Making Ends Meet: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the End of Times in Medieval Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism

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The conference *Making Ends Meet* took place from 24 to 26 September 2015 in Vienna, Austria. It was organized by Vincent Eltschinger, Directeur d'études / École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section des sciences religieuses, Paris) and Veronika Wieser, VISCOM co-ordinator/researcher, Institute for Medieval Research (Austrian Academy of Sciences) in line with the SFB F 42 VISCOM (›Visions of Community. Comparative Approaches to Ethnicity, Region and Empire in Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, 400-1600 CE‹).[1]

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This conference originated from a series of joint activities of VISCOM scholars and associated researchers from the fields of History, Social Anthropology, Tibetology, Indology, Buddhist and Iranian Studies who started to comparatively address the question how eschatological visions affected religious communities and political structures in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.[2]

In their introduction, **Vincent Eltschinger** and **Veronika Wieser** outlined the main questions and goals of the conference. The conference aimed to produce a more nuanced understanding of how eschatological thought influenced and factored into the political and religious perception and self-definition of medieval communities and individuals, and of how notions of an imminent end shaped a community's identity, perception of other communities and an individual's perspective towards life and the world. Eltschinger and Wieser stressed that cross-cultural comparison was central in their analytic approach. They had decided not to analyze microsystems of thought or stay within their own disciplines, but rather to broaden the perspective. In the sessions, they were bringing together central eschatological topics such as death, the afterlife, the end of time, musings about the transience of the world or an

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1 Programme: http://www.univie.ac.at/viscom (retrieved on 5 June 2016); http://www.ikga.oeaw.ac.at/Events/Making_Ends_Meet (retrieved on 5 June 2016); https://viscom.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool-viscom/pdfs/MEM_programm_web.pdf (retrieved on 5 June 2016).

2 First results of this interdisciplinary work group were presented in a session strand at the conference *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia* (November 2013, Vienna), https://viscom.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool-viscom/pdfs/programm_midterm_web.pdf (retrieved on 5 June 2016).

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empire, considering them all as integral to visions of the Last Things rather than as separate phenomena. The conference's papers offered overarching perspectives on the different types of eschatology in different religions as well as presentations that focused on single sources, individuals or specific local contexts. They analyzed cultures of eschatology that were formed in between universal, polytheistic, individual, collective, particular, regional conceptions of religion and history, with regard to literary traditions, manuscript transmission, social and cultural practices, rituals, images, bodies and empires.

Eltschinger and Wieser argued that bringing together historians, anthropologists and theologians should help us to reflect on eschatology as a human experience and on the relationship between God(s) and humans. This broadened approach would enable them to work towards a more differentiated view on eschatological notions in general.

The first five papers of the conference were grouped under the term of *Exchanges* and paid special attention to regions where shared traditions between different religious communities or geographical areas would overlap. In her presentation, **Faustina Aerts-Doufikar** (University of Amsterdam) concentrated on the various uses of Gog and Magog in the Christian and Islamic world referring to medieval as well as to modern interpretations. She emphasized that the apocalyptic peoples Gog and Magog, which were first described in the Old Testament (Ez 38-39), played an important role in the eschatological beliefs in Europe, Asia Minor and Africa during the early Middle Ages. She demonstrated that Gog and Magog motives could be found in Christian and in Islamic maps, which highlighted the importance of this motif for medieval societies. According to Aerts-Doufikar, in Christian and Judaic traditions the use and belief in Gog and Magog diminished in the sixth and seventh centuries and was adapted to changed political contexts. In the later literary and geographic traditions, new narratives emerged so that the origin of the apocalyptic peoples could also be found further in the Middle East.

In his paper, **Bernhard Scheid** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) explained the different concepts of death, pollution and afterlife in the two Japanese religions: In Buddhism and Shintō. In Shintō death was seen as a form of severe pollution and its priests were unable to deal with death due to the strong notion of death taboos, whereas in Buddhism, one was expected to take care of the seriously ill and to perform elaborate funeral rites. Therefore, Buddhist priests were seen as specialists who could overcome these taboos and thus influence a person's afterlife. This created an interdependence between Buddhism and Shintō, in which the topic of death was expressed in a complex system of rituals, ceremonies and doctrine. **Martin Treml** (Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin) provided insights on Jacob Taubes, ›Gründungsprofessor‹ for Jewish Studies at the Free University of Berlin in 1962, his conception of eschatology and the differences and overlaps between Christianity and Judaism. In his works, most importantly in his thesis *Occidental Eschatology* (1947), Taubes contributed greatly to the scholarship of apocalyptic thinking and messianic gnosticism. Treml explained how Taubes understood eschatology and its 2000-year-long Jewish-Christian traditions, not only as a mere historical phenomenon but also as defined by the dialectic of secularization and resacralization. Due to the impact of eschatology on the doctrines of the two religions, it should be considered as a ›Lebensform‹. The belief and certainty of liberation from crisis or catastrophe was transformed into an explosive messianism, which is rooted in Judaism, and into a cosmic belief in the End Times characteristic of Catholicism.

In the third century CE, a new religious school of thought emerged in the Middle East, *Manichaeism*. In his paper, **Johannes van Oort** (University of Pretoria) presented a new sketch of Manichaean eschatology, while giving an overview of the life of the prophet Mani and his teachings, and explaining the manuscripts traditions with regard to the discovery of new texts. As Mani was raised in a Jewish-Christian community, his ideas reflected widespread teachings of both religions. Jesus held a central position in Manichaean eschatology and narratives such as the Great War, Antichrist and the Last Judgment also became fundamental to its beliefs. Van Oort explained that the main difference between Manichaeism, Christianity and Judaism could be found in the conception of time and place of the End Times. The basic idea was that the end would be imminent, as the time of God had already started. Mani considered himself the Last Prophet who testified to the beginning of the destruction of the known world. The two sessions on *Exchanges* were concluded with a presentation by **Uta Heil** (University of Vienna) who outlined the main characteristics of Christian apocalyptic literature dealing with either the end of the world or of an individual. Key aspects for a text to be classified as apocalyptic were content/form, cosmology and its historical dimensions. Christian apocalyptic literature referred on the one hand to existing biblical traditions and on the other hand concentrated on the aspect of revelation. Heil stressed that in early Christian communities apocalyptic texts were considered as heretical, wrong and deceitful by Church Fathers who considered Jesus Christ to be the only real, true teacher.

Guy Lobrichon's (University of Avignon) presentation opened the following session on *Cultures of Eschatology*. Lobrichon offered a compelling grand narrative of developments of eschatology in European medieval thought and exegetical traditions from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries. Lobrichon's presentation drew on a wide range of sources, from liturgy, exegesis, hagiography, annals and material culture. He discussed key topics of eschatology such as fear of death, moral improvement, justice, equality on earth, which not only concerned individuals and prophets but also medieval society in general. From the seventh century onwards, ecclesiastical elites began to specialize in apocalyptic literature, becoming ›the best managers of the present and the best guarantors of the future‹ in the Carolingian era. By the twelfth century, however, the focus had changed. The fight between the forces of good and evil was taken over by worldly warriors, while monks prayed for and contemplated the fulfilment of time. **Florian Schwarz** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) then presented an analysis of the role and importance of eschatology and millenarianism in Islamic local, communal, and imperial contexts. He argued that different eschatological models could lead to conflicts between various Muslim communities and stressed the diversity of Islamic millenarian expectations. He concluded with a discussion about the possible existence of globally circulating messianic motives and expectations by showing an intriguing western early modern eschatological illustration, which was adapted by an Arabic author.

The final session on Thursday was dedicated to *Scripture and Authority*. **Michael Sommer** (University of Halle) started with a paper on John of Patmos' Revelation, its use of biblical traditions and motifs. Sommer argued that his text did not primarily reflect a conflict between the seer and Roman imperial politics, but between different Christian communities in Asia Minor. He showed that the book mirrored conflicts and rivalries between early Christian identities and stressed that Revelation should be read less as criticism directed specifically against the Roman Empire but against political structures in general. **Cinzia Grifoni** and **Clemens Gantner** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) followed with a joint paper on the wide reception of Pseudo-Methodius' *Revelations* in the west, from the first Latin translation in the 720s up to the seventeenth century. A large part of the text, which was originally written

in Syriac, was heavily abridged in some medieval Latin translations, but the section predicting a conflict between the ›Romans‹ and the Saracens/Arabs was transmitted wholly in all recensions. The codex St Gallen SB 238 was offered as an interesting new textual witness of the third Latin recension. Due to its display of simplified terms and stereotypes, the *Revelations* remained an important narrative in western apocalyptic thought for over a thousand years. The text was even printed in a summarized form on a 1683 pamphlet reacting to the Ottoman invasion. **Pavlína Rychterová** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) presented a text from a highly influential late Medieval Latin author, the *Vade mecum in tribulatione* (1356) written by John of Rupescissa during his imprisonment in Avignon. After an overview of Rupescissa's tumultuous life, Rychterová explained his role in Franciscan spiritual writings, eschatological prophecy, and political discourse. She argued that his imprisonment in Avignon was the point of departure for all of his successful works and that his personally experienced persecution and the literary constructed one were closely related in his works. She explained that the *Vade mecum in tribulatione* was widely circulated, being translated into seven vernacular languages. These vernacular versions offer important insights on church reforms and developments in the fifteenth century.

The second day was opened with a session on *Afterlives and Other Worlds*. **Zsoka Gelle** (Eötvös Loránd University) introduced the audience to Buddhist eschatology. Although Buddhist scriptures describe the universe and all sentient beings as being subject to a cycle of rebirths without beginning and end, they comprise eschatological elements insofar as these cycles eventually come to an end on cosmic and on historical levels. Gelle specifically focused on the prophecy of the ›General Description of the Hidden Lands‹ by Rigzin Gödem, a famous teacher who lived in the second half of the 14th century. The text describes signs of the Age of Decline such as moral laxness in the monastic community, political instability and an increasing lack of mindfulness. It urges Buddhist practitioners to escape the times of chaos and the final battle, hide in the ›Hidden Lands‹ as places of salvation and start a new era of improved morality. **Eirini Afentoulidou** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) continued with a description of Byzantine Christian beliefs about heaven and afterlife. In many Byzantine texts, the souls of the deceased undertake a journey to heaven, passing different tollhouses while adverse powers, military opponents, demons or toll keepers try to hinder their ascent. At each tollhouse, which is guarded by a demon, the soul and its accompanying angel have to answer questions and pay for unconfessed sins. These narratives about aerial tollhouses in the space between heaven and earth reflect worldly power relations and earthly life. Unlike in apocalyptic literature, God is not present in the accounts of the tollhouses. At the end of the morning session, **Frederick Chen** (Sheng Yan Research Fellow in Chinese Buddhism at the National Chengchi University) returned to the topic of Buddhism, focusing on ancient Chinese beliefs and popular traditions. He argued that the concept of an afterlife journey with obstacles that had to be overcome also existed in early Chinese beliefs. It was integrated and adapted in Buddhism when the religion was introduced in China. Purgatory and repentance liturgies, burial objects and documents show that the afterlife journeys mirrored, quite similarly to the Byzantine tollkeepers, Chinese imperial bureaucracy.

In the next session on *Death and Resurrection* **Jane Baun** (University of Oxford) compared early medieval Byzantine otherworld visions, such as *The Apocalypse of the Theotokos* and *The Apocalypse of Anastasia*, with their late antique predecessors and demonstrated a clear shift in eastern Christian conceptions of the Other World and its workings. Baun argued that this change was conditioned by the lived experience of one of the great imperial bureaucratic systems of the pre-modern world. **Pia Bockius** (Freie Universität Berlin) analyzed the role of

saints' cults and miracles in perceptions of the afterlife in western Europe. She demonstrated how in Gregory of Tours' works the veneration of saints and their relics and the belief in the divine power working through them were closely connected to ideas about life after death. Contrary to the idea of the *corpus incorruptum*, miracles that were worked by the saints through their relics were interpreted both as signs of the power of God and as signs that the saints were already in heaven. For Gregory these two notions confirmed his belief that the body we use on earth was not the same body that was resurrected, and that God could recreate the body if he wanted to. The session was completed by **Roberto Tottoli** (University of Naples), who gave a paper on death, eschatology and the lives of the prophets according to Islam. The stories about the lives of the prophets preceding the advent of Muhammad were quoted in every literary genre of Islamic literature starting from the Qur'ān. Among these conceptions and beliefs, a particular focus is placed on questions of the fear of death, the relations of the prophets to the angel of Death and on the condition of their corpses in their tombs. In Islamic literature prophets were depicted as being afraid of death, yet they were not corrupted by it and accepted it as part of God's will. An interesting point, which was discussed after the presentation, was that Jesus, the Messiah, is seen as a perfect Muslim. Although his role in judgment is the most important one compared to the other prophets, he does not stand above Muhammad.

After the break the first of two sessions on *Empires* kicked off. First **James Palmer** (University of St Andrews) set out to establish a framework for comparing apocalyptic micro-cultures in the western tradition, building critically on methodological tools used in religious studies and history. He addressed a crucial methodological question: to what extent can we refer to a single western apocalyptic tradition? Palmer approached this question presenting three case studies, all situated in early medieval Iberia: the Adoptionist dispute of the late eight century; ninth-century anxieties and debates on the so-called Martyrs of Córdoba; and a prophetic text about Gog. These examples showed that Iberian writers had a wide repertoire of apocalyptic, eschatological, and prophetic models at their disposal, which could be employed according to specific needs. On the one hand, Palmer argued, this situational use of apocalyptic thinking shows that comparative history should look beyond just the millennarian model, while on the other hand historians should be aware that much of this rhetoric was about heresy and conflict, which made it inherently polemic. The topic of eschatology, conflict and violence was explored further by **Philippe Buc** (University of Vienna) who compared the concept and understanding of eschatology in the first two crusades, referring to the Hussite Movement and the Reformation as well. Buc showed how eschatological expectations could on the one hand spur holy war, but also lead to doubts about it. After the failure of the first crusade, in the light of the non-coming of the End these expectations were demoted to a partial fulfilment of later attempts at conquering the pagans or were re-interpreted as deeds of the Antichrist. **Eirik Hovden** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) presented the example of a Yemeni village around 1200 CE, which had been struck by a terrible hailstorm, in order to analyze the ways this incident was interpreted and used. According to the author of the story, who was also the local *imam*'s secretary, this hailstorm was not at all coincidental but a divine punishment for the village's hosting of a heterodox, Muṭarrifiyya religious preacher. This event spurred the author to simplify complicated theological debates and make them accessible for a wider audience. The villagers were to understand that the hailstorm did not only reveal the deception of heterodox ideas, but also that, if they obeyed the *imam*, rain and prosperity would come.

The second *Empires* session was introduced by **Graeme Ward** (Austrian Academy of Sciences), who gave a paper on the reception of Orosius' *Histories against the pagans* in the post-Roman Empire of the Carolingians. Discussing the exegetical work of Paschasius Rad-

bertus and Hrabanus Maurus, he showed how Orosius' text was used to make sense of the Biblical past, the Carolingian present and eschatological future. **Stephen Shoemaker** (University of Oregon) addressed the relations between apocalyptic interpretations and Empire. In his paper he analyzed the apparent ambivalence of the urgent eschatology revealed by the Qur'ān and other early Islamic sources on the one hand, and the determination of Muḥammad and his followers to expand their religious policy and establish an empire on the other. He argued that the political concepts of eschatology circulating in the Byzantine Empire during the sixth and early seventh centuries indicated that these two beliefs went hand in hand. These notions offered an important contemporary precedent for the construction and use of imperial eschatology that seems to have been fueled by the rise of Islam.

The first session on Saturday was entitled *Last Days*. **Kurt Appel** (University of Vienna) revisited the topic of apocalypse on a theoretical level. He argued that apocalyptic narratives could be understood as a hinge between time and its end. He presented a cross-referenced analysis of the Apocalypse of John and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy focusing on the transmission of images and representations. Therein he addressed questions of a traditional, biblical understanding of time, which had shaped western concepts of history for the past centuries, and reinterpreted apocalyptic images and the figure of the zombie against the backdrop of the modern theories of Hegel, Kant and Agamben. **Miriam Czock** (University of Duisburg-Essen) continued with questions about the perception of time and its end in medieval Christianity. She stressed the importance of the expectation and fear of the Last Judgment, which was then perceived to be imminent, as an important but often overlooked factor in Carolingian ideas about the Christian way of life as well as specific approaches to time. Czock argued that Carolingian ecclesiastical reforms were not primarily designed as long-term reactions to problems, but based on the idea of justice, for a just ruler could be sure of a place in heaven. A demand for perfection and completion as preparation for the end of the world was central in these notions. Concluding the morning session, **Ann Christys** (independent scholar) provided an insight into eschatological beliefs in medieval al-Andalus. She concentrated on the work of Abd al-Malik ibn Habīb, who introduced the hadīth to the region. Contrary to the Qur'ān, which mainly contains descriptions of heaven and hell, the literature of the hadīth provides narratives of the Last Days. In his *Description of Paradise*, Ibn Habīb worked with an exegesis of references to Paradise in the Qur'ān. In his *History*, he gave an apocalyptic warning of the fate awaiting the Muslims in Spain, where some of the events of the Last Days were expected to take place. **Domenico Agostini** (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute) gave the first paper in the following session *Life after the End*. He discussed the two different eschatological models of afterlife, which coexisted in Zoroastrianism: the earlier ›eternal‹ model comprised ideas of an ideal, purified earth and an universal resurrection that would follow the End of Days with the destruction of all evil on earth. The latter model was represented by a temporary, not eternal, hell, paradise, and middle abode. Individuals were assigned to these different stations according to their good and evil deeds during their lives on earth. Agostini explained how the idea of a ›temporary‹ afterlife emerged in Zoroastrian thought and pointed out the possible influence of the apocryphal apocalypses of Peter and Paul. In his paper, **Christian Lange** (Utrecht University) addressed concepts of paradise and hell in Islam, which provided a concrete blueprint for the interpretation of this-worldly realities and the organization of Muslim society. In his examples, Lange highlighted three areas in which the medieval Muslim discourse of paradise and hell manifested itself: topography, architecture, and ritual. He showed for instance that cities were built and

described as ›places of heaven on earth‹ claiming that such divine imagery truly and fully took place on earth. This phenomenon was frequently accompanied by struggles over the political centre of the Muslim world, between cities in Syria and the Arabian Peninsula. In the final paper of this session, **Marc Tiefenauer** (University of Lausanne) described death and death rituals in ancient Indian texts. In the earliest of these texts, death was originally perceived to be a definitive ›end‹. In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE the ideas of reincarnation and karma were introduced into ancient Indian beliefs and later became a new paradigm in Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Jainism. Tiefenauer argued that at a very early point the concept of reincarnation was counterbalanced with devotion, which would play a central role in the religions of the Indian subcontinent until the arrival of Islam. The final session of the conference, *Adaptions*, concluded with three papers on the early medieval West. **Marilyn Dunn** (University of Glasgow) surveyed ideas on afterlife, judgment and on the teachings about soul and body during the period of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. She argued that the complex Christian ideas about the afterlife had to be adapted in order to be made comprehensible and attractive to peoples whose original religions centered on the here-and-now. **Rutger Kramer** (Austrian Academy of Sciences) then discussed eschatological notions in early ninth-century Francia, applying Foucault's concept of the ›paradox of pastoral power‹ to the *Institutio Canonicorum*, the Redon Cartulary (based on the Formulary of Tours) and the writings of Agobard of Lyon. Faced with the interdependence of purity, power, and politics, these authors used eschatological imagery as a way to reflect on and consolidate their authority. Kramer argued that the threat of the imminent end of world could have been used as an encouragement for not just the audience, but also for the authors, to do good deeds and to lead morally correct lives. **Immo Warntjes** (University of Belfast) concluded the conference with his fittingly titled paper ›The Final Countdown‹, discussing various seventh- and eight-century manuscripts, which included countdowns to the end of the sixth millennium. At least fourteen countdowns considered it to coincide with the year AD 799/800. Warntjes traced the transmission of these texts from Ireland, through Burgundy, to Northern Italy. He argued that these countdowns were not primarily computed out of fear of an imminent end but because they were part of the medieval tradition to calculate Easter.

The conference's presentations have shown how in the medieval West as in the East eschatology has been part of the foundation upon which societies were built. Over the course of the Middle Ages, these notions were the subjects of numerous controversies, connecting church authorities, theologians, ascetics, historians, politicians, radical thinkers, reformers or prophets of doom with each other in an eschatological discourse. For medieval societies, eschatological thought did not only comprise doctrinal expressions and disputes but was a matter of balancing political power and social cohesion. Apocalyptic literature certainly contained a revolutionary potential, and the question that occupied the minds of many medieval ecclesiastical authorities was how to integrate this potential into a community's identity while at the same time raising awareness of any potential challenges that it may pose for the community. The papers presented compared with each other not only different visions of the End Times in various cultural and religious areas but also highlighted the social dynamics and discursive strategies behind these ideas.

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