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The apocalyptic thought in the early Church as a response to the fears in the 21st century

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Abstract

The apocalyptic thought in the early Church as a response to the fears in the 21st century

This article concerns the Christian understanding of the concept of “apocalypse.” It presents an original way of renewing eschatological thought in the modern world. Current events, social movements and ideologies are often seen as apocalyptic phenomena, because they instill fear, hopelessness, and a false understanding of God. The focus is on the issue of the apocalyptic thought of the early Church, its essence being faith in the resurrection and second coming of Jesus Christ. Based on the theological analyses of the apocalyptic doctrine of the early Church and the Revelation (Apocalypse) of John, the author proposes a method to overcome the fears people are experiencing in the 21st century. The cure for all fears is hope, which is a constitutive element of the Christian apocalyptic thought.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, apocalyptic thought, the Book of Revelation, fear, hope

Abstrakt

Apokaliptyka pierwotnego Kościoła jako odpowiedź na lęki w XXI wieku

Tekst dotyczy chrześcijańskiego rozumienia pojęcia “apokalipsy”. Autor prezentuje oryginalny sposób odnowy eschatologicznego myślenia w świecie współczesnym. Aktualne wydarzenia, ruchy społeczne i ideologie postrzegane są często jako fenomeny o charakterze apokaliptycznym, ponieważ powodują lęk, beznadzieję i fałszywe rozumienie Boga. W artykule jest podejmowana kwestia myślenia apokaliptycznego w pierwotnym Kościele, którego istotą jest wiara w zmartwychwstanie i powtórne przyjście Jezusa Chrystusa. Na podstawie teologicznej analizy apokaliptycznej doktryny pierwotnego Kościoła i Apokalipsy św. Jana, autor proponuje metodę przeciwdziałania lękom ludzi XXI wieku. Lekiem na wszystkie lęki jest nadzieja, która stanowi element konstytutywny chrześcijańskiego myślenia apokaliptycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: Jezus Chrystus, apokaliptyka, Apokalipsa św. Jana, lęk, nadzieja

On September 16, 2022, during the scientific conference of the Polish Dogmatic Society in Legnica, Michał Łuczewski,¹ a sociologist from the University of Warsaw, delivered a lecture entitled *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego* [On the need to think eschatologically].² He put forward the argument that “the contemporary world is much more apocalyptic than Christian theology,”³ explaining that “today, every teenager in Warsaw is more apocalyptic and, therefore, more eschatological than the Polish Church has been in recent decades. He [the teenager] is no longer waiting for some vague apocalypse, because it has already been here.”⁴ The sociologist also proposed a path the Church could take in this situation of anxiety and fear: “We can rebuild this dramatic, eschatological vision of Christianity, which is the response to that anxiety and fear.”⁵

According to Łuczewski, what has marked the history of recent years, i.e., social movements (e.g., the American Black Lives Matter, the National Strike of Polish Women) as well as various events (the war in Ukraine) and ideologies (transhumanism, LGBT+, climateism, antinatalism), has an apocalyptic nature.⁶ These trends, ideas and events are pessimistic, predicting an imminent end of the world due to climate change, COVID-19 pandemic, or financial crises. Contemporary apocalypticists point to the presence of evil and suffering, which we are not able to eliminate, even though we are mindful of the food we eat, the way we travel, of the clothes we wear, as well as of our words and thoughts.

1 Asst. Prof. Michał Łuczewski (b. 1979), a sociologist, Department of Methodology and Sociological Theory of the University of Warsaw, <https://ws.uw.edu.pl/zespol/luczewski-michal-2/> (Feb 22, 2023).

2 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, “Teologia w Polsce” 16 (2022) n. 2, pp. 207–214.

3 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, p. 207.

4 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, p. 212. On the topic of understanding the apocalyptic in modern Western culture, cf. A. Laddach, *Apokalipsa św. Jana w kontekście apokaliptyki tradycji judaistycznej*, “Maska” 25 (2017), pp. 183–184.

5 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, p. 214; cf. R. Tichy, *Czas na apokalipsę. Historia oczekiwań mesjańskich*, in: R. Tichy, *Ukryte Oblicze. O mistyce i mesjanizmie*, Poznań 2013, pp. 181–232; A. Laddach, *Apokalipsa św. Jana w kontekście apokaliptyki tradycji judaistycznej*, p. 185.

6 Cf. M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, pp. 207, 212–213.

The paradox is that by making sacrifices for themselves and their unborn children—the young generation does not regain peace [...]. They carry suffering on their shoulders, but cannot, in any way, reverse the end of the world. It is an unbearable burden. As I believe, Christ carries this heavy burden because I am not able to take it on.⁷

Everything inevitably leads to a disastrous post-apocalyptic world, and this fills us with fear. It is a completely different apocalypse from the Christian parousia, which emphasizes “both the coming of the Kingdom of God and the triumphant Christ. At the same time, young people wait for no savior.”⁸ Living according to the post-Christian world vision, young people adapt their choices to this new paradigm. They proclaim that

there is no longer a merciful God. Still, each of us becomes a god who must show mercy to everyone. Everyone, except ourselves. If you take on this role, torment yourself, suffer, self-harm, and sacrifice of not having children, then in a certain post-Christian way, you identify yourself with Christ. It is a messianism for the masses.⁹

The present text is an attempt to respond to Łuczewski’s proposal from the perspective of Catholic theology. Since in his diagnosis of the situation of modern man, the sociologist refers to three concepts closely related to the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely: apocalypticism, the Apocalypse of John and eschatology, I intend to explain their meanings in the light of Catholic theology. Finally, I will present conclusions that can help explicate why the apocalyptic thought in the early Church may be a response to the fears of those living in the 21st century.

7 M. Łuczewski, *Uwięzieni w spirali przemocy*, “Rzeczpospolita”, Feb 11, 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art35674011-michal-luczewski-uwiezieni-w-spirali-przemocy> (Feb 22, 2023).

8 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, pp. 212–213.

9 M. Łuczewski, *Uwięzieni w spirali przemocy*, “Rzeczpospolita”, Feb 11, 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art35674011-michal-luczewski-uwiezieni-w-spirali-przemocy> (Feb 22, 2023).

1. Apocalypticism of the early Church

The German term *Apokalyptik* is a neologism, which was introduced in 1832 by Friedrich Lücke in his research on the elements connecting the Book of Revelation with its contemporary texts.¹⁰ Since then it has become a technical term, referring to: (1) a literary genre in late Judaism and early Christianity; (2) a religious movement; (3) a set of views and theological ideas; (4) a special atmosphere, mood (German: *Stimmung*)¹¹, which the Jews “breathed” for approximately four centuries, i.e., from the Maccabees’ fight for the purity of Israel’s faith against Antiochus IV Epiphanus (175–163 BC) to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans (66–70) and the Bar-Kokhba revolt (132–135).¹² Modern scholarship use “apocalypse as a literary genre, apocalypticism as a social ideology, and apocalyptic eschatology as a set of ideas and motifs.”¹³

Jewish apocalyptic thought was expressed in some Old Testament books (Joel 3–4; Isa 24–27; Isa 34–35; Isa 63:1–6; Ezek 38–39; Zech 9–14; Dan 2–7, 8–12) as well as in apocryphal literature and the Qumran writings.¹⁴ The following characteristic features of Jewish apocalypticism can be indicated: pessimism, disappointment and discouragement, caused by the belief in the failure of Israel resulting from his unfaithfulness to the covenant with God¹⁵; waiting for God’s imminent judgment, which will end the current history of Israel and the world and

¹⁰ Cf. F. Lücke, *Commentar über die Schriften des Evangelist Johannes*, Bonn 1832.

¹¹ Cf. J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu von Reich Gottes*, Göttingen 1892, p. 67.

¹² Cf. L. Stachowiak, *Apokaliptyka*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 1, eds. F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyk, Z. Sułkowski, Lublin 1973, col. 753–755; D. S. Russell, *L’apocalittica giudaica (200 a.C. – 100 d.C.)*, Brescia 1991, pp. 33–39; A. Annese, *Gesù e l’apocalittica. Le tendenze della ricerca e due casi di studio (Lc 10, 18; logion Freer)*, „*Filosofia e Teologia*” 35 (2021) no. 1, pp. 88–90; G. Ancona, *Escatologia cristiana*, Brescia 2003, pp. 54–56, 60, 120–135 (Nuovo Corso di Teologia Sistemática, 13); A. Nitrola, *Il giudizio finale*, in: *Ş. Manteanu, A. Nitrola, F. Ferrario, La vita del mondo che verrà. Escatologia in prospettiva interconfessionale*, Milano, Cinisello Balsamo 2022, pp. 68–74.

¹³ Cf. J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Michigan, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 2.

¹⁴ Cf. S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, Gniezno 1991, pp. 130–137; P. Briks, *Apokaliptyka jako próba „ucieczki do przodu”*, „*Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny*” 4 (2003), pp. 280–281. On the topic of apocalypse as a literary genre, see. S. Jędrzejewski, *Apokaliptyka jako rodzaj literacki*, „*Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny*” 51 (1998) no. 1, pp. 29–35.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Maier, *Il giudaismo del secondo tempio. Storia e religione*, Brescia 1991, p. 320.

begin a completely new era; the erratic anticipation of signs of this breakthrough, such as social and natural disasters causing suffering on a cosmic scale; and the appearance of some figure fighting with God.¹⁶

However, we must not forget that apocalyptic thought, being, on the one hand, literature, a way of thinking and the atmosphere of a crisis, on the other hand, and ultimately in its essence, is a consoling message of hope. It is the response of faith that Israel had to give in the face of facts that contradicted any hope.¹⁷ In this way, it remains in harmony with the message of the Old Testament, which in its entirety “is a book of hope.”¹⁸

Thus, the source of apocalyptic hope was the belief in God’s absolute dominion over history and His irrevocable fidelity to the promise of salvation, “faithfulness despite it all.”¹⁹ As a result of this belief, Jewish apocalypticists believed in the “scheme of two eons,” i.e., the idea that God would intervene to create the world anew and definitively (*new eon*), different from the previous history, full of evil and infidelity (*old eon*). Therefore, the end of the old would begin a new eon.²⁰ The apocalypticists considered the signs of the coming turn of the eons to be, among others, the general resurrection of the dead²¹ and the appearance of mysterious messengers of God, such as the Messiah, the Prophet, and the Son of Man.²² Consequently, the apocalyptic writings are eschatological,

16 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, Milano, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, pp. 360–362; G. Ancona, *Escatologia cristiana*, pp. 57–66.

17 Cf. D. S. Russell, *L’apocalittica giudaica* (200 a.C.–100 d.C.), p. 36; G. Ancona, *Escatologia cristiana*, p. 65.

18 Benedetto XVI, *Che cos’è il cristianesimo. Quasi un testamento spirituale*, a cura di E. Guerrieri, G. Gänswein, Milano 2023, p. 60.

19 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 362–364. On the topic of God’s irrevocable faithfulness despite Israel’s infidelity, see Benedetto XVI, *Che cos’è il cristianesimo*, pp. 69–73.

20 Cf. G. Lohfink, *Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu. Reden über Jesus und die Kirche*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2013, pp. 56–57. “La logica del ‘tanto peggio tanto meglio’ soggiace al genere letterario dell’apocalittica perché è nel ‘peggio’ che il messia viene. È dalla crisi che prende avvio il processo della redenzione” (M. Ivaldo, *L’apocalisse. Crisi della rivelazione de della storia*, “Filosofia e Teologia” 25 (2021) no. 1, p. 3).

21 Cf. G. Ancona, *Escatologia cristiana*, pp. 57–60, 63–76; A. Annese, *Gesù e l’apocalittica*, p. 88.

22 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 384–385.

as their authors wanted to motivate the members of the chosen nation to wait for the coming of a new and timeless world—a new eon.²³

The heir of apocalypticism and Jewish sensitivity was the early Church, i.e., its first form, at its birth, composed of Christians originating from Judaism, led by the Apostles.²⁴ This is testified by the NT texts of an apocalyptic nature, first of all the Book of Revelation. The last book of the Bible is a typical example of early Christian theology, which is centered around the expected parousia of the resurrected Christ.²⁵ The other apocalyptic texts of the New Testament include Jesus' eschatological speech, so-called "synoptic apocalypse" (Mark 13:5–37; Luke 21:8–36; Matt 24:4–44) as well as Peter's texts (2 Pet 3:10, 12) and Paul's texts (1 Thess 4:14–17; 2 Thess 1:7–10; 1 Cor 15:21–26, 51–52).²⁶ There are also apocryphal apocalypses of the New Testament, e.g. the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul or the Apocalypse of Thomas.²⁷

In the early Church, however, the intervention of God, awaited by Jewish apocalypticism, "embodies" Jesus Christ, in whom the expected turn of the eons occurs.²⁸ Christ, unlike John the Baptist, is not a prophet of the apocalypse; He does not preach the judgment of God, but the kingdom of God, a new beginning, which is already present in Him as

²³ Cf. S. Jędrzejewski, *Apokaliptyka jako rodzaj literacki*, pp. 32–35; P. Briks, *Apokaliptyka jako próba „ucieczki do przodu”*, p. 281; R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – orędzia nadziei w Biblii*, "Teologiczne Studia Siedleckie" 5 (2009), p. 114; "The very difficult (political, social, religious and cultural) situation and the lack of a real prospect of improvement in the foreseeable future in a way forced hagiographers to spur on, to transfer their hope for a better fate to some distant, but wonderful future, like never before" (P. Briks, *Apokaliptyka jako próba „ucieczki do przodu”*, p. 284).

²⁴ Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 420; D. S. Russell, *L'apocalittica giudaica (200 a.C. – 100 d.C.)*, pp. 55–58; A. Jankowski, *Eschatologia Nowego Testamentu*, Kraków 2007, pp. 41–84 (*Myśl Teologiczna*, 54).

²⁵ Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana. Objawienie, a nie tajemnica. Wstęp – przekład z oryginału – komentarz*, Częstochowa 2012, p. 47 (*Nowy Komentarz Biblijny*, 20).

²⁶ Cf. A. Jankowski, *Eschatologia Nowego Testamentu*, p. 41.

²⁷ Cf. S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, pp. 137–138.

²⁸ Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 440. "The theological idea that God, the creator of the universe and man, showed in Jesus Christ the greatest love for creatures is the basis of apocalyptic eschatology" (P. Paciorek, *Czas kresu czasów w literaturze apokaliptycznej*, "Vox Patrum" 34 (2014) vol. 62, p. 413).

an “incarnate promise” among us (see Luke 17:21) and requires only our acceptance. The requirement ultimately consists of a request to accept the promise of a close God and strong faith in His promise.²⁹

The proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus [...] although on the one hand, is situated within the apocalyptic sensitivity [...] on the other [...] is, above all, the proclamation of an unprecedented newness, the faithfulness of God, which – in order to be so – is always creative even to the point of overturning a hopeless situation, like the one in which Israel found itself.³⁰

Jesus “leaves Israel’s past behind and offers it hope. That God is like this for Israel does not, of course, result from pure juridical fidelity to the covenant condition but from the fact that He loves people as they are, with their limitations, and also with their sins: the kingdom, therefore, is nothing other than God’s being with and for people, at their side despite everything, listening to their cries.”³¹

However, the early Church responded to the non-apocalyptic message of Jesus by its apocalyptic mentality, i.e., it translated the message about God’s closeness into the expectation of His imminent intervention.³²

For this reason, Judeo-Christians saw the fact of Christ’s resurrection through the eyes of Jewish apocalypticism and interpreted it no other than apocalyptic, that is, as the beginning of the universal

²⁹ Cf. E. Käsemann, *Sul tema dell’apocalittica cristiana primitiva*, in: E. Käsemann, *Saggi esegetici*, Casale Monferrato 1985, p. 118; “Jesus hat dieses ‘Heute’ der Gottesherrschaft und damit die Gegenwart Gottes zur Mitte seiner Verkündigung gemacht” (G. Lohfink, *Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu. Reden über Jesus und die Kirche*, p. 60).

³⁰ A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 389. Benedict XVI describes God’s action in a similar way: “Gesù considera la distruzione del tempio come conseguenza dell’atteggiamento sbagliato della gerarchia sacerdotale dominante. Dio però – come in ogni punto di svolta della storia della salvezza – utilizza l’atteggiamento sbagliato degli uomini come *modus* del suo amore più grande” (Benedetto XVI, *Che cos’è il cristianesimo*, p. 104).

³¹ A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 395.

³² Thus, apocalypticism became the mother of theology, cf. E. Käsemann, *Gli inizi della teologia cristiana*, in: E. Käsemann, *Saggi esegetici*, Casale Monferarato 1985, pp. 100–101. Concerning the synthesis of contemporary views on the character and nature of Jesus’ message, cf. A. Annese, *Gesù e l’apocalittica*, pp. 90–91.

resurrection.³³ It is evidenced by the term the early Church used to describe the experience of the crucified Jesus' "return to life" – "resurrection."³⁴ This term is taken from the language of apocalypticism and has its consequences.³⁵

If the early Church believed in the resurrection of Jesus, it means that death is not the last word, and appearances are deceiving. God works where it seemed He did not exist, where everything – in a human way – failed. Thus, the resurrection of Christ is an event that marks, gives direction or meaning to history and its future, and allows us to hopefully look forward to what will happen next. Talking about the resurrection of Jesus is using the language of hope because it is an anticipation of the end, announcing its concrete shape.³⁶

For Christian apocalypticism, the crisis takes on the face of the crucified and risen Jesus, in whom the dialectic between the old and the new eon must be deciphered so that the expectation is directed towards His parousia.³⁷

Thus, the original *kerygma* took the form of a profession of faith in the resurrection of Christ and waiting for His second coming, i.e., the parousia. This "and" is essential, because resurrection opens to the expectation of parousia, and parousia is the coming of none other than the Risen Jesus Christ, who is already present.³⁸ Hence, it is the essence of the good news that the early Church lived, formulated in the spirit and language of apocalypticism. In other words, the apocalypticism of the early Church is faith in the resurrection of Christ and waiting for His second coming, which will be life for everyone – the living and the

33 Cf. A. Jankowski, *Eschatologia Nowego Testamentu*, pp. 85–115.

34 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 423; A. Oepke, *Totenaufstehung im AT und Judentum*, in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Bd. 1, Hrsg. G. Kittel, Stuttgart 1957, pp. 370–371; D. S. Russell, *L'apocalittica giudaica (200 a.C. – 100 d.C.)*, pp. 445–460.

35 Cf. R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – oredzia nadziei w Biblii*, pp. 116–117.

36 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 410–416.

37 A. Nitrola, *L'apocalittica: una dimensione essenziale della teologia cristiana*, "Filosofia e teologia" 35 (2021) no. 1, p. 80.

38 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, p. 419.

dead (see 1 Thess 4:16–17)—as well as its fulfillment (see 1 Cor 15:28) and Final Judgment (see 2 Thess 1:6–10).³⁹ This message of the faith of the early Church is to be preached to all people on earth until the end of the world, since it proclaims God's victory over death in Christ, and at the same time, the irrevocable defeat of all evil.⁴⁰

2. The Book of Revelation — Apocalypse of Saint John

A special sign of the presence of the apocalyptic tradition in the Christian message and an example of the apocalypticism of the early Church is the Book of Revelation — Apocalypse of Saint John.⁴¹ This text has been regarded as one of the most difficult NT books⁴² and the most mysterious one.⁴³ The study of its text, carried out by Friedrich Lücke, led theologians to coin the category of “apocalyptic literature.”⁴⁴

The term *apokalipsis*, in the strict sense, means an unveiling, a revelation given by God and became part of the title of the last NT book. It is not my intent to present a detailed review of the Apocalypse of Saint John, which can be found in the very extensive literature on this book.⁴⁵

39 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 2: *Pensare la venuta del Signore*, Milano, Cinisello Balsamo 2010, pp. 62–66.

40 Cf. A. Annese, *Gesù e l'apocalittica*, pp. 92–96.

41 Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, pp. 37–38, 47.

42 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana. Wstęp—przekład z oryginału—komentarz*, ed. by A. Jankowski, Poznań 1959, p. 7 (*Pismo Święte Nowego Testamentu*, 12).

43 Cf. R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy—orzędzia nadziei w Biblii*, p. 117.

44 Cf. F. Lücke, *Commentar über die Schriften des Evangelist Johannes*, “The Revelation of John is the first ancient composition defined as *apokalipsis*. [...] Today most scholars believe that John's Apocalypse belongs to apocalyptic literature, a term defining a series of Jewish and early Christian writings, which are similar to some extent to the Book of Revelation. Thus, this term refers to a literary genre and in this sense, it means a special kind of writing, i.e. apocalypse” (D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, „*Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*” 5 (2012), p. 23). For a detailed presentation of this literary genre, see D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, pp. 22–30; *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, p. 71.

45 Cf. e.g., *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, pp. 37–132; S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, pp. 105–185; U. Vanni, *L'Apocalisse. Ermeneutica, esegesi, teologia*, Bologna 1991; V. Meldau, *Die Wende aller Zeiten. Eine Auslegung der Offenbarung des Johannes aus katholisch-apostolischer Sicht*, Marburg 1998; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Milano, Grand Rapids 1999 (*The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 21); M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego*

Nevertheless, it is worth noting two issues: the context of its creation and its message.

The circumstances of the origin of John's Revelation should be associated with the last years of the reign of Emperor Domitian, who persecuted Christians, i.e. around 95 AD.⁴⁶ According to Dariusz Kotecki,

The Church of the Apocalypse lives in a world that the author describes as a system that excludes God from all areas of life. [...] This earthly order is contrasted with the order of Christ, which in the Apocalypse is reflected by the image of the Woman-Bride. Neither the state that wants to receive divine honor nor the consumerist and secularized system can be God. Christ's order stands in opposition not only to the entire economic and religious pagan world, but also to all those Christians who compromised (i.e. adopted the attitude of the Great Whore) and thus became part of this system.⁴⁷

This *Sitz im Leben* allows us to understand the message of this Apocalypse. Its author wants to support Christians so that they can overcome the feeling of fear and resignation, trusting in God's intervention that will eliminate all suffering. Thanks to this attitude, members of the young Church will be able to stand, but not by their own strength. Their strength is the bond with the crucified and risen Christ, presented in the Book of Revelation as the victor, in whom God showed his full power over history (cf. Rev 7:14; 12:11). Thus, the last book of the New Testament was written not only to encourage the fearful, but also it invited them to become martyrs, since it contains a call to Christian heroism in a world that was hostile to it.⁴⁸

Jana, pp. 37–90; D. Kotecki, *Zrozumieć Apokalipsę? Szkice egzegetyczno-teologiczne*, Rzeszów 2021, pp. 9–24, 25–64 (Biblioteka Szkoły DABAR, 1).

46 Cf. D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, p. 31.

47 D. Kotecki, *Duch Święty w zgromadzeniu liturgicznym w świetle Apokalipsy św. Jana*, Warszawa 2006, p. 119 (Rozprawy i Studia Biblijne, 26); cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, pp. 52–57.

48 Cf. D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, pp. 31–33; T. Siemieniec, *Bóg jako Pan historii świata i ludzi w świetle Apokalipsy Janowej*, "Studia Koszalińsko-Kołobrzeszkie" 19 (2012) no. 2, pp. 129–155; J. Nowińska, *Apokalipsa św. Jana – księga o sensie zmagania*, "Lumen Bibliae" 4 (2014) no. 4, p. 135.

However, the message of John's Revelation is not limited to its historical situation, because the Roman Empire, described in this book, is a symbol of every power that opposes God and persecutes the Church.⁴⁹ Its message is therefore timeless. Stanisław Gądecki reminds us that

it is not only about the Johannine Christians, but also about every member of the entire universal Church throughout history. People from all nations and times are also naturally drawn into God's salvation history, including those who are only witnesses of the events taking place and who are affected by the apocalyptic events. Consequently, we can say that, in the broadest sense of the word, the object of interest of the Book of Revelation is every human person.⁵⁰

Based on the circumstances of the creation of the Apocalypse of Saint John and the essence of its message, theologians unanimously conclude that this text was not intended to cause fear in its addressees. On the contrary, the mission of the last NT book is consolation,⁵¹ filling them with steadfast trust,⁵² giving courage and uplifting their spirits,⁵³ motivating them to action and effort, showing the meaning of life of every individual, the community of the Church and the whole world,⁵⁴ persuading them to change the way of life and to abandon their sinful behavior.⁵⁵ In short, the Apocalypse of John is a message of hope expressed through

49 Cf. D. Kotecki, *Duch Święty w zgromadzeniu liturgicznym w świetle Apokalipsy św. Jana*, p. 81.

50 S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, p. 150; cf. S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, pp. 122–123; R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – orędzia nadziei w Biblii*, p. 118; T. Siemieniec, *Rola „Zasiadającego na tronie” w dziejach świata i ludzi. Studium z teologii Apokalipsy św. Jana*, Kielce 2012, p. 104. The universality of the message of the Book of Revelation is also confirmed by research on biblical geography and the role of the cities of the seven churches from John's vision, see S. Szymik, *Ziemia przymierza. Geografia i archeologia biblijna w zarysie*, Lublin 2022, pp. 162–169.

51 Cf. R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – orędzia nadziei w Biblii*, p. 118.

52 Cf. R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – orędzia nadziei w Biblii*, p. 119.

53 Cf. S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych*, p. 184.

54 Cf. J. Nowińska, *Apokalipsa św. Jana – księga o sensie zmagania*, pp. 136–139; T. Nawracała, *Wieczna trwałość ludzkich czynów. Studium biblijno-teologiczne na podstawie Ap 14, 13*, Poznań 2017 (*Studia i Materiały*, 187).

55 Cf. P. Briks, *Apokaliptyka jako próba „ucieczki do przodu”*, pp. 279–280.

the symbols and images,⁵⁶ which it uses, a message that is summarized in the words of the Son of Man addressed to John who saw him:

Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld” (Rev 1:17–18).⁵⁷ God is a fair Judge, who hears the cries of his faithful servants and guarantees them a just reward. “The judgment also brings hope—an announcement of the deliverance of the faithful.”⁵⁸

Therefore, their hope for final retribution is not vain (see Rev 16: 5–7; 19: 2).⁵⁹

The words of John Paul II from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* can be considered a summary of our analysis of the message of Revelation:

In proclaiming to Europe the Gospel of hope, I will take as a guide the Book of Revelation, a ‘prophetic revelation’ which discloses to the community of believers the deep and hidden meaning of what is taking place (cf. Rev 1:1). The Book of Revelation sets before us a word addressed to Christian communities, enabling them to interpret and experience their place in history, with all its questions and its tribulations, in the light of the definitive victory of the Lamb who was slain and who rose from the dead. At the same time, it sets before us a word which calls

56 “The wealth of symbols adopted by John reflect the Church’s deep mystery as a human and transcendent reality. The wealth of symbols also serves to transmit John’s message of hope that God has saved all humanity in Christ and invites all to enter into his life” (A. Spatafora, *Symbolic language and the Apocalypse*, Ottawa 2008, p. 135). On the topic of the symbols and images used in Revelation as signs of hope, see A. Spatafora, *Symbolic language and the Apocalypse*, pp. 101–135; cf. D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, p. 29.

57 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, p. 68; R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – oredzia nadziei w Biblii*, pp. 119–120; P. Briks, *Apokaliptyka jako próba „ucieczki do przodu”*, p. 279; T. Siemieniec, *Bóg jako Pan historii świata i ludzi w świetle Apokalipsy Janowej*, p. 131.

58 T. Siemieniec, *Rola „Zasiadającego na tronie” w dziejach świata i ludzi. Studium z teologii Apokalipsy św. Jana*, pp. 104, 309–321; cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *I giudizi divini nell’Apocalisse, „Communio”* (edizione italiana) 79 (1985), pp. 14–21.

59 Cf. T. Siemieniec, *Bóg jako Pan historii świata i ludzi w świetle Apokalipsy Janowej*, pp. 141, 151–153.

on us to live in a way which rejects the recurring temptation to construct the city of man apart from God or even in opposition to him. For should this ever happen, human society itself would sooner or later meet with irreversible failure. The Book of Revelation contains a word of encouragement addressed to believers: beyond all appearances, and even if its effects are not yet seen, the victory of Christ has already taken place and is final. This in turn causes us to approach human situations and events with an attitude of fundamental trust, born of faith in the Risen One, present and at work in history.⁶⁰

3. Dramatic-eschatological vision of Christianity

As mentioned in the introduction, the sociologist Michał Łuczewski proposes “to rebuild the dramatic, eschatological vision of Christianity, which is the response to this anxiety [of modern man] – to this fear.”⁶¹ This vision can be found in the Apocalypse of John, and this is clearly shown by the Polish biblical scholar Augustyn Jankowski in his commentary. Summarizing the theology of this book, he writes:

The Revelation of Saint John is a worthy conclusion to the entire biblical revelation, a finale, if not in a chronological sense, then certainly in a logical one. It complements it, and making a gigantic synthesis, it shows the totality of the present and future events and all the factors of the great drama of God, the beginning of which was given in the Book of Genesis.⁶²

Jankowski continues to describe the dramatis personae (transcendent God, Christ—the Lamb, the Holy Spirit, angels, evil spirits, the faithful—the Church, the camp fighting against the Church),⁶³ the space-time framework of the drama (the entire visible and invisible world,

60 John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, Jun 28, 2003, no. 5, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html (Dec 9, 2023).

61 M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, p. 214; cf. R. Tichy, *Czas na apokalipsę. Historia oczekiwań mesjańskich*, pp. 181–232; A. Laddach, *Apokalipsa św. Jana w kontekście apokaliptyki tradycji judaistycznej*, p. 185.

62 *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, p. 112.

63 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, pp. 113–121.

from the first to the final reception of Christ),⁶⁴ the sense of the drama of history (the Lamb's final victory over Satan who fights with Christ's disciples),⁶⁵ and instruction for the human participants of this drama.⁶⁶

This dramatic character of human history was presented and theologically analyzed by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his monumental work entitled *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. This Swiss theologian shows salvation history as a drama constantly raging between two freedoms: the infinite freedom of God and the finite freedom of man.⁶⁷ The relationship between the freedom of the Creator and the freedom of the creation is a feature of apocalyptic eschatology.⁶⁸ Therefore, in the last part of *Theo-Drama*, entitled *The Last Act*, being his compendium of eschatology, he presents apocalypticism and the Revelation of John as illustrations of this drama.⁶⁹ The outcome of these dramatic struggles in the universal dimension is determined by the defeat of evil by God, who is love.⁷⁰ God is completely on man's side, expecting man to choose Him. However, in the individual dimension, the dramatic tension continues, because each person is personally called to respond freely to God's love. Thus, man's final fate depends only on his decision "for" or "against" his adherence to Jesus.⁷¹ This choice determines whether an individual life will be a drama with a happy end or it will ultimately turn into a tragedy. This is the essence of the *Theo-drama*: that God's certain, final "victory as such does not contain the certainty of an individual's salvation."⁷²

64 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, pp. 121-122.

65 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, pp. 123-124.

66 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, pp. 125-127.

67 "Se deve esserci un dramma, ci devono essere delle libertà le une di fronte alle altre. Se deve esserci un teodramma, la sua premessa prima è che, «accanto» o «dentro» l'assoluta libertà divina, esista un'altra non-divina, creata libertà, che in un senso vero abbia parte all'autonomia della libertà divina, sia nella decisione per Dio che in quella contro Dio" (H. U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica*, vol. 2: *Le persone del dramma. L'uomo in Dio*, Milano 1982, p. 66).

68 Cf. S. Jędrzejewski, *Apokaliptyka jako rodzaj literacki*, p. 32.

69 Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica*, vol. 5: *L'ultimo atto*, Milano 1986, pp. 17-46.

70 "The biblical vision of eschatological events positively shows the final victory of good over evil, over Satan, and the triumph of the Church, which is God's institution" (P. Paciorek, *Czas kresu czasów w literaturze apokaliptycznej*, p. 422).

71 Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica*, vol. 5: *L'ultimo atto*, pp. 18-19, 25.

72 H. U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica*, vol. 4: *L'azione*, Milano 1986, p. 51.

Jesus Christ is the victorious Lamb (Rev 5:5–14) and central character of John's Revelation, which receives the title "the Book of the Lamb."⁷³ In his commentary on this book of the New Testament, Hans Urs von Balthasar states that the Word once for all became flesh, and the Lamb that was slain is eternally alive. His victory is universal. The endurance, which the entire Book of Revelation demands from Christians, is a grace granted by God. Christians must accept it and live it. If they do so, this grace will also lift them above all fears and will free them from their uncertainty of resisting the pressure of evil. The Apocalypse of John does not say about those who follow the Lamb that they are gripped by fear amid the catastrophes of this world. Those who decide to stand on His side, even if they experience fear, their fear will be "the fruitful fear of a woman giving birth, which turns into joy" when she sees her baby, "crying in birth pangs."⁷⁴ Christians trust deeply that thanks to their faithfulness to God, they share the final triumph of the Lamb in all battles.⁷⁵ Therefore, they can ultimately view their future in an optimistic way.⁷⁶ Only the enemies of the Lamb condemn themselves to paralyzing fear. They want to run away and hide themselves from God's judgment.

The kings of the earth, the nobles, the military officers, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person hid themselves in caves and among mountain crags. They cried out to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it?" (Rev 6:15–17).⁷⁷

Their desire to avoid meeting the Judge results from their blindness caused by their sins, which makes them unable to recognize the Love that saves them in the Coming One.

73 H. U. von Balthasar, *Das Buch des Lammes. Zur Offenbarung des Johannes*, Freiburg 2010, p. 45. For the topic of the Christ-centered reinterpretation of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation, see D. Kotecki, *Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy*, pp. 20–22.

74 Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Das Buch des Lammes*, pp. 118–124; M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, p. 37.

75 Cf. *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, ed. by A. Jankowski, p. 127.

76 Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, p. 90.

77 Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Das Buch des Lammes*, pp. 80–83; M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, pp. 205–207.

Conclusion

Summarizing our theological analysis of the three concepts: apocalypticism, the Apocalypse of John, and the dramatic-eschatological vision of Christianity, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The apocalypticism of the early Church is a message of hope, as it is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, in whom God fully realizes all the expectations of the Old Testament apocalyptic thought. As the resurrected one, Jesus is the absolute conqueror of death and all evil. Moreover, being expected as the One who will give his victory a universal and final dimension during his second coming (parousia), he confirms that neither the present, full of suffering, nor the future, unknown to people, has to be a source of paralyzing fear and hopelessness. Thus, the apocalypticism of the early Church is a cure for the 21st century man, because “it forms a vision of man being together with the world on the way towards the final coming of Jesus, which is the fulfillment of salvation: this is the apocalyptic element proper to theology as such.”⁷⁸ Therefore, it is necessary to correct the false understanding of apocalypse, which today has become a synonym for an inevitably approaching catastrophe that deprives us of all hope.⁷⁹

Also, the Apocalypse of John has nothing to do with the contemporary mood of general discouragement, described by Łuczewski. On the contrary, it shows a positive and optimistic vision of reality due to the expected better future, guaranteed by the power of the victorious Lamb. His presence and the perspective of a final encounter with Him gives sense to activities, events and enduring all kinds of suffering (see Rev 3:11).⁸⁰ In his message to the church in Philadelphia, John writes hopefully: “Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep

78 A. Nitrola, *L'apocalittica: una dimensione essenziale della teologia cristiana*, p. 77.

79 “The apocalypse is happening here and now, before our eyes. We are no longer saved, but we are all condemned, marked by original sin. But there is no God, heaven, or Kingdom of God where we can hope. We are alone. Like the optimistic vision of progress, the idea of decline is not dramatic but tragic. It is a vision of sliding down a slippery slope faster and faster” (M. Łuczewski, *O potrzebie myślenia eschatologicznego*, p. 212).

80 Cf. J. Nowińska, *Apokalipsa św. Jana – księga o sensie zmagania*, pp. 139–140; J. Nowińska, *Bóg przychodzący w ujęciu Apokalipsy św. Jana*, in: *Misterium słowa. Modlitwa*, ed. by D. Czaicki, Kraków 2014, pp. 249–266.

you safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth” (see Rev 3:10). In the light of such a promise, no conflicts, hurts and gloomy forecasts can erase the truth that the history and lives of all people, without exception, are ultimately governed by Divine Providence only.⁸¹

For many modern people, the word “apocalypse” brings to mind gloomy associations, because the Johannine text is related more to a “timetable” for the end of the world than to a “book of hope.” This is due to their lack of knowledge about the last book of the New Testament. Only when it is read correctly, i.e., in accordance with the intention of its author, do we understand it as “the book of consolation,” announcing victory over evil and our final rescue. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly and patiently explain the Book of Revelation within the Tradition of the Church.⁸² Von Balthasar was convinced that the Apocalypse of Saint John could only be read and explained in the light of the entire Good News. The Spirit who inspired the New and Eternal Testament cannot remove from this last NT book what he previously revealed: that God is Love. This book was added at the end of the New Testament so that we would not think that we already know enough about what love is, and so that we would not measure the fire of God’s love with our miserable earthly flame.⁸³

Finally, our analysis of the apocalypticism of the early Church and the message of the Apocalypse of Saint John as a special example shows that there is no true Christianity that would not be a dramatic and, at the same time, eschatological vision of human history, both in its individual and universal dimension. The very act of granting the gift of true freedom to people by the Creator-Love points to the need to make choices for or against this Love. This creates a dramatic tension whose sense can only be understood properly in the light of the ultimate destiny of humanity and the world, revealed by God. Therefore, only in view of eschatology can one understand the drama in which every human

81 Cf. R. Krawczyk, *Apokalipsy – orędzia nadziei w Biblii*, p. 120.

82 Cf. A. Tronina, *Apokalipsa. Orędzie nadziei*, Częstochowa 1996, p. 9; E. Ehrlich, *Apokalipsa. Księga pocieszenia*, Poznań 1996, p. 5; M. Wojciechowski, *Apokalipsa świętego Jana*, pp. 31–32, 64.

83 Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Das Buch des Lammes*, pp. 119–123.

being, without exception, participates. Since eschatology is a rational discourse concerning what God has revealed as the ultimate and definitive future of man and the world. This revelation is summarized in the Person of the Resurrected Jesus Christ, who promised to come in glory (parousia), and the general resurrection. For this reason, the dramatic-eschatological vision of Christianity cannot be anything other than a message of hope.⁸⁴

The drama between God and man continues. This belief is revealed especially in borderline situations, i.e., great crises caused by, for example, the political or social situations or natural disasters, which somehow invite/force us to make radical existential decisions.⁸⁵ So, apocalypticism includes an invitation to have hope for those living today.⁸⁶ Consequently, a concrete effort is necessary, because hope is an active openness, full of cooperation with God, to the future He is offering.⁸⁷ Moreover, it is looking forward to the One who has already come once and is mysteriously but really present. The end of every individual's history and the end of the world have the same name—Jesus, the Son of Man, awaited by apocalypticists (see Matt 16:13–20),⁸⁸ and for Christians, “the central figure of hope.”⁸⁹ Therefore, Christian apocalyptic thought can remove all fear.

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84 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 19–28.

85 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 364–365.

86 Cf. M. Delcor, *Studi sull'apocalittica*, Brescia 1987, p. 31; A. Nitrola, *Il giudizio finale*, pp. 96–108.

87 Cf. A. Nitrola, *Trattato di escatologia*, vol. 1: *Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, pp. 326, 340, 341. Jewish apocalypticism was not a proposal of an “escape mechanism” because, for apocalypticists, moral values resulting from faithfulness to God, often even to the point of becoming martyrs, were extremely important, cf. D. S. Russell, *L'apocalittica giudaica (200 a.C. – 100 d.C.)*, pp. 136–137.

88 Cf. J. Dupont, *Le tre apocalissi sinottiche. Marco 13 Matteo 24–25 Luca 21*, Bologna 1987, p. 47.

89 Benedetto XVI, *Che cos'è il cristianesimo*, p. 75.

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