

Introduction

THE BELIEF IN THE afterlife in Judaism and Christianity emerges as a response to a real challenge: the problem of evil. As the Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl wrote, “in its original setting the resurrection is an answer to the question of Judaism in the time of Jesus: the question of theodicy. Will justice win and the promises of God to the faithful be fulfilled?”¹

The fundamental question is that of theodicy: What is the meaning of life and history in the midst of a world in which evil, injustice, and ultimately death persist and seem to achieve a constant triumph over the wish for life and endurance?

First, we shall examine the classical problem of theodicy, showing the gravity of the problem for a theistic perspective, and then we will extend its scope to consider the meaning of history as a whole (if there is one) and how we should interpret the dynamics of human history on the basis of some of the principal philosophical proposals of contemporary Western philosophy. Since the focus of this introduction is the Judeo-Christian tradition, we will not deal with these aspects in the context of Eastern religions and philosophies, which undoubtedly offer important illumination on the issues we are treating.

The next step will be the analysis of apocalypticism. Apocalypticism is, as Ernst Käsemann wrote, the “mother of Christian theology.”² Jesus’ life and message cannot be understood without the influence of apocalyptic intertestamental literature. In particular, its emphasis on eschatology, universal history, and afterlife generated an almost everlasting impact on the Western culture, which can be felt even in contemporary philosophical proposals.³ It is therefore worthwhile to study the nature of the apocalyptic movement and of its principal theological contributions.

1. Stendahl, *Immortality and Resurrection*, 7.

2. “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” 17–46.

3. Jacob Taubes studied the so-called occidental eschatology in his classic work

After examining apocalypticism, we shall delve into the problem of death, the “radical non-utopia,” to use Ernst Bloch’s terms, and how it is interpreted in atheism, pantheism, and theism. The specific Judeo-Christian response to the challenge of death is the belief in the resurrection of the dead. But, when did this belief emerge? Why did it take so long for the Israelites to believe in it? We will then study the principal hypotheses on the origin of the idea of resurrection in Judaism.

The belief in resurrection, however, cannot be conceptualized as an isolated concept that suddenly appeared. Resurrection is not a goal in itself. The question refers to the aim of resurrection, and the answer involves taking into consideration the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the central part of Jesus’ teachings. Resurrection is an instrument serving a broader, more encompassing reality: the Kingdom of God. Such a utopian Kingdom gathers the final response to the problem of theodicy and to the question of the meaning of history. The idea of the kingship of God was present in the Hebrew Bible, but the idea of a Kingdom of God which is over the kingdoms of this world takes us back to apocalypticism and to early Christianity. We shall analyze this concept in light of the Gospel of Matthew (in which it plays a very relevant role) and contemporary theologies, like the principal European tendencies and liberation theology in Latin America.

There is a thread from the problem of evil to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God summarizes the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the individual and the collective human life. But in spite of its fundamental importance in Jesus’ message, Jesus himself did not define the Kingdom of God in itself. He showed some of its features but not its ultimate nature.

Few questions exert such a great fascination on human conscience as those related with the meaning of life, history, and death. The interest in religions, which seem capable of providing a constant “utopia” for human beings, is ever increasing. It is true that secularization has diminished the relevance of religions in daily life in Western societies, but it is also true that all people, believers or not, feel always compelled by the questions that religions themselves pose and that religions themselves try to answer. Let us therefore assume the weight of those questions: as Heidegger wrote in *Die Frage nach der Technik*, “questioning is the piety of thought.”⁴

Abendländische Eschatologie of 1947. For a detailed analysis of Taubes’ views, cf. Faber et al., *Abendländische Eschatologie: ad Jacob Taubes*.

4. Cf. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7.

There is some kind of mysticism in reality that invites everyone never to cease wondering about the world that surrounds us. The great Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci taught that every person is a philosopher, because philosophy deals with the fundamental anxieties which concern us all. The principal problems of philosophy are not abstractions for select, elite academics: they affect us as human beings, and they influence how we conceive of ourselves and of history. Philosophy, in this sense, is an extremely political activity, which offers an interpretation of the world which necessarily determines how we manage social life.

As Jürgen Habermas has remarked, knowledge is always linked to a certain interest,⁵ and the ultimate interest of knowledge must be the achievement of the highest possible state of both individual and collective freedom. Philosophy, as a both theoretical and practical activity, helps human reason to become more aware of its own dignity and of its responsibility in the edification of a more inclusive world.

5. Cf. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*.