Apocalyptic Thought in Christianity and Buddhism

Jan Van Bragt
Professor Emeritus, Nanzan University

INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to present here, in this introductory talk, a general picture of apocalyptic thinking in the Judeo-Christian and Buddhist traditions against the background of which the millenarian traits detected in present-day religious movements, especially in Asia, may become more understandable and easier to judge. Not being a specialist in apocalyptics myself, I have tried to summarize for my own and your convenience what some recent authoritative authors have written about the question. I am aware that you know already full well many of the things I am going to say. So, consider this a refresher course, meant to alert us to possible ingredients of present-day millenarian movements.

There is a preliminary question: Is it true that now, as we rapidly approach the threshold of the third millennium, there is a stronger millenarian ferment in religious and secular movements than, let us say, thirty years ago? The answer to this question may have to be distilled from the reports in this symposium. Let me offer only a few hints, not limited to the Asian scene.

Stephen O'Leary speaks of our age as "a world where bright utopic visions compete with increasingly plausible scenarios of global catastrophe,"[1] and writes: "The appeal of apocalyptic prophecy has endured through the ages, but its popularity has undergone a remarkable resurgence in the latter half of the twentieth century."[2] For a lighter touch: in an article in the *Daily Yomiuri* of January 7 of this year, entitled "No Shortage of New Year's 'Revelations'," the author identifies no less than nine different sites on the internet devoted to apocalyptic predictions.

And, reading recently an article by David Toolan on "New Age," I was struck by the following passage:

> New Agers are neither nostalgic nor despairing. Quite the contrary, they are bullish millenialists. They welcome the death of the old as the necessary, if painful, prelude to a major cultural realignment. They see themselves as bearers of a paradigm shift...– and thus as the messianic vanguard of a cultural reawakening that will lead, not just to a mending of society, but to its remaking. Something big and new is about to be born, they claim, out of our social crisis.[3]

INTER-RELIGIO 31 / Summer 1997

The question which I must address could be formulated as follows: How is it possible that a mere number, stuck rather arbitrarily to our age, excites human fears and expectations and leads to extraordinary, and apparently very irrational, human behavior?[4] Would it be possible to detect a kind of logic behind this apparently totally irrational thing or, at least, to unravel the knot of human psychological impulses that leads millenarian rhetoric continually to find an audience?

The most plausible hypothesis to work with in our attempt at understanding could be that millenarian movements rest basically on universal human feelings but need specific cultural conditions – especially the presence of apocalyptic thought in the culture – to take on that specific form.

Since apocalyptic thought is clearly present in the Judeo-Christian tradition – to the extent that the whole terminology used in the question derives from it – I shall start my investigation there, and subsequently broach the question of whether an equivalent or analogy can be found in the Buddhist tradition. Other traditions will be left out of the picture except insofar as they may have influenced the traditions under consideration.

<center>THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION</center>

Here, four terms appear to lay claim to our attention: eschatology, apocalypse, messianism, and the millennium. Apocalypse and millennium will have to take central stage, but they necessarily imply the more general idea of eschatology, and most often seem to appeal to a Messianic figure.

<center>*(a) Eschatology*</center>

On the most primordial level, humans appear to feel the need to fix humanity in a divinely instituted cosmic order, in space and time. In most (primitive) cultures there are myths of origin: the idea of a divine Ur-time that is cyclically reenacted in human life. Humanity is thereby linked to an 'ultimate of beginnings' in what is called a 'protology.'

In the Jewish tradition, protology is also present (first in the paradigmatic story of the exodus and later in the Genesis story of creation) but there appeared in addition the idea of an end whereby the nature of the human experience can be defined in terms of fulfillment or fruition: an 'ultimate of endings', an eschatology. Thus the Jewish tradition is directed toward the future and time becomes linear (although not exclusively so). In the Jewish tradition, the *eschaton* is given different names ('the Day of Yahweh', 'the Day of Judgment', 'the Kingdom of God', 'the New Jerusalem', 'the Resurrection'), and more or less prominence is given to the Messiah, the saving figure who would introduce the *eschaton*. This

eschatological expectation was kept alive mainly by the prophetic tradition. A. George puts it this way: "From the days of the Old Testament to the days of the New Testament, the People of God had their gaze directed toward the future. This is one of the traits that distinguished them from the surrounding nations. While the latter lived in the closed circle of perpetually recurring natural cycles, Israel was forever directed toward the salvation that was to come."[5]

In fact, with the arrival of Christianity, which believes that Messiah and salvation have already come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, this direction might have been reversed, but *de facto* was not, since from the beginning the idea prevailed that salvation would be definitively accomplished and the Reign of God fully arrive with the second coming of Christ in the *parousia*.

(b) Apocalypse

What does apocalyptic thought (the apocalyptic literature) add to the eschatological ideas found in the Jewish Scriptures?

A first and basic answer is given by Bernard McGinn: "General eschatology becomes apocalyptic when it announces details on the future course of history and the imminence of its divinely appointed end."[6]

The term 'apocalypse' is used as the name of a literary genre and is derived from the apocalyptic work we know best, the *Apocalypse of John* in the New Testament. As a literary genre, however, apocalypse is older than its title. It is found in Judaism from the third century BC onwards. The best known Jewish apocalypse is, of course, the *Book of Daniel*, which was taken up into the Hebrew Scriptures. It dates from the second century BC and it is significant that it was written in response to the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes that led to the Maccabean revolt (ca. 168 BC). Among the details it relates concerning the end of time are the great tribulation and the intervention of Michael, the head of the heavenly hosts. From the second century AD on, several Christian compositions are called by this name, for instance, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, and in Judaism also the genre lived on into Rabbinic times.

If we want to give a more detailed answer to the question of what distinguishes the apocalyptic genre from the rest of the biblical writings, the following traits can be adduced:

a. it presents revelations given to persons taken up to the heavens and it imparts 'secret knowledge' – a knowledge about nature and the undercurrents of history, not contained in the scriptural revelation (and even presented there as knowledge reserved to God; cf. the book of Job);

b. as to literary style, allegory abounds and numerical symbolism is prominent;

c. it contains an elaborate angelology: angels play several important roles, as interpreters of visions, regulators of natural phenomena, etc.;

d. it offers a periodization of history which "entails the idea that God has divided history into eras or epochs, at the consummation of which the messianic era is expected to dawn upon those selected for redemption";[7]

e. it introduces a strong dualism of good and evil. Seen essentially as a struggle of good against evil, history then takes on the character of a drama, wherein the 'adversarial element' is of primary importance: the stronger the adversary, the more glorious the final victory. It must be remarked that this strong dualism is not present in the rest of Scripture. "In Scripture, evil as such is no independent metaphysical entity (but a question of the moral choice that confronts man in his daily behavior)....Ontologically speaking, the scriptural world is monistic. In apocalypticism, on the other hand, we find a clear dualistic outlook."[8] We face here the question of the origin of this dualism, this pitting of the Angel of Darkness against the Prince of Light. Does its appearance point to an external influence, from the Persian Mazda religionfor instance, as is often surmised, or could this ontologization and personification of evil have been evoked by the excessive suffering a persecution implies?

Among the many apocalyptic works appearing in the Judeo-Christian world from the third century BC onwards, the *Book of Revelation* or the *Apocalypse of John* merits our special attention since, as part of the Christian canonical Scripture, it was endowed with special authority. I must honestly say that I have had very little use for John's Apocalypse in my Christian life (except for short passages from the messages to the seven churches and the description of the heavenly Jerusalem). It has always felt to me overly dramatic, full of esoteric elucubrations, and even alien to the spirit of the New Testament as I understood it. Maybe I should say that it did not appeal to me because it did not feel existentially relevant to me. The question may then be: what could bring people to experience this Scripture as relevant to them?

As to its character, "The Apocalypse of the New Testament is not a book of doom. On the contrary, it is a message of encouragement and hope for the Christians in difficult circumstances at the end of the first century. The pagan power of the Roman Empire seemed bent on crushing the young churches, but the author announces to them their liberation and the

triumph of the resurrected Christ. In this difficult context, it is not surprising that strong and impressive images are used [and the liberation is presented as imminent].”[9]

As to the parts of the (loosely structured) *Book of Revelation* that may be most germane to the question of millenarianism:

a.   Right at the beginning and again at the end there is the theme of temporal urgency and imminence: “The time of fulfillment is near” (1: 3); “‘Yes, I come soon.’ Amen, Lord Jesus, come” (22:20).

b.   The description of the end time in chapters 19-21:
     19:11-21: The army of heaven, led by the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” slays the beast and the false prophet;
     20:1-6: after Satan is bound by a big chain, Saints are resurrected and “reign with Christ for a thousand years;”
     20:7-10: the army of the again unleashed Satan is destroyed by fire from heaven and Satan himself thrown into the “lake of fire and brimstone,” this time for good;
     20:11-15: this final victory is followed by the Last Judgment and the destruction of death itself;
     21:1 ff: a new heaven and a new earth, the New Jerusalem, is born.

All in all, we have here the final victory of good over evil, and thus the resolution of the dualism. This final victory then takes the form of a new creation, a reign of apparently eternal and other-worldly bliss, sufficient to compensate for all the evil and suffering here on earth. The remarkable thing is, however, that the final battle is to be fought twice and that the final, heavenly salvation is preceded by a reign of the good on this very earth, which lasts for a thousand years between the two battles: the millennium. The millennium thus appears originally in the Book of Revelation as an interim earthly reign of the good after a penultimate battle with evil, led by a messianic figure. I doubt, however, whether the millennium is ever understood in that strict sense in Millenarian movements.

We must mention here, by the way, that the New Testament also contains other apocalyptic passages, namely in the gospels: Jesus himself talking about the end time in what are called the ‘little apocalypses’ in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 12, 17, 19, and 21. Here, however, the essential idea is simply the birth pangs and tribulations that will usher in the messianic age, together with the vigilance required because it is not for us to know the time of the *eschaton*.

The *Periodization of history* found in apocalyptic literature appears to correspond to a human desire to know “what time it is in history.” Theoretically, this seems to be a larger conception than that of the end of time, but its main function nevertheless, appears to be to calculate how one

is situated with regard to the end of time (definitive end or end of a world cycle). Used as we are to the modern idea of progress, it strikes us as strange that traditionally, "all societies agree in situating humanity at the end of a progressive cosmic decline." In other words, "in the mythic awareness of temporality, the present is always the time of greatest evil."[10] This is very clear in Indian and Persian cosmic ideas, but applies also to the West. For example, of people in the Middle Ages it has been said: "Those 'medieval' men were living not in the Middle Ages, in their own minds at least, but at the very end of the Last one."[11]

The *Apocalypse of John* itself does not offer an elaborated periodization of history, but simply situates humanity in the immediate vicinity of the last events. Soon afterwards the idea of the 'World Week' (found in the Epistle to Barnabas, second century AD) became operative in the Christian world. History since creation was hereby divided into six periods of 1000 years each, to be followed by the Sabbath, the millennium. One thus "stamped the template of the divine week [of creation] on happenings of history."[12] The Christ event was then originally situated in the exact middle of the sixth millennium (Anno Mundi 5500). This, of course, left only a few hundred years before the eschatological events and, as time went on, Church authorities had to place the Jesus event earlier, in order to avoid the immediate historical relevance of eschatology and to stave off the popular excitement this could provoke – in other words, to forestall the rise of millenarian movements that could upset the established order. In the seventh century, then, the English historian Bede changed the "epochal rhetoric" and "shifted to the chronological system...that counted time not by Annus Mundi, the World Year, but by Annus Domini, the Year of Our Lord."[13] Herewith the eschatological implications of the older system were done away with, but not, apparently, the habit of counting in millennia.[14]

As already noted in the case of the *Book of Revelation*, apocalypse in general is no mere preaching of doom. It certainly announces great tribulation, but at the same time an ideal future. In it "the images of disaster and the [glorious] millennium are inseparably linked, so that catastrophe without redemption is almost unthinkable."[15] Or, as another author has it, "Millenarians promise more than an accurate prediction of catastrophe.... Even at their most catastrophic, millenarians insist that a classical tragedy must be fought through only to reach a genuinely good time."[16] Apocalyptic discourse offers a dramatic mixture of catastrophic and utopian thinking that appeals to the deepest human feelings, not only of fear but also of longing. Somebody has called it "the ultimate carrot and stick tactic." The apocalyptic scenario seems to suppose that evil can and will be overcome only after it has reached its highest, critical point.

In other words, apocalyptic discourse does not simply predict an end to history (which may be catastrophic), but an end that is the completion of history and justifies it – an end that carries history into eternity. On this point, it differs from the rhetoric of the antinuclear and environmental movements, although these are sometimes criticized for their 'apocalyptic tone,' because here all hope of redemption is absent and only a scenario of doom is offered.

Since the apocalyptic genre may strike us as an unbridled run of the imagination and the acme of the irrational or the absurd, it is good to listen once to (the already often quoted) Stephen O'Leary's interpretation. He writes: "I want to stress the essential nobility of the quest for eschatological meaning over and against its absurdity" (p.223). He discovers in it a logic of its own, not a logic of reason, but a "logic of the entire human person," a "narrative rationality" (p.28). According to him, apocalypse is a quest for the meaning of evil, that supreme problem of human existence before which reason is impotent. "Apocalyptic functions as a symbolic theodicee, a mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil,...by way of a dramatic construction of temporality" (p.14). In apocalyptic thinking, "the existence of evil and suffering is no longer senseless, but has a place in the cosmic scheme" (p. 14). There is at work in it the "ultimate exigency" of a just God or of the aesthetic wholeness of the world-historical process.

(c) Millenarian Movements

After studying the apocalyptic discourse present in the Judeo-Christian tradition (and analogously in several other traditions), we are now faced with two questions:

(i) when, how, and why, at certain moments, are these ideas 'activated', as it were and made to give rise to socio-historical movements; why do people in certain circumstances take that highly allegorical discourse literally, consider the apocalyptic predictions as relevant for their own age, and start arranging their own lives accordingly?

(ii) what dynamics are at work in these movements, and what shape and development are they apt to show?

As to *why* millenarian movements arise, Academia does not seem to have come up with a satisfactory answer:

> ...there are but two current scholarly explanations for the birth of millenarian movements. The first asserts that millenarianism arises from feelings of relative deprivation in matters of status, wealth, security, or self-esteem. Millenarian movements appear in periods of crisis [such as]...the sack of a city...or the passage from isolated agrarian community to industrial megalopolis.... The second complementary explanation says that millenarian movements spring from contact between two cultures, when

one is technologically far superior to the other. Millenarianism spreads within the settled, inferior culture, whose polity is critically threatened."[17]

Schwartz then adds, however, that these theories are full of holes. "Millenarian movements have not 'burst out' where relative deprivation has been most apparent: eighteenth century Ireland, nineteenth century Ethiopia, the southeastern coast of modern India," and, on the other hand, "where across this imperfect world has relative deprivation ever been absent or a crisis lacking?"[18] The author then concludes: "At best, deprivation predisposes, contact precipitates." Jan Nattier also concludes that other contributing factors are required to provoke apocalyptic revolutionary activity, and names: "1) the political system must be invested with religious significance..., i.e., seen as a key element in the cosmic structure; 2) the would-be rebels must believe that their enterprise is divinely sanctioned." She then adds: "These ideas are generally supplied by a preexisting apocalyptic mythology."[19] O'Leary directly tackles the question from this last point. The question then becomes: "What are the reasons for the persistent appeal of apocalyptic discourse?" This stresses, of course, that millenarian movements do not simply arise wherever certain historical circumstances prevail, but presuppose in the culture the existence of a "subterranean spring of symbolic resources," namely, "a textually embodied community of discourse founded in the accepted canon and occasionally augmented by the production of new revelations and interpretive strategies."[20]

This idea is, of course, important for the study of the history of millenarian movements. For example, does Japanese culture contain such a "subterranean spring of symbolic discourse [and prophecy]? Can one speak of truly millenarian movements in premodern Japan? For the present, however, one could argue that the millenarian elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition (as also the further prophecies of Nostradamus et al.) have become the common property of people in nearly all cultures.

What, then, is the difference between people like us, who are aware of the apocalyptic prophecies but keep them at a distance, and millenarians? Hillel Schwartz offers a precious hint: "...in practice, millenarianism is distinguished by close scrutiny of the present, from which arise urgent issues of human agency."[21]

Millenarianists submit the events and situations of the present to close scrutiny, in order to discover therein coincidences with the data of prophecy. Thereby, they often have recourse to very intricate and ingenious calculations, a 'millennial arithmetic,' starting from the numbers present in the prophecy, in order to determine the date of the *eschaton* "with some degree of specificity and proximity."[22] In this scrutiny of the present, special attention is given to the evils of the time. Lists of these evils convince

people that the forces of evil in the world have now reached the critical mass required for them finally to be defeated. In this 'calculus of evil' two processes seem to be at work: one, that of "pyramiding the evils of the present-day into a structure of cosmic significance;"[23] two, that of identifying the root cause of evil (the "great beast" of the *Book of Revelation*) with a particular phenomenon (social system, state, person).

From such a scenario millenarian movements arise when practical concrete consequences are drawn for human action. Here, visionary leaders appear to play the pivotal role. It is they who "take millenarianism from diagnosis to prescription."[24] These figures tend to be identified, or identify themselves, with Messianic figures, come to mobilize the forces of good for the final battle against evil, or to save the good people, 'the elect,' in that ultimate hour of trial by leading them to a 'safe place.' Thus David Koresh, leader of the Branch Dravidian sect, which came to a fiery end at Ranch Apocalypse near Waco, Texas, simply said: "If the Bible is true, I am Christ."[25] And the identifications in which Asahara, the leader of Aum Shinrikyo, indulged in are well known. The idea of a trek to a place of refuge or promised land often becomes central in millenarian movements. Thus Schwartz calls 'migration' the 'prime metaphor' of millenarian movements, and writes: "Just as millenarian thought focuses upon golden ages, so millenarian movements have golden places."[26]

Around those leaders form apocalyptic communities of people who see themselves as the elect, destined to be saved in the general catastrophe and to reach the New Age. Against the background of the dramatic opposition of good and evil, they naturally come to see themselves as the target of a conspiracy; a psychology of martyrdom comes into effect. That 'astringent phase' of withdrawal from and opposition to society may have been preceded by an 'expansive phase' during which they tried to convince society at large.

Knowing themselves to live in such a dramatic period of transformation, millenarians often do not feel themselves bound by the traditional rules of society. The deliberate breaking of taboos then takes on a symbolic meaning: obscenity, nudity, killing of cattle, bonfires of earthly possessions, but also fasting and celibacy.

Much variation is possible in millenarian movements according to which phenomena are seen as marks of the end and central embodiments of evil; the stage of the *eschaton* they suppose they are in or the amount of time left before the end; what they think should be done to escape the imminent catastrophe and enter the New Age, and so on. The 'ethos' that defines the image of the New World may also differ from case to case. This may be primarily a 'restorative ethos'; seeking a return to a lost purity, or

primarily a 'retributive' one; seeking to balance an unfortunate past by a fortunate future.[27]

Millenarianism can have political implications, especially when its speculations on evil and time come to be combined with ideas on authority. A priori, one would think that "predictions of an imminent overturning of the earthly order are inimical to traditional structures," but history appears to prove that apocalyptic discourse has been as well used for legitimation as for subversion. Thus Joseph Kitagawa remarks that "the symbols of Maitreya/Cakravartin were often domesticated by the Buddhist kings to legitimate their reigns."[28] And O'Leary concludes: "The apocalyptic myth is broad and expansive enough to provide symbolic resources for both the legitimation and the critique of religions and secular power."[29]

Because of the possible threat to the established social order constituted by millenarian movements, religious and secular authorities are faced with the question of how to evaluate these movements and what attitude to take towards them. Historically, these attitudes have shown different shades: from trying to quarantine them (as with Mormonism in Utah in the later 1800s); and fencing them off (as in the present-day anti-cult campaigns against the Unification Church); to 'lancing the boil' (as in the Belgian imprisonment of Simon Kimbangu and his first disciples).[30]

We should finally pay explicit attention to the psychological factors at work in the millenarian movements or constituting the appeal of the apocalyptic discourse. Earlier, I have surmised that "basic human fears and aspirations" must be at work in them. Can we be more specific? Some authors have seen in them "an expression of a universally human fantasy of returning to the womb and resuming unhindered power in a practically timeless world."[31] If that sounds too general and psychological, we can at least think of a rebellion against the tyranny of time and the death it inexorably brings near (in China, millenarians often deemed themselves immortal). In a more modest vein, we could speak of the universal utopian dream of a fully satisfactory state of happiness that breaks with the present unsatisfactory state and its insecurity with regard to the future.

This may also imply a desire for the radically new (not bound by past *karma*), for 'radical discontinuity', for a New Year feeling in the second degree. To quote O'Leary a last time: "...audiences may be impelled by the desire for consummation, for narrative closure, for absolute knowledge, an irrepressible tendency to anticipate conclusions, both catastrophic and blissful;"[32] in other words, a desire for finality and the reassuringly predictable.

We can only hope that the following reports and discussions will throw more light on this question too.

When considering millenarian movements in Asia, it may be important to know whether and to what extent apocalyptic elements are present in the most widespread religion of Asia – Buddhism. The Buddhist elements that are mostly mentioned in this connection are, of course, the *mappō* (latter day lay) idea and the figure of the future Buddha, Maitreya. My probe of these elements to judge their apocalyptic content will have to be brief and cannot go into any detail.

A methodological *caveat* seems to be in order here; be extremely careful not to read Judeo-Christian elements into the Buddhist tradition. *Hineininterpretierung* may be the main pitfall in this matter.

(a) The Mappō Idea

Let us remark right away that the periodization of Buddhist history in the three periods of True Law, Semblance Law, and Latter (Day) Law (*shō zō matsu*), so familiar to the Japanese, is a rather late growth. It apparently originated in China in the sixth century AD, and the 'pre-founder' of the T'ien-t'ai School, Hui-ssu (515-577) may have been the first to formulate it in writing. At that time, the feeling that the Buddhist Law was rapidly declining and might be near to its extinction may have been triggered, or at least strongly promoted by, the devastation of institutional Buddhism during the Northern Chou persecution of 574-577. Then, by putting the Buddha's death in 949 BC and allotting 1000 years to the True Law period and 500 years to the Semblance Law period (or vice versa), one concluded that one had entered the Latter Days in 552. In Japan, the same calculation also became influential, but soon a different arithmetic that allotted 1000 years to both periods came to prevail. This made the *mappō* begin in 1052. These calculations certainly show an affinity with the 'apocalyptic arithmetic' in the Judeo-Christian world. Also, some revolutionary (religious) conclusions were drawn from this periodization: both San-chieh-chiao (the Three Stages sect) and the Pure Land school (especially Tao-cho) concluded that the traditional Buddhist practices were not practicable for people of the Latter Days, who, because of their diminished capacities, needed an easier path.

In early Buddhist scriptures the term *mappō* appears, but there it simply denotes the idea of 'decadence' or 'extinction' of the Dharma. Indeed, the idea that the Dharma, revealed by Sākyamuni Buddha here on earth, would have only a limited time of existence or validity appears to be very old. Around 200 BC, some sūtras contain the idea that the Buddha Law would endure for a thousand years – indeed, here again is the number 1000. This appears to me to be the most basic and surprising element of all

mappō talk. How can we explain why the Buddha's disciples soon came to see the Buddha's path as enduring for only a limited time?

Were these people so deeply impressed by the idea of the impermanence of all earthly things that they naturally included even the Buddha Law? Used as I am to the idea that while all human kingdoms and ideologies come and go, the 'Church' will stand as a rock till the very end, this does not sound very convincing to me. Further explanation appears to be needed, and this may be partially provided by the Indian time scheme of cosmic cycles, which begin with an ideal situation (people being very spiritual and having a lifespan of 8000 years) and then show a gradual decline, until finally, people are more like beasts and live for only ten years. As already mentioned, Buddhists situated the coming of the Buddha Sākyamuni in the lower reaches of the decline cycle, probably for the simple reason that they saw their own time, with its lifespan of 60-80 years, as situated there. People would then soon decline further, to the point where they could no longer understand or practice the lofty Buddha Law. Indeed, J. Nattier defines *mappō* as a time when "traditional religious practice loses its effectiveness and the spiritual capacity of human beings reaches an all-time low."[33]

Another factor that may have contributed to the idea of the end of the Dharma was the experience of the difficulty (or impossibility) of reaching *satori* or *nirvana* (any longer). Peter Fischer, for example, writes that ca. 300 years after Sākyamuni's death Buddhists experienced the methods of attaining enlightenment as ineffective.[34] If true, this is rather important, but is it proven?

Rather soon two different scenarios for the extinction of the Dharma were imagined: (1) an abrupt and clear-cut end, and, (2) an indeterminate period of, as it were, 'petering out' of the Dharma (the Semblance Law period) after a period of full vigor (True Law). The latter idea is clearly present in Vasubhandu's *Abhidarmakosa*, which also defines the difference between the two periods: "The true Law of the Tathāgata is twofold in form: one, doctrine (*agama, kyō*) and, two, manifestation (*adhigama, shō*)…. The Dharma of manifestation has only a duration of thousand years, but the Dharma of doctrine persists beyond that."[35]

We are now ready to ask the question whether this *mappō* idea shows any affinity with eschatological, apocalyptic thinking. As common elements we can cite:

a.   a preoccupation with time: it also asks the question "what time it is in history" (at least in the history of Buddhism);

b.   although in some scriptures internal-Buddhist reasons (such as sectarian struggles or the acceptance of women into the Sangha) and

external reasons (such as persecution) for the decline are mentioned, "in the scholastic texts, in particular, there is the tendency to treat the decline and disappearance of the Dharma as part of an inexorable process" (Jan Nattier);

c. a thousand–year span (millennium) is seen as historically meaningful;

d. the further periodization of history in China.

On the other hand, however, most of the basic ideas of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic scheme appear to be absent:

a. *mappō* is not (directly) about the end of the world or of human history, but about the end of the Buddha Dharma in this cosmic cycle. It does not function as a narrative whereby the end provides the meaning of history. Its direct theme is purely religious: the Buddha Law and the human capacity for it;

b. One does not find in *mappō* thinking the strong dualism of and struggle between good and evil that seeks a solution through a catastrophic climax. In the canonical Scriptures only pure decline is mentioned without reference to dramatic catastrophe or adversarial elements (such as, for example, the Anti-Christ). It can be said, in general, that "in Buddhism, evil is seen as ignorance and error, not as demonic, malicious"[36];

c. The Buddhist eschaton does not bring justification or compensation for the evil in the world through a glorious future. The *mappō* idea by itself does not contain a vision of hope or utopia. The element of hope will be provided by the figure of Maitreya;

d. Not directly concerned with the state of human society, *mappō* ideas by themselves did not give rise to social movements.

(b) The Buddha of the Future: Maitreya

Let me begin my treatment of Maitreya with two texts by Alan Sponberg:

> Along with the figure of Gautama himself, Maitreya is one of the few truly universal symbols occurring throughout the Buddhist tradition, one holding a role of importance in Theravāda as well as Mahāyāna cultures.

And

> Here we have an aspect of Buddhism that resonates significantly with some of the most cherished themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition.[37]

> The Maitreya figure certainly resonates with one aspect of Judeo-Christian eschatology: the expectation of happy events in the future. To quote Sponberg once more: "In every Buddhist culture Maitreya is a symbol of hope, of the human aspiration for a better life in the future when the glories of the golden past will be regained."[38]

However, as with all popular figures, it is essential to distinguish carefully between the significance of the figure of Maitreya in the Canonical Scriptures and the traits that naturally attached themselves to the figure, in popular religion, under the influence of other religious traditions, or through a transforming political use of the figure.

What does Maitreya basically stand for in canonical Buddhism? He is the Buddha who in the next cosmic cycle will preach the same Dharma as Sākyamuni and his predecessors, and who in that way guarantees the continuity of the Buddhist tradition, the temporary extinction of the Dharma on earth notwithstanding. By this last point the figure of Maitreya is somehow connected to the *mappō* idea: The extinction of Sākyamuni's Dharma is, as it were, a presupposition and condition of the descent of Maitreya, who at present bides his time in the Tusita heaven.

When did Maitreya appear on the Buddhist scene? The Buddhas of the past seem to have made their appearance first, and at a very early date. With them, "the center of gravity of the tradition ...remains firmly in the past."[39] Soon afterwards, however, Buddhism seems to have looked in the direction of the future. In the *Cakkavatti-sihanada* sūtra (ca.200BC) "Sākyamuni prophesies that after a period of decadence a new golden period will begin wherein Maitreya will appear."[40]

What is remarkable is that Maitreya is generally depicted as descending to earth not in the lower reaches of a cosmic decline, as Sakyamuni is supposed to have done, but on an ascending line, when an ideal human situation has already been realized under a Cakravartin king. This ideal 'setting' of Maitreya's descent can, of course, easily become the main focus of attention.

The figure of Maitreya then became the object of Buddhist devotion in a twofold way. First, in what J. Nattier[41] calls the *here/later* scheme (which is by far the oldest and most common one in the canonical Scriptures), the faithful looked forward to being reborn on earth during Maitreya's time. Originally, this was because then there would again be the possibility of reaching *nirvana*. (In Japanese one speaks here of *geshō*) Second, in a *there/later* scheme, people aspired to be reborn in Maitreya's Tusita heaven or Pure Land immediately after their death *jōshō* (In China and Japan, the aspiration to be born in Amida's Pure Land would gradually supplant this devotion, from the seventh century onwards.)

Up to this point the Maitreya myth appears to share with apocalyptic literature only the general human hope of a blessed future. This changes drastically, however, when in non-canonical scriptures and popular movements the figure of Maitreya comes to be interpreted in a *here/now* scheme. Here the coming of Maitreya is foreshortened: instead of the

original date of 5,670,000,000 years in the future, Maitreya is pictured as having come already or as coming in the immediate future. In this tradition, present-day religious and political figures are identified with Maitreya. "The identification of Maitreya with leaders and founders is found constantly throughout Buddhist Asia."[42] In this interpretation, Maitreya was made political use of by kings who wanted to legitimate their reign and also by those who wanted to challenge established authority. In the latter case, we encounter revolutionary upheavals that can be interpreted as millenarian movements. The leaders of these movements, rather than identifying with Maitreya himself (who in the myth has no active role in bringing about the Golden Age), presented themselves as persons destined to prepare the nation for the advent of the New Buddha.

It is especially in China that we find this apocalyptic reinterpretation of the Maitreya figure. "A number of incidences of genuinely revolutionary *here/now* versions of the Maitreya myth are found in Chinese sources."[43] Several authors point out that this was triggered by the preexistence in Chinese culture of a messianic belief, namely, "the Taoist belief in the ever possible appearance of a sage [Perfect Ruler] capable of giving salvation to an elite band of devotees."[44]

"As early as the middle of the sixth century, an apocryphal s)tra [in China]...predicted an apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil, the descent of Maitreya, and the renewal of the world in an ideal form."[45] I guess that this is as near as one can possibly get to the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic ideas. The only differences may be: (1) while a Messiah comes (actively) to inaugurate a whole new era, Maitreya (as already pointed out) is mostly thought to appear when the Golden Age is already in place. (2) while the Judeo-Christian apocalypse is about the definitive end of the world, the Maitreya myth, at least in theory, can be said to evoke the idea of a millennium, but is not about the (definitive) end of time.

What, then, about Maitreya in Korea? In the history of Korean Buddhism Maitreya has certainly been an important figure (cf. the Miroku statues). "Korea held it [Maitreya practice] in high esteem and continued to do so long after Chinese interest in the traditional aspects of Maitreya had died."[46] Of the *here/now* interpretation we hear an echo in the association which the 'Hwarang' (flower boys), that semi-military organization of young men, came to have with Maitreya. And "Maitreya also appears as a major element in the messianic groups [new religions] that have arisen in Korea,"[47] especially the Chungsan-gyo.

Finally, what about the working of the Maitreya myth in Japan? Miyata Noboru sums it up as follows: "[Although Japan received its Buddhism from China] Seldom do we encounter [in Japanese religion and

society] the expectation of a future messiah combined with a detailed or concrete vision of the millennium. Furthermore, movements prophesying Maitreya's advent as a messiah are almost never found."[48] Why this difference with China? The author links this to the idea of world renewal as it existed in Japan's indigenous culture. This is, in general, more a desire for [passive] *yonaori* than "a straightforward desire to actively change the world (*yonaoshi*)". Moreover, "the idea was that the world must be transformed someday but not made radically new. That is, the people longed for a change that was moderate and reformative, not a full-scale eschaton, millennium, or revolution."[49] The desire for *yonaori* was, for instance, very clear in the *okage mairi* and *eejanaika* pilgrimages to Ise at the end of the Edo period, and Maitreya elements were strongly present in them.

Interestingly enough, the author then connects this passive and moderate world renewal sentiment with the figure of the emperor in the Japanese indigenous world view: "According to folk belief, the emperor was a magicoreligious figure capable of achieving a world mending within the structure of the imperial system. The fact that there was little radical sentiment in *yonaori* derives from the people's assumption that the emperor was in control of world mending."[50]

In conclusion, it can be said that apocalyptic elements are practically not to be found in the canonical presentation of Maitreya, although the theme would appear to lend itself to such elements. Thus Alan Sponberg can write: "...the Maitreya myth seems distinctive to me precisely for its lack of eschatological content."[51] The opposite, however, appears to be true in the case of millenarian movements inspired by indigenous aspirations toward world renewal, in Chinese and some other cultures, which have appropriated certain elements of the Maitreya myth.

NOTES

1   Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 4.

2   S. O'Leary, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3   David S. Toolan, in *Cross Currents* 46/3 (1996), p.371.

4   We should remark here, by the way, that the numbers 1000 and 2000 have less objective reality than, for instance, some relative positions of stars and planets that have been interpreted as boding ill for humanity.

    Moreover, the number 2000 makes sense only in the Christian calendar (*Anno Domini*) and has no roots in Asian civilization. In Buddhism, we are rather nearing the year 2500; in China one lives in about the year 50 of the revolution, and in Japan we have started year 9 of Heisei. Why then would the year 2000 have repercussions in Asia?

5   Augustin George, "The Judgment of God," *Concilium* (New York edition) 41 (1969), p. 9.

6   Bernard McGinn, as quoted in S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

7   Lawrence Fine, "APOCALYPSE: Jewish Apocalypticism to the Rabbinic Period," in: Mircea Eliade ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 1, p. 339. I am deeply indebted to this article for what I am writing here.

8   *Ibid.*, p. 341.

9   *Les Dossiers de la Bible*, No. 45 (1992), p. 3.

10   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

11   Richard Landes, as quoted in S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 234, note 44.

12   Hillel Schwartz, "Millenarianism: An Overview," Mircea Eliade ed., *op.cit.*, Vol. 9, p. 522.

13   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 49

14   To assess the amount of apocalyptic excitement around the year 1000 AD, it would be important to know to what extent this new chronology had already taken root among the people.

15   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

16   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

17   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

18   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 528. O'Leary shares the same scepticism towards the current theories. He remarks that it is certainly not only the deprived and downtrodden who are susceptible to apocalyptic rhetoric. "A brief survey of the history of apocalyptic discourse shows that its appeal has historically cut across class lines. The audience of these receptive to prophecy and its interpreters has included emperors, peasants, merchants, and factory workers, the educated and the uneducated alike from Isaac Newton to Ronald Reagan." (*op. cit.*, p. 9) We might remark here, however, that there is a big difference between showing an interest in apocalyptic prediction and staking one's life on a particular interpretation of it by joining a millenarian movement.

19   Jan Nattier, "The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth," in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 42, note 41.

20   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

21   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 522.

22   Cf. S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

23   *Ibid*, , p. 83.

24   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

25   As quoted in S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

26   H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

27   Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 522.

28   Joseph M. Kitagawa, "The Many Faces of Maitreya," in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre, op. cit., p. 17.

29   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

30   See H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 526.

31   See H. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 530.

32   S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

33   Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991, p. 60.

34   Peter Fischer, *Studien zur Enwicklungsgschichte des Mappō-G edankens und zum Mappō-Tōmyō-Ki.* Hamburg, 1976, pp. 30 and 51-52.

35   As quoted in P. Fischer, *Ibid.*, p. 89. We may remark here that the basic distinction between the

two periods, adduced here, will be complemented later (once one distinguishes three periods) by inserting "practice" (*gyō*) between doctrine and manifestation.

36 S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, p.91.

37 Alan Sponberg, in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds. *op. cit.*, pp. 2 and 293.

38 Alan Sponberg, *Ibid.*, p.2.

39 Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time,* p. 21.

40 Peter Fischer, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

41 Jan Nattier, in Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds., *loc. cit.*, pp. 25 ss.

42 Louis Lancaster, "Maitreya," in: Mircea Eliade ed., *op. cit.*, Vol. 9, p.137.

43 Jan Nattier, in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

44 Louis Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

45 Jan Nattier, in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

46 Louis Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

47 Louis Lancaster, *Ibid.*, p. 140.

48 Miyata Noboru, "Types of Maitreya belief in Japan," in: Alan Sponberg & Helen Hardacre eds., *op. cit.*, p. 175.

49 Miyata Noboru, *Ibid.*, p. 187.

50 Miyata Noboru, *Ibid.*, p. 189.

51 Alan Sponberg, *op. cit.*, p. 296.