

ESCHATOLOGY: ETERNAL NOW OR COSMIC FUTURE?

by *Ted Peters*

Abstract. Paul Tillich's eternal now is the ground from which all things emerge and perish in each and every moment. A Tillichean eschatology involves the gathering of all things finite into the eternity of the present moment, into God. Salvation is present moment. But is the "eternal now" enough? This essay offers biblical and theological critiques of Tillich's present eschatology and posits an eschatology that combines Tillich's "eternal now" with Wolfhart Pannenberg's "end-oriented eschatology." The result is an eschatology that recognizes the eternal now in which all things (including all time) belong to God yet with an eye toward the God-given possibilities of the next moment, the future. The end of being is not cessation; rather, it is the fulfillment of time, the consummation of all things.

Keywords: consciousness; eschatology; eternity; ontology; Wolfhart Pannenberg; soteriology; Paul Tillich; time.

Let's start with the present moment, the now. Oh, yes, we can remember our past and imagine our future, yet it is through the lens of the present that the past is past and the future is future. The present is concrete, while past and future are abstract. The present is solid and stable and here now. Therefore, what is present—what is in the now—must be reality. It is in the present that we find being, the solid ground on which we stand. Right? Does this seem right?

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PAST AND FUTURE IN THE PRESENT

It certainly seems right to Paul Tillich. To Tillich the past that counts is the past that is still present. "In every cell of our body, in every trait of our face, in every movement of our soul, our past is present," he writes (Tillich 1963, 127). The past as history is present to us as blessing and curse. As blessing, our personal history and cultural history provide us with identity and opportunity. As curse, the bad habits and personal obsessions inherited from our parents and from our culture predispose us to prejudice and bias. We can be liberated from the curses of the past through repentance, and forgiveness can liberate us for a new and open future.

To Tillich future consciousness prompts awareness of time and, thereby, awareness of the presence of the present. "It is the future that awakens us to the mystery of time. Time runs from the beginning to the end, but our awareness of time goes in the opposite direction. It starts with the anxious anticipation of the end. In the light of the future we see past and present" (Tillich 1963, 123; 1951–1963, 3:395). The essence of future consciousness is that it anticipates an end that is not yet.

The existential impact of future consciousness here is the anticipated loss of the present, the expected ending of the now. My now will come to an end at my death. Your now will come to an end at your death. We are, as Heidegger says, *Sein zum Tode*, being-unto-death. These three belong together: future, end, death. All mark the inescapable loss of the now, the final destruction of the present moment.¹

ONTOLOGICAL SHOCK

Awareness of our future end evokes ontological shock in us. Of reality as a whole we ask, Why is there something and not nothing? Of ourselves we ask, Why am I here if I came from nothing and will return to nothing?

Ontological shock is stunning. We react to shocks by withdrawing. Withdrawal can take the form of denial. Tillich identifies two common ways we deny our future end. The first way is to expect a long life between now and the end. "Long live the Queen!" *Vive la France!* "This nation shall not perish from the earth." The U.S. Marines will change you "forever." Such well-wishing for a long life, whether for a person or a nation, is for Tillich a sign that we are avoiding the inevitable, attempting to escape the cold, hard reality that our end is coming.

The second way is to posit a belief in a hereafter or life after death. Without footnote Tillich seems to agree with Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that such a belief is a projection, a delusional invention of our belief system that refuses to accept our own finitude, our own anticipated end. To expect some new life *after* death exceeds "the limits of essentially justified hope."² Tillich's problem with such a belief is the "after" part. Belief in a hereafter seems to affirm endless time. But in

reality, thinks Tillich, time has an end. That is the nature of time. Time has an end, because time is finite and all finite things are limited.³

The temporal finitude experienced from the inside of our souls as the threat of death becomes for Tillich an existential question. It is the question raised by the prospect of our future nonbeing. To such existential questions Tillich offers theological answers. To this particular question, Tillich answers with eternal life. But what is eternal life? Is it something that comes after temporal life? No, says Tillich. Eternal life has to do with the present, with the now. "The eternal is not a future state of things. It is always present" (Tillich 1951–1963, 3:400).

LIFE AFTER DEATH?

In repudiating life after death, Tillich denies that it is taught in the New Testament: "It [salvation] is certainly not, what popular imagination has made of it, escaping from hell and being received into heaven, in what is badly called 'the life hereafter.' The New Testament speaks of eternal life, and eternal life is not continuation of life after death" (Tillich 1963, 114). So what does Tillich think the New Testament teaches? He writes,

Eternal life is beyond past, present, and future; we come from it, we live in its presence, we return to it. It is never absent—it is the divine life in which we are rooted and in which we are destined to participate in freedom—for God alone has eternity. . . . We are mortal like every creature, mortal with our whole being—body and soul—but we are also kept in the eternal life *before* we lived on earth, *while* we are living in time, and *after* our time has come to an end. (Tillich 1963, 114–15)

Salvation as taught by the New Testament Tillich reads is not to be awaited in hope; rather, it is to be found in the eternal God above or below the present moment. To avoid placing eternity in the future, Tillich frequently uses spatial images. He places eternity "above" time or "in the depths" of time: "There is no time *after* time, but there is eternity *above* time" (1963, 125).⁴

With the eternal *above* time, we do not look for it in the future; we do not look for it beyond the end to temporal history. "The *eschaton* becomes a matter of present experience without losing its futuristic dimension; we stand *now* in face of the eternal, but we do so looking ahead toward the end of history and the end of all which is temporal in the eternal" (1951–1963, 3:396).

Tillich forcefully states that eternity is not a temporal event, and to think of eternity in terms of time is to make a categorical mistake: "The transition from the temporal to the eternal, the 'end' of the temporal, is not a temporal event—just as creation is not a temporal event. Time is the form of the created finite (thus being created with it), and eternity is its inner aim, the *telos* of the created finite, permanently elevating the finite into itself" (1951–1963, 3:399). Yet eternity is not simply divorced from

time. Eternity includes temporality just as the infinite includes the finite: "What happens in time and space, in the smallest particle of matter as well as in the greatest personality, is significant for eternal life. And since eternal life is participation in the divine life, finite happening is significant for God" (1951–1963, 3:398).

What is eternal belongs to God, the ground of all being. The eternal God is inclusive of all time, freed from the finitude of time because this God is inclusive of past and present and future. We finite creatures, in contrast, are subject to the threat of nonbeing. This threat takes the form of temporality. As temporal creatures, we are estranged. Time places us in bondage. We are in bondage to the present moment. "We are aware of the eternal to which we belong and from which we are estranged by the bondage of time" (1963, 123). Is it the case, for Tillich, that God can enjoy something we can never enjoy, namely, eternity? Is it the case that what Tillich calls the "now" is bondage for us while it is eternity for God? If it is bondage for us, how can we also greet it as eternal life?

ETERNITY WITHOUT A FUTURE?

I find two flaws in Tillich's argument, one biblical and one theological.

First, the biblical flaw. Is it accurate to assume that the New Testament affirms "eternal now" and disavows life after death? How could the central symbol *resurrection of the dead* imply anything other than life after death? How could the Easter resurrection of Jesus following his death on Good Friday refer to anything other than a new life after the end of the present one? How could the connecting symbol of *new creation* and the promise that, like Christ, we too shall rise on the last day (1 Corinthians 15:20) avoid referring to a future event following our world's end? Rather than anticipate our future end with anxiety because it threatens us with nonbeing, the New Testament greets the future with hope for resurrection and new life. The New Testament answer to the existential question posed by our own temporal end is not resignation to the present now but rather hope for future renewal.

The biblical words that come into English as *eternity* refer to an age that lasts a long time, perhaps forever. Isaiah uses the Hebrew word *olam* when writing, "I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age" (Isaiah 60:15 NRSV). In the New Testament the principal term for eternity is *aion*, which comes into English also as *aeon*, meaning literally an age that lasts for a long time. This is the term used in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life [*zoen aionion*]." Eastern Orthodox liturgies preserve the New Testament sense of the word when repeating that salvation lasts "unto ages of ages."

Tillich is certainly right, of course, that eternal life has a present dimension to it; yet I contend that this present dimension of eternity draws its

power proleptically from the promised resurrection in the future. In Paul's great baptismal passage in Romans 6, he announces that now, in the present time, we can walk in "newness of life." Why? Because we are united with Christ's death in the past, and in the future we will be united with Christ in the resurrection. Note the future tense of the verb, *esometha* (we will be): "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). And in that same chapter, Paul connects eternal life with the end: "The end [*telos*] is eternal life" (Romans 6:22). If Paul has no difficulty connecting eternal life with the future and with the end, why should Tillich? If the Bible can celebrate a long life that lasts for ages, and if the Bible can look forward to life after death, why can't Tillich?

In summary, Tillich is right in emphasizing the presence of the eternal God in the now, especially the now of faith. Yet, Tillich misleads us when he cuts the eternal now off from the future, especially the transformatory future that carries us beyond death into new life, beyond the end of the present creation into the new creation.

ETERNITY AS THE WHOLE OF TIME

Second, the theological flaw. Tillich says that because time is a category of finitude it must have an end, not just a purpose (*telos*) but a finish (*finis*). Cosmic time, like us, is mortal. The accompanying theological correlate, according to Tillich, is that Christian faith must accept this end and its accompanying mortality. We must avoid the delusion of hoping for immortality, hoping for life ages into the future without end.

Yet we might ask, Just what is the connection between time and mortality? Does the finitude of temporal passage require mortality? No, says Wolfhart Pannenberg, among other theologians. In principle, we can have both time and life. "Finitude does not always have to include mortality. . . . The eschatological hope of Christians knows a finitude of creaturely existence without death" (Pannenberg 1991–1998, 2:271).

Pannenberg's alternative to eternity's residing above time or in the depth of time is to conceive of eternity as the whole of time. This is because the essence of anything, especially the essence of our personhood, is contextual. Who we are is determined by the whole context of which we are a part, and the meaning of the present moment is determined by the whole context of our personal history, and the meaning of our individual personal history is determined by the whole context of cosmic history. "The end of worldly history will bring fully to light all of its events and the life of each individual human being. But the end of history is not nothingness. The end of time . . . is eternity. It is from the standpoint of this end that the essence of each individual thing, the manner in which it has anticipated eternity, will be decided" (Pannenberg 1990, 109). This means that

eternity as the whole of time is dependent upon the consummation of time, both existential time and cosmic time. This is what resurrection and new creation beyond the end make possible, for Pannenberg.

In life in the present the past is no more and the future has not yet come. This separateness means that the totality of our life constantly evades us. Hence time is no more a theologically neutral thing than death. . . . The finitude of the perfected, when this corruptible will have put on incorruption (1 Cor. 15:53), will no longer have the form of a sequence of separated moments of time but will represent the *totality* of our earthly existence. (Pannenberg 1991–1998, 3:561)

In short, our future end is not the cessation of being but rather the fullness of being.

My point here is not to argue in favor of endless finite time. Rather, my point is that the end of time can be thought of as fulfillment, and biblical symbols of aeons and ages convey this sense of fulfillment.

AN ONTOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

I wonder what would happen if we pieced together the being-nonbeing dialectic of Tillich with the end-oriented eschatology of Pannenberg. The result, I submit, would be a futuristic ontology.

To be is to have a future. We feel this existentially. To lose our future is to die. The threat of losing our future elicits anxiety. Without a future we feel depressed, lonely, angry. Hope for the future elicits joy, confidence, energy. The dialectic between future and present is the dialectic between being and nonbeing.

I believe that the power of being comes from the future, God's future. We and all that exists in the cosmos experience the power of being as a draw toward the future. This is the way God, the ground of being, cedes being to the world: God grants the world a future. When we think of *creatio ex nihilo*—creation at day one in the book of Genesis or lighting the fuse on the Big Bang—I believe we could say this: the first thing God did for the universe was to give it a future. God bestows future by opening up the possibility of its becoming something it had never been before and by supplying the power to change. The power of God is experienced in the creation as the power to become something new. Until it has become something new, it has not become what it essentially is. Creation and redemption have this in common: both receive a future from God.

Right now, in the present moment, we experience the power of being as a draw toward future reality. The present never stands still. It is constantly moving. What we call the "now" is really an abstraction—a mentally conceived, discrete moment. The underlying actuality from which we abstract it is an ever-moving frontier of time. As the frontier moves, what we think of as the present is dropping off into the past, dropping into the nonbeing of the past. The power of being is constantly drawing us from the present moment toward the next while allowing all other reality to

drop into the nonbeing of the past. To fail to be drawn forward is to allow the past to overtake us, to cease to be.

This is the noneschatological relation of time to being that is experienced by the created cosmos. The eschatological dimension, as Christian theology conceives it, anticipates a fulfillment of time and being. The eschatological end—both *telos* and *finis*—will constitute the fulfillment of time. Rather than a cessation of time wherein everything drops into the nonbeing of the past, the eschatological end will constitute the consummation of time, the gathering up of all that has been the history of reality into eternal life. What has been fragmentary and partial will, according to Christian soteriology, become healed and whole.

Our entrance into this eschatological wholeness will be through the gate of death and resurrection. The essence of who we are is the whole of who we are, and the whole of who we are is connected to the whole of all that is. Our individual resurrection and the new creation are of a single piece. This is the Christian promise. It is an audacious promise, a fantastic promise. To a reasonable person examining our everyday experience with time and passage and decay and death, the Christian promise may look unrealistic. Even Tillich seemed to shrink from the grandeur of the promise by saying that Christian hope exceeds “the limits of essentially justified hope.” Yet, right or wrong, this is the grand scope of the eschatological promise as I see it based upon the Easter resurrection of Jesus.

In conclusion, Tillich’s focus on the eternal now rightly acknowledges the ephemerality of temporal passage as we experience it existentially. It also rightly acknowledges that, in the present moment, eternity belongs to God and that realistically we must accept our own creaturely finitude. Yet it seems to me that Tillich could and should make better use of the eschatological future. The future end of time is not the cessation of being. Rather, it is the fulfillment of being, the consummation of all things wherein each creature will find its true essence and wholeness. Eternity is not found merely spatially above or in the depth of time. Rather, eternity incorporates all of time; and, for this to be possible, eternity must begin with the end of time.

NOTES

1. “Finite being is a question mark. It asks the question of the ‘eternal now’ in which the temporal and the spatial are simultaneously accepted and overcome” (Tillich 1951–1963, 1:209).
2. “In actuality the popular expressions of hope by far exceed the limits of essentially justified hope. They are projections of all the ambiguous materials of temporal life, and the desires they evoke, into the transcendent realms” (Tillich 1951–1963, 3:397). “It should surprise no one conversant with Tillich’s preference for existentialism, psychoanalysis, and socialism that he showed little interest in the other-worldly individualism of heaven” (McDannell and Lang 1990, 330).
3. “Time is the central category of finitude. . . . In the anxiety of having to die nonbeing is experienced from the ‘inside’ . . . anxiety about transitoriness, about being delivered to the negative side of temporality, is rooted in the structure of being and not in a distortion of this structure” (Tillich 1951–1963, 1:193–94).

4. In addition to “above,” Tillich also employs another spatial category, “depth,” to depict eternity. “Time and change are present in the depth of Eternal Life, but they are contained within the eternal unity of the Divine Life.” Perhaps appeal to spatial categories is due to his rejection of temporal categories. “We have rejected the understanding of eternity as timelessness and as endless time” (Tillich 1951–1963, 3:418–19).

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