 1983), 241–267. There is though a wide variety on this theme within Hinduism and Buddhism. For example, in Mahayana Buddhism, the idea of Heavenly Pure Lands of Buddhas comes into soteriological focus; and with the bhakti movement in Hinduism the perfect state of bliss is also directed to the heaven of a particular God. However, the belief in transmigration makes a particular body merely a temporary dwelling of the body or the karmic process. See, for example, James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne (ed.): The Pure Land Tradition, History and Development (Freemont, 1996) and David Knipe: »Hindu Eschatology« in Jerry Walls (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology (Oxford, 2008), 170–190.
7 With the increasing importance and influence of bhakti to a personal god in India, the distinction between god and devotee was emphasized. See, for example, the theology of Ramanuja (12th century), in which the souls are even given new bodies in the redeemed condition. Jan Brzezinski: »Rāmānuja« in Edward Craig (ed.) Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (London, 1998), 42–44.
8 For a presentation of the Samkhya philosophical system see Gerald James Larson: Classical Sāmkhya: an interpretation of its history and meaning, 2. rev. ed. (Delhi, 1979); and for Advaita Vedanta, Karl H. Potter (ed.): Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and his pupils (Princeton, 1981).
10 Nevertheless, the problem presents itself again between the point of time when a person dies and when he or she is reunited with the body. Are there, thus, no individuals
in the heavenly state, that is, until the resurrection of the dead, which the Averroists claimed? Aquinas solves this by maintaining that the souls retain a special kind of quality of informing a body, and thus individuality, while the Scotists claimed that the souls was an individual by itself, by having a special this-ness. Udo Thiel: The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume (Oxford, 2011), 19–21.


12 This has of course generated a substantial body of scholarly reflection see, for example,


13 See, for example, the SETI project: www.seti.org, or www.space.com/19157-billions-earth-size-alien-planets-aas221.html.

14 It is interesting that Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) is the only novel to be read by children before the age of twelve according to Rousseau in his Emile: or, on education. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Émile, ou De l’éducation (Amsterdam, 1762).


18 Harry Martinson: Aniara. En revy om människan i tid och rum (Stockholm, 1956); Aniara: a Review of man in time and space (Södra Sandby, 1991).

22 O’Brien: *Voyage to Alpha Centauri*, 485.
26 See especially the dance described on page 418 in O’Brien: *Voyage to Alpha Centauri.*
28 If someone thought that I mischievously had created a neologism, I would like to point out that there are actually courses in utopology, see www.yorku.ca/gradhuma/courses/Utopology.htm.