

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND IN ISLAM



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The article deals with a seemingly outdated topic of the “Apostolic Creed,” the classical Christian confession of faith: the return of Jesus at the end of time. In the tradition of Islam, it also plays an important role. Muslim theologians often regard it as an important issue of Christian-Muslim dialogue. In the first part of the article, I sketch out and compare the main references of this topic in the New Testament, the Qur’an, and the tradition of Islam. Then I discuss the question of how the belief in the second coming of Christ can be interpreted today.

The “Apostolic Creed” states that Jesus Christ “is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.” This indicates that the second coming of Christ played a central role in Christian belief in its early stage when that confession was formulated. This creed is still the normative articulation of Christian faith and is recited in many Sunday services. By doing so, Christians express the hope that at the end of time Jesus will return to earth after his ascension to heaven. However, in today’s academic theology and in the theological declarations of the mainline churches, this topic is rather marginalized, as though it were merely an artifact in the museum of Christian history. As opposed to early Christianity, the majority of Christians in the Western world today are not expecting that the history of the world will come to an end soon, that the Last Days will be any time near and that the time of judgment is just around the corner.

We find that expectation present mainly (but then with a strong emphasis) in some Christian denominations like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the Seventh-day Adventists. Some of these and other groups and individuals even tried to calculate the date of the Last Day.¹

1. A list that shows the dates and details of predictions of when Jesus was, or is, expected to return, can be found at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predictions_and_claims_for_the_Second_Coming_of_Christ.

Why did I come to deal with such a topic in a series of lectures aimed at finding out what we can learn from other faiths? It was by an invitation to a conference in Qom, Iran, a few years ago, that I realized that the belief in the second coming of Christ is also part of Shia-Islam's eschatology. The conference was on the "Reappearance of the Mahdi," the 12th Imam who—according to the belief of Twelver Shia Islam—is living in occultation (Arabic: *ḡayba*²) and will reappear (*ẓohūr*) at the end of time to establish an Islamic state of peace and justice. Jesus will come to assist him.

Participating in that conference on the Doctrine of Mahdism was an eye-opener for me. The topic was strange to *me* but crucial for *them*. The conference was more a celebration of the political Shia ideology of the state and military leaders than a theological discourse: proclamation rather than reflection. The daily program started with a recitation of the Qur'an, immediately followed by the national anthem, accompanied by a film that showed the military forces in action. The message was: with all our social, political, and military efforts we prepare the ground for the Mahdi to reappear and take over the power. It was a political theology.

The purpose of the conference as a whole was not to get into interreligious dialogue. The quest for the second coming of Jesus was only a marginal issue. But even in the workshop where it was debated, a real dialogue did not occur. It was not the "soft dialogue" that I was familiar with: an open exchange of insights, trying to foster mutual understanding, esteeming the perspective of the other, and so on. Rather, it was a "hard dialogue" based on an inclusivism which presupposed that the Doctrine of Mahdism had the final truth.³

Many dialogues—not only with Muslims—are hard dialogues. The issue at stake is not mutual learning but struggling with strangeness. And that means not only coping with strange ideas but also with strange cultural settings, strange habits and standards of communication, strange expectations, and so on.

For me, the conference was also a challenge to return to those concepts of Christian theology that had once played an important role in Christianity. They are still a part of our creed but have taken a back seat today. So, the interreligious encounter provoked me to deal with the question of how to understand the belief in the second coming of Christ in today's theology.

In my paper, I will first take a brief look at the biblical testimonies of Jesus Christ's second coming, before I turn to the Qur'an and some *hadiths* for some

2. ranicaonline.org/articles/gayba (18.01.2022).

3. I am aware that there is a much broader discussion on eschatology among Muslim scholars as was represented at the conference. An overview is given in Jane I. Smith, "Eschatology," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00055.

hints on that topic. I will then discuss the question of how to understand the belief in Jesus Christ's second coming in Christian theology today.

1. The second coming of Jesus in the Bible

In Paul's 1 Thessalonians (4: 13–16), the second coming of Christ is heralded. The verses read: “We believe that Jesus died and was raised to life. We also believe that when God brings Jesus back again, he will bring with him all who had faith in Jesus before they died. Our Lord Jesus told us that when he comes, we won't go up to meet him ahead of his followers who have already died. With a loud command and with the shout of the chief angel and a blast of God's trumpet, the Lord will return from heaven.”

Paul is not supposed to proclaim something in announcing that Jesus will return. He presumes it and takes it for granted. The question he wants to answer is not whether Christ will come again or when he will return, but rather: What will happen to believers who died before the second coming of Christ? Will they not be included in Christ's saving mission? Will they be eternally lost? Paul responds to these questions by assuring the Christians in Thessaloniki that Christ will come to save not only those believers who are alive but also those who died in the meantime. The living believers have no advantages over the dead. This is the scope of his message.

Paul expects the second coming of Christ to happen soon (1 Corinthians 7: 29). The next generation of early Christians had to cope with the experience that this expectation was not fulfilled. The period between the resurrection of Jesus and the second coming got longer and longer. In organizing the life of the Christian communities, they had to account for this greater duration. Not the belief in the return of Christ faded away but the belief that this second coming was about to happen in the near future. The delayed return of Jesus (“delay of Parousia”) seems to already be considered in the Gospel of Luke. No one knows when the hour of judgment comes.

The Jewish prophetic tradition does not teach that the Messiah must come twice. The early Christians had to cope with the dissonance between their belief that Jesus was the expected Messiah and savior on one hand, and their experience that the Messiah had not fulfilled the expectations attributed to him by the messianic prophecies on the other hand. The world went on as if nothing had happened. The theological processing of that dissonance led to the expectation that the messiah will return and fulfil his mission.

Let us take a closer look at 1 Thessalonians 4. It is firstly important to note that for Paul, the return of Christ is not directly connected with the Last Judgment. It is a pure salvific act for those who believed and believe in Christ. Christ

will gather them into a heavenly community in the immediate presence of God. Expecting the coming of Christ is thus supposed to give hope, not to evoke fear. In 2 Corinthians 5: 10 Paul refers to Christ as a judge, but according to 1 Thessalonians 1: 10, the judge is the savior.

It is secondly important to note that for Paul there is no conflict between that future-oriented eschatology and his present or realized eschatology. Those who are baptized, and who thus are “in” Christ, are *already* participating in the community with God. They look *back* on their (spiritual) death. Baptism to Paul means a new birth, connected with the certainty that nothing can separate them from the kingdom and realm of God (Romans 8: 38).

It is thirdly important to note that Paul does not give a detailed description of the second coming or how it will happen. Opposing the religious culture of his time, which was characterized by widespread myths of heavenly beings descending to earth, he demythologizes the eschatological beliefs. He only writes: “With a loud command and with the shout of the chief angel and a blast of God’s trumpet, the Lord will return from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 4: 16). That is all.

Popular piety in later times, however, went beyond this restraint. In Christian religiosity as it was practiced by ordinary people, and in art—like paintings and sculptures—the Last Judgment was portrayed in great detail. Its artistic representations can be found above the portals of many cathedrals. Their function was to remind the Christians of their sinfulness, right upon entering the church, and to prepare them for the forgiveness of God, symbolized by the Eucharist.

An example of an eschatological fiction of our time is the novel “Left Behind” by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, published in 1995 in the USA. It became a bestseller. The authors take up Paul’s vision of a rapture of the believers at the end of time and turn it into a seemingly realistic story, which plays in the present-day US. The book tells the story of millions of people who suddenly disappear. Their relatives are desperately looking for their loved ones, when a Romanian politician appears and attracts millions of followers—the antichrist who leads humanity into temptation.

Let us return to the biblical references. Not only Paul’s letters but also the gospels allude to Christ’s return. But the reference here remains vague. Mark 13 depicts an apocalyptic vision. We also find it in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, albeit in a modified form. I quote from Mark 13: 24–27:

In those days, right after that time of suffering, the sun will become dark, and the moon will no longer shine. The stars will fall and the

powers in the sky⁴ will be shaken. Then the Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will send his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the earth.

The eschatological figure of the Son of Man is mentioned already in the book of Daniel in chapter 7. Verse 13 reads: “As I continued to watch the vision that night, I saw what looked like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven, and he was presented to the Eternal God.” Obviously, that vision and verse mark an important point of reference for the belief in the return of Christ in the New Testament—as well as in Paul’s Epistles and in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The scenery described is similar. The eschatological figure comes from heaven to Earth and collects true believers. But there’s also a big difference: According to Daniel 7, the Son of Man comes to build his kingdom on earth. He will not terminate history or extract the true believers out of it but will consummate history. Verse 14 reads: “He will rule forever, and his kingdom is eternal, never to be destroyed.”

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew follow that vision, while Paul modifies it in two respects: Firstly, he does not speak of the Son of Man but the Lord. And secondly, he speaks not of the kingdom on earth but of a rapture of true believers into heaven.

There is a debate among New Testament scholars on whether Jesus in Mark 13: 26 and other verses in the gospels identifies himself as the “Son of Man,” or if he is pointing at a different figure. There are only some hints that may prompt the conclusion that Jesus could have regarded himself as the “Son of Man.” We find them in the verses that depict the Son of Man as *suffering* (Mark 9: 12; 9: 31; 10: 45; 14: 41). That goes beyond the testimony of Daniel 7. But there is no verse in which Jesus identifies himself explicitly with the “Son of Man.”

The “Son of Man” could be identified as the Messiah, but originally the Messiah was seen as a historical figure, not as an eschatological one. He was believed to be an offspring of King David. The people of Israel hoped that he would come to liberate them from the foreign rule of the Roman Empire. This means that two distinct interpretations were applied to Jesus: the messianic expectation that he could be the political Messiah, and the apocalyptic predication as the eschatological “Son of Man” who will descend from heaven to earth as a divine ruler. The apocalyptic vision could be combined with the notion of Christ coming as a judge.

Let me summarize: The belief that Jesus will come again from heaven to earth is mainly based on Paul’s first letter to the Christian community in

4. “The powers in the sky” refers to belief that the stars are spiritual powers.

Thessaloniki and on the apocalyptic announcement in Mark 13. It is inspired by the vision that is portrayed in Daniel 7. Paul goes beyond this vision in that he speaks of a rapture of true believers. The eschatological kingdom of God is not considered to be on earth but in the heavenly communion with God. In this interpretation, the vision became the basis for the belief in the return of Christ in the Christian tradition.

2. The second coming of Jesus in the Qur'an and the *hadiths*

The main references to the return of Jesus in the Qur'an—as interpreted by the commentators—is *sura* 43 (*Az-Zukhruf*), verse 61.⁵ It reads: “And it shall be a sign of the hour: therefore have no doubt about it, but follow ye Me: this is a straight way.” Neither the name of Jesus is mentioned in that verse,⁶ nor the “coming” of Jesus. But the context of the verse suggests the conclusion that it refers to Jesus: Verse 57 of the *sura* speaks of “the son of Mary,” and verse 63 mentions Jesus explicitly. Accordingly, some translations⁷ interpret the verse as follows: “And he (Jesus) shall be a sign (for the coming of) the hour (of judgment): therefore have no doubt about the (hour), but follow ye Me: this is a straight path.”

The following overview of translations shows how different the interpretations are. Some are translating the verse literally,⁸ leaving it open as to who “he” (or “it”) refers to. Other translations name Jesus, and others attribute the statement to the Holy Qur'an:

5. Relevant is also Qur'an 4: 159. But here the reference to the second coming of Jesus is even more vague.

6. For the qur'anic understanding of Jesus in general see: George C. Anawati, “‘Īsā,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam (Second Edition) Online*, edited by P. Bearman et al. (Brill), doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0378.

7. Referring to: Ibn 'Abbas, Mujahid, 'Ikramah, Qatadah, Suddi, Dahhak, Abu al-'Aliyah and Abu Malik.

8. See also the grammatical analyses at: corpus.quran.com/wordbyword.jsp?chapter=43&verse=61#(43:61:1 (16.01.2022)). Cf: quran.com/43/61 (16.01.2022).

Maulawi Sher Ali	But, verily, he was a sign of the Hour. So entertain no doubt about it, but follow me. This is the right path.
Rashad Khalifa	He is to serve as a marker for knowing the end of the world, so you can no longer harbor any doubt about it. You shall follow Me; this is the right path.
Muhammad Pickthal	And lo! verily there is knowledge of the Hour. So doubt ye not concerning it, but follow Me. This is the right path.
Maulana Muhammad Ali	And this (revelation) is surely knowledge of the Hour, so have no doubt about it and follow me. This is the right path.
Sahih International	And indeed, Jesus will be [a sign for] knowledge of the Hour, so be not in doubt of it, and follow Me. This is a straight path.
Abdullah Yusuf Ali	And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment): therefore have no doubt about the (Hour), but follow ye Me: this is a Straight Way.
Muhammad Sarwar	(Muhammad), tell them, “Jesus is a sign of the Hour of Doom. Have no doubt about it and follow me; this is the straight path.”
Muhammad Musin Khan	And he [‘Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)] shall be a known sign for (the coming of) the Hour (Day of Resurrection) [i.e. ‘Iesa’s (Jesus) descent on the earth]. Therefore have no doubt concerning it (i.e. the Day of Resurrection). And follow Me (Allah) (i.e. be obedient to Allah and do what He orders you to do, O mankind)! This is the Straight Path (of Islamic Monotheism, leading to Allah and to His Paradise).
Shabbir Achmed	This (Qur’an) gives knowledge of the oncoming Revolution. So, bear no doubt about it, and follow Me. This alone is the straight path.
Abdul Mannan Omar	And indeed this (Qur’an) gives the knowledge of the (promised) Hour. So have no doubt about it, rather you should follow Me. This is the straight and right path.
Muhammad Asad	AND, BEHOLD, this [divine writ] is indeed a means to know [that] the Last Hour [is bound to come]; hence, have no doubt whatever about it, but follow Me: this [alone] is a straight way.

This means that there is no clear reference to the return of Jesus in the Qur'an. It depends on the interpretation of Qur'an 43: 61.⁹ According to the opinion of the majority of Shiite and Sunni commentators of the Qur'an, however, Qur'an 43: 61 refers to Jesus.

Muwatta, the earliest collection of *hadiths*, compiled by Imam Malik, contains no reference to the return of Jesus. Later collections of *hadith* compiled by Bukhari and Muslim, on the other hand, address it. Sahih al-Bukhari (which is one of the six major collections of *hadiths* and regarded as the most authoritative book in Sunni Islam) states (referring to Ibn Shihab) that Jesus “will descend amongst you shortly as a just ruler and will break the cross¹⁰ and kill the pig¹¹ and abolish the *jizyah*.¹² Wealth will flow (in such abundance that) nobody will accept (any charitable gifts).”¹³ Many *mutawatir hadiths*¹⁴ report that the Messenger of Allah (Mohammad) said that “Isa” (Jesus) will descend before the Day of Resurrection as a just ruler (*imam*) and fair judge.

In Shia Islam, the return of Jesus is tied to the reappearance of the Mahdi. *Tafsir Nemooneh* (which in Shia theology is regarded as an important exegesis and commentary of the Qur'an) refers to Jabir bin Abd Allah, who was a companion of the Prophet Mohammad. According to the text, Jabir bin Abd Allah had heard the Prophet say that Jesus Christ descends and Amir al-Muminin (here: Mahdi, as interpreted by the help of other *hadiths*) says: “Come and let me say prayers with you.” Then Jesus says the prayers while standing behind Mahdi (letting him be the imam in the prayer).¹⁵ A narration attributed to Sa'id ibn Jubayr reports: “Mahdi reappears and Isa bin Maryam descends to the earth and recites prayer behind His Eminence. The earth shall be illuminated from the east to the west.”¹⁶

9. For the following see also: Ahmad Shafaat, “Islamic View of the Coming/Return of Jesus” (islamicperspectives.com/ReturnOfJesus.htm#Notes5) (16.01.2022); Fatih Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah: Jesus in the Hadith Tradition* (Dissertation, Temple University, 2013), 123–193.

10. This means he will reject the Christian understanding of the crucifixion, the salvific significance of his death, and the way Christians worshipped the cross. He will renew his message that all worship must be directed to the one true God.

11. Jesus will prohibit eating pork.

12. The tax that the *Dhimmi*—the non-Muslim “protected persons” living in a Muslim state—had to pay.

13. Sahih al-Buchari 3/425, Muslim 1: 255, quoted from: islamicperspectives.com/ReturnOfJesus.htm#Notes5 (16.01.2022)

14. A Mutawatir Hadith is reported by a large number of narrators of different times, so that it is regarded as undoubtedly true.

15. Vol 21: 100. For other Tafsirs see: altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=43&tAyahNo=61&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2 (16.01.2022).

16. Fara'id al-Simtayn: *Ghayatul Maraam*: 43, quoted from: al-islam.org/es/life-imam-al-mahdi-baqir-shareef-al-qurashi/signs-reappearance-imam-time (17.01.2022). See also Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, *Nuzool Isa Ibn Maryam Akhir al-Zaman*, 56f.

3. Similarities and differences between the Islamic and the Christian tradition:

3.1. *Similarities*

In some respects, there are similarities between the biblical teaching about the return of Jesus and the Qur'an 43, 61 as interpreted by Muslim commentators on the basis of *hadiths*.

(1) The first similarity is the qur'anic formulation "sign / knowledge of the Hour" (verses 61 and 66), which has parallels mainly in apocalyptic strands of the New Testament.¹⁷ In both cases, "the Hour" means the hour of judgment.

(2) Secondly, no one knows when that hour of judgment is going to come (Qur'an 43: 85). Only God knows. It strikes unexpectedly, so one must at all times be prepared for this eschatological event.

(3) Thirdly, demonic forces will appear, with the intention to lead the righteous people into temptation. The Qur'an speaks of the Satan (Qur'an 43: 62); the Gospels of false Christs and prophets (Mark 13: 22, cf. Matthew 24: 24).

(4) A fourth similarity is the rise of riots between the nations and enmity among friends. Qur'an 43: 67 reads: "Close friends, that Day, will be enemies to each other." In Mark 13: 8 it is announced that "nations and kingdoms will go to war against each other."

3.2. *Differences:*

(1) The role of Jesus in Qur'an 43 is different: according to the biblical witness, he comes as a judge, fulfilling earlier prophecies (combining Messianic traditions and the expectation that the Son of Man is going to come). According to the Qur'an, he is the *sign* (or reveals the knowledge) of the coming of the hour of judgment. Upon his return people will know that the Last Days are surely imminent. Jesus comes as a Prophet, not as a judge. Some *hadiths*, however, declared him as ruler and judge. When he is depicted as a judge, it means: he is a human judge, not the final judge, who is God himself. God even calls Jesus to account (Qur'an 5: 116–120). The mission he has to accomplish is located within history, not in the hereafter, and not in carrying the true believers to heaven.

(2) In the Shia tradition, he will come after the reappearance of the Mahdi to assist him. He will be standing in prayer behind him,¹⁸ taking part in the wars fought by the Mahdi against Dajjal, the "false Messiah." Al-Mahdi is the war leader, and Jesus merely supports him. Al-Mahdi then will be the ruler of

17. Revelation 14: 7; Matthew 24: 36, cf. Mark 13: 32f, see also: Matthew 25: 13; Acts 1: 7. Especially John, the Baptist, proclaimed that the Last Judgment was imminent.

18. For references see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadith_of_Jesus_praying_behind_Mahdi (16.01.2022).

the world. Jesus helps him as his vizier to spread the Qur'anic and Islamic values around the globe. Jesus is a Muslim who will prove that the deniers of the belief in Mahdi's reappearance are wrong. According to one *hadith*, Jesus says to Imam Mahdi: "Verily, I have been sent as a minister and not as chief (*amir*) or ruler."¹⁹

(3) If Qur'an 43: 61 is related to Jesus, he knows "the Hour," or his appearance is the sign for that knowledge. According to Mark 13: 32 (cf. Matthew 24: 36), "the Son" does not know it.

4. Tradition and modernity: How can we interpret the belief in the second coming of Christ today?

How can we deal with the two perspectives on the return of Christ in Christianity and Islam? At the conference in Qom, both narrations were understood literally. The Christian version was regarded as partly true, but still as lacking the full truth as revealed in the Qur'an, and as elaborated on in the tradition of the Twelver Shia Islam. Based on that inclusivism, there was nothing to learn from the Christian tradition. It could be well respected as far as it confirmed the Shia point of view.

For me, the main issue was and is not how to deal with the differences between the Christian and the Islamic perspectives, but how to cope with the differences between the two of them on one hand, and modern theology on the other. By modern theology, I mean a theology informed by historical and hermeneutical consciousness.

4.1. *Historical consciousness*

Historical consciousness teaches us that the understanding of the return of Christ as found in the New Testament and early Christianity is closely tied to a specific—namely the *apocalyptic*—worldview and to the context in which that worldview has flourished. This prompts us to ask whether and in what sense we can adopt it today. Apocalyptic worldviews mainly appear in times of crisis. They form a response to the experience of degeneration and decay, to oppression and injustice, to hopelessness and despair.

The apocalyptic interpretation of the world has four underlying tenets:²⁰ the first is dualism, which believes "that there were two fundamental components of reality in our world, the forces of good and the forces of evil." The second is

19. Al_Malahim Syed Ibn Tawus: 83 and Al_Fetan ibn Abbas: 160, quoted from: www.al-islam.org/overview-mahdis-atfs-government-najmuddin-tabasi/government-truth (16.01.2022).

20. Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: Harper, 2008), 215ff.

pessimism, according to which “we cannot improve our lot in this age, an age of evil, misery, and anguish.” The third is the hope that God “will vindicate his holy name, and the people who call upon his name, in a show of cosmic force.” The fourth consists of the expectation that all this “will happen very soon. It is right around the corner. It is imminent.”

The apocalyptic way of thinking originated in the second century before Christ’s birth. We find it in the later books of the Hebrew Bible, mainly in the book of Daniel (7–12) in the second century BC.

What kinds of groups sustained those traditions and were attracted to them? A socio-historical perspective suggests that Apocalypticism invokes the last desperate vision of hope generated by an oppressed people who can no longer imagine achieving justice for themselves within the realities of this world. Apocalyptic texts express collective despair, felt by a group of people who have lost all hope. The hope for the second coming of Jesus reflects that despair and the longing for liberation, salvation, and justice. It expresses the hope of those who have no hope anymore, who are politically, socially, and religiously marginalized. If the present situation and history no longer offer any hope of improvement, all hope is built on the expectation of an *end* of history. It is set on God’s final action, which abandons the flux of history and installs his rule of eternal peace and justice.

If we interpret the belief in the return of Christ in such a historical and contextual way, then the question occurs if it loses its relevance under different historical conditions, as is the case in modern Western Christianity. Not even apocalyptic scenarios like the pandemic, climate change, the possibility of nuclear wars, or other causes that could lead to the destruction of the world seem to lead to its revival. Only some rather evangelical Christians relate the second coming of Christ to those scenarios and regard Christ as the savior of the faithful.

But can we historically relativize that part of the Apostolic Creed and simply declare it to be invalid for today? Not only many Christians but also Muslims may regard this as abandoning an essential part of the Christian faith. This question leads me to hermeneutical considerations.

4.2 Hermeneutical considerations

The basic hermeneutical question in this regard is: If it is no longer plausible to interpret the belief in the return of Christ in a *literal* way, as the report of a particular event at the end of history, does it have to be conceived *symbolically* (or allegorically) as an expression of meaning from the perspective of the Christian faith? What could be its meaning? My answer is twofold: Firstly, in terms of a future eschatology, it can be understood as a symbolization of ultimate hope;

the hope for ultimate justice, truth, and righteousness. Secondly, in terms of a realized or present eschatology, it expresses the advent of Jesus Christ—who represents God’s presence²¹—in every moment of one’s life.

(a) The first interpretation remains within a historical paradigm but does not take the return of Christ as a historical event within a series of events at the end of time. No heavenly person is coming down from heaven to earth as the beginning of the Last Days—whether as a ruler or a judge, to build up his kingdom on earth, or to take the believers with him to heaven. The belief in the return of Jesus, rather, ascertains an ultimate hope and trust that God’s justice will prevail over the evils of the world. As a “sign,” Jesus’s return indicates the fulfilment of the promise that all the injustice that occurred in history will not have the final word. Like other eschatological symbols—for example, the symbol of the “kingdom of God” or the “heavenly banquet”—the expectation of the second coming of Christ proclaims that there will be an eschatological consummation of history in a communion with God, in which all suffering, oppression, and injustice are overcome. The descent of Jesus Christ from heaven is a metaphor, a way of envisioning and strengthening the eschatological hope of the believers. It is a myth that conveys a deep truth. Its truth is not located on the surface of the symbol, but behind it: on the deeper level of the message. The mythical image illustrates that message. It says: Christ’s mission to establish the reign of God will be accomplished when all the demonic powers are defeated: all the political, economic, and social powers that oppress people, the powers that create injustice and violence in the world; the powers that dehumanize human beings. Only after those powers are defeated, the kingdom of God will be established.

It is the kingdom of *God!* The belief of Jesus’s return has to be interpreted in the light of 1 Corinthians 15: 28, which means in a *theocentric* way: The coming of Christ represents the presence of God, who will be all in all. “Then God will mean everything to everyone.” As the *hadith* says, Jesus is indeed a minister; he is submitted to his mission, and thus to God alone, in the last instance, not to another eschatological figure.

(b) The second interpretation relates the return of Christ not to the future but to the present; not to history as a whole but to the life of the individual believer. It understands the return of Jesus existentially, as his coming, time and again, to those who open their heart to him. It symbolizes the real presence of Christ at all times and in all spaces, meaning in the here and now. This is

21. Reinhold Bernhardt, *Jesus Christus—Repräsentant Gottes: Christologie im Kontext der Religions-theologie* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2021).

what Paul calls “being in Christ and Christ in me.”²² According to Matthew 28: 20, Jesus Christ promises: “I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.” The belief in the return of Jesus can be seen as symbolizing that belief. It says: Christ is physically absent but spiritually present. He comes in every moment into the lives of individual human beings, can transform their lives, can create belief, love, and hope. The present Christ will represent himself—and that means the presence of God—here and now. Where and when that happens, an eschatological moment occurs.

That interpretation does not refer to the figure of Jesus but to the mystical body of Christ. “Coming of Jesus” means becoming part of that “body,” which is the presence of God. We can understand the image of the rapture as being taken into it. The focal term here is not “hope” but “being-in.” According to Paul Knitter, this salvation is to be understood “not as an atoning process that takes place outside of oneself but as a transformative unitive experience.”²³

Both interpretations, (a) and (b), are not mutually exclusive but require each other: being in Christ is the faith that confirms the trust in the fulfillment of God’s promise. Hope is faith-based and faith evokes hope. (b) gives inner certainty, (a) leads to action in the world. (b) gives spiritual strength, while (a) helps to cope with experiences of injustice and motivates to struggle for justice. Both belong to each other like breathing in and out, or like resting in a safe harbor and sailing out to the rough sea. They can also be corrective to each other: By going back to the source of hope, faith can “empty” certain assumptions of what shall be hoped for. Hope can be an expression of individual or collective egocentrism, or part of a religio-political ideology. Then faith can lead to a critique of hope. The correction also works in the other direction: An introverted, unworldly faith primarily concerned about the own salvation can be open to social, economic, and political affairs by a “theology of hope.”

Both interpretations, (a) and (b), are based on a symbolic understanding of the return of Jesus. A symbol has two levels: the imagery on the surface and the deeper meaning that it points to. One needs to go behind the surface and spell out the meaning as I did in my twofold interpretation (a) and (b). On the surface level, there is an unresolvable tension between the specific imageries of the religious traditions. In the Christian faith, the imagery portrays the return of Christ, in Shia-Islam the reappearance of the Mahdi, in Judaism the arrival of the Messiah. These differences on the figurative surface of the symbol cannot be overcome, but they can be transcended by turning from the pictorial

22. Romans 8: 1; 1 Corinthians 12: 27; 2 Corinthians 5: 17; Galatians 2: 20; Philippians 2: 5.

23. Paul Knitter, “My Buddha-nature and my Christ-nature,” *Theology without Walls. The Transreligious Imperative*, edited by Jerry L. Martin (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 67.

level to the deeper sense to which they point, and to the posture they intend to evoke. All those visions express an ultimate hope. But they differ in the mythological images in which they express that hope. A literal understanding of the eschatological symbol neglects the apophatic character of eschatological proclamations. If one could give way for such a shift of perspective and put more emphasis on the truth *behind* the eschatological imagery than on the images themselves, the difference between the Christian and Islamic eschatology could diminish.²⁴

The meaning of eschatological symbols is not to be conceived only in terms of their semantic content but also in terms of the pragmatic function: they firstly intend to evoke certainties and attitudes in the addressees, and secondly give them orientation and motivation for action. The semantic dimension consists in a proclamation, the pragmatic dimension in an evocation. Thus, to understand a symbol one needs not only to ask what it *says* semantically but what it intends to *do*. It wants to exert an influence on the recipient, to transform him/her existentially. Eschatological symbols do not report future events but they want to give solace, create hope and strengthen trust. And they do not only intend to transform the inner attitude of the addressees but lead them to action.

Karl Rahner reflected on how the eschatological statements in the Bible could and should be understood. He distinguished between eschatology and apocalypics, and criticized an apocalyptic understanding of eschatological statements that interprets them “as anticipatory, eyewitness accounts of a future which is still outstanding.”²⁵ Biblical apocalyptic speaks of the future as if the writers were eyewitnesses. Contrary to such an understanding, Rahner insists that eschatological statements are not the plot outline of a drama whose final act we know in advance. They are rather “conclusions from the experience of the Christian present.”²⁶ They strengthen faith and hope *now*. They pledge that

24. For symbolic interpretations of the return of Jesus in Islamic theology, see: Fatih Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah* (footnote 6), 177–193. Fethullah Gülen for example is concerned with the nature of Jesus’ body and regards it as a spiritual body that exerts a God-provided influence. “The coming of the Messiah as a spiritual personality simply means that a spirit of compassion or a phenomenon of mercy will come to the foreground, a breeze of clemency will waft over humanity, and human beings will compromise and agree with each other” (Muhammad Fethullah Gülen: *Questions and Answers about Islam*, vol. 2 [Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2005], 148–149). For Said Nursi, Jesus who represents “the collective personality of Christianity will kill al-Dajjāl, who represents the collective personality of disbelief.” See: Said Nursi, *Risāla-i Nur Collection, The Words* (Somerset, NY: The Light, 2010), 347.

25. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). (Translation of “Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums” [Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1976], 431).

26. *Ibid.*, 432.

the present life of the individual believer, of the community of the believers, and the world as a whole is not a groundless, aimless, and meaningless process but in the good hands of God. Eschatological symbols are statements of *present* meanings, not of future facts. They want to encourage the believers to not lose faith and to not give up hope in the face of all the suffering, injustice, and oppression they are confronted with. They want to assure the believers that God's power is stronger than all the oppressive forces. They want to empower them to live according to that hope, and to practice justice especially towards the needy and the poor.

According to the first interpretation (a), the symbol of Jesus' return evokes the hope that divine justice will prevail over human sinfulness. This attitude leads to acting that strives to *do* justice to everybody. It motivates to struggle for justice and liberation here and now. There is a close connection between eschatology and ethics, as can be seen in Matthew 25–31–46. Following (b), it evokes faith in being embedded in the presence of God as mediated by Jesus, the Christ, and it stimulates to act as a member of the mystical body of Christ.