Christian Eschatology and the End of Time
according to Thomas Aquinas
(Summa contra Gentiles IV, c. 97)

RUDI YE VELEN (Amsterdam)

1. Introduction: the beginning of the world

The narrative of creation in the first book of the Bible opens with the well-known words “in the beginning”, when God created heaven and earth. It tells the story about how everything started with God, about how God was present at the beginning of the world, as He is present now and will be present in the future. The “in the beginning” of the Bible should not be taken, in my view, in the literal sense of a well-determined starting point in time, but in the sense of the permanent and ever-present beginning of historical time in which the Jewish people experience the guiding presence of God through his revelation. The Bible bears witness to a specific historical experience. The God of the Bible is a God of history, who reveals himself in human historical life in order to orientate this life towards a future to which He commits himself. History becomes a history of salvation, in which people live out of a promise of a future in which the historical existence as such will come to its end and final fulfillment. The “in the beginning” of creation, draws, in my view, its meaning from this religious experience of a divine presence in history which began with creation.

In the Christian tradition the opening phrase of Genesis was understood as denoting a kind of temporal beginning of the universe, before which there had been nothing. According to Thomas Aquinas, the phrase “in the beginning” can be explained as meaning “in the beginning of time”. Time began together with the creation of the earth and the heaven. This implies that the created world has a beginning of its duration. But the ancient philosophers had seemed to say something quite different. The common view of Greek philosophy seemed to be that the physical universe has always existed and that time itself is without a beginning and without an end. The conflict between the biblical, religious worldview of Christianity and the Greek philosophical account of the natural universe led to the medieval debate on the eternity of the world. The debate was mainly concerned with the issue of creation and the beginning of time. The

1 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q. 40, a. 3.
2 Cf. for instance R. Sorabji, Time, Creation and the Continuum, London 1983, part III.
question of the end of time, which is spoken of in the last book of the Bible, does not seem to have played a role in the debate. But the question of the beginning of the world’s duration and its end can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. The possibility of an end of time meets similar difficulties from a conceptual point of view as that of the beginning of time. In both cases temporal expressions like beginning and end are applied, not to something which exists in time, but to time and temporal existence itself. For instance, a historical or physical event has a certain location and duration in time; it began at a certain point in time and it will have an end in time. The temporality of an event, its finite duration, is expressed through an encompassing framework of time by means of which the duration is measured. But what if this framework of time itself has a finite duration? Is a final moment of time conceivable, if it is not a final moment in relation to an enduring framework but the end of the time-measuring framework itself?

In this paper I propose to discuss the idea of the temporality of time, in particular from the perspective of the end of time. I will focus on the view of Thomas Aquinas, as he offers, in the last chapter of the “Summa contra Gentiles”, a fascinating interpretation of the Christian eschatological view of the end of this historical world, when “time shall be no longer”, as it is written in the Apocalypse (10,6).

2. The temporality of time from the perspective of Christian faith

According to Christian faith, the temporal duration of the world is finite from both sides, a partes ante et a parte post. The world in which we live our temporal and historical life began with creation and shall end after the Day of Judgement when a new heaven and a new earth will be created. Aquinas was convinced that the Christian view concerning the beginning of creation could not be demonstrated by reason. What reason can do is show the opposite position of the eternity of the world is not necessary, and that the temporal beginning of the world is, seen from a philosophical perspective, at least a possibility. It would therefore not be against reason to accept and believe the Christian truth on this issue. That the world is in fact created in the beginning of time is, however, an article of faith. Its truth has to be accepted on the basis of revelation. From the perspective of reason, an eternally created world is possible. Being created and a beginningless duration do not necessarily exclude each other, since the philosophical notion of creation is neutral with respect to time. It merely entails the absolute dependency of the whole of reality on a first principle. But in its full and complete meaning, “creation” is a word of faith and includes the temporal beginning of the world.

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3 Cf. Summa Theologiae I, q. 46, a. 2: “Dixit ergo quod non semper sit, sed semper sit, ut demonstrative probari non posset.”

unity of "already" and "not yet" characterizes the typical Christian understanding of eschatological time.

If the eschatological future is contrasted with the state of present life and represents the ever present and still hidden future of present life, perhaps the beginning of temporal life on earth should be interpreted in the same way. In this sense the beginning of creation is not simply the moment at which the clock of time starts to tick; it is not a beginning which is in some way continuous with the time of the present life, something which has taken place in the distant past. But it is the ever-present past of creation. The temporal life on earth has the character of a singular history, which has a beginning and an end. And the physical world is included within this singular history of salvation and has itself the character of a singular event. From the perspective of Christian faith, the world is not an everlasting and permanent cosmos, but it is "this world", a temporary constellation which looks forward to or is in expectation of the world to come.

The beginning of the world is for Aquinas, so to say, not a matter of fact, but a matter of faith. He refers to Gregory who speaks of a prophecy about the past when Moses wrote the first sentence of Genesis, in which the newness of creation is stated. A prophecy about the past is like looking back to the beginning of temporal existence of man on earth, an existence which by God's revelation has received the character of a history of salvation, a history which apparently began with God and which will be brought by God to its eschatological fulfillment.

Aquinas rejects decisively any attempt to prove the non-eternity of the world by rational arguments. In his view, even if the conclusion is true, any attempt to provide necessary reasons for it will lead to sophistical arguments. And one should not assent to a truth of faith on the basis of weak and sophistical arguments, since this would expose Christian faith to derision on the part of non-believers. Christian religion would lose its credibility if it were to find its beliefs on sophistical and pseudo-scientific arguments. Aquinas presents two arguments as to why the issue of the beginning of the world cannot be decided from the point of view of reason.

The first argument is derived from Maimonides: it says that whatever is solely dependent on divine will cannot be demonstrated by necessary reasons. The will of God concerning creatures is a free will, and is not bound by any necessity. The only way to know how God's will is determined with respect to the temporal condition of the world is by revelation, which is accepted by faith. In Aquinas' view, God could have willed the world to exist from all eternity. That God actually has willed the opposite is, however, not without reason. Aquinas sees this as fitting, since the fact that the world has not always existed makes more

Christian Eschatology and the End of Time according to Thomas Aquinas

clearly manifest that the world depends on an agent that acts by free will, and that it does not proceed from the divine principle according to natural necessity. The "in the beginning", therefore, emphasizes the Christian distinction between the eternal God and the temporal creation.

The second reason why the temporal beginning of the world cannot be demonstrated follows from the very nature of demonstration and demonstrative knowledge. Any demonstration proceeds from the essence of a thing. But the essence, considered as such, abstracts from the here and now. One cannot therefore demonstrate that the world or any part of the world, considered in its species, has not always existed. Singular existence in time and space falls outside the scope of demonstration. It is an interesting argument, especially because it suggests that the world not only consists of singular events in time and space but also is itself a singular event, which happens to exist.

The beginning of the world is an object of faith, not one of demonstration or science. It is part of the religious-symbolic world view of Christian faith, the meaning of which only can be perceived from within, from the perspective of faith, in the light of which the temporal duration of the world is experienced as somehow engaged in the divine economy of salvation. This becomes especially clear from Aquinas' treatment of the Christian eschatological view concerning the end of time. Here he proceeds in a similar way as he does with respect to the temporal beginning of creation. Philosophy cannot prove that the duration of the world is finite and will come to an end. Greek philosophy and cosmology even seem to state the opposite: time, movement, the natural circle of generation and corruption will go on forever. Aquinas intends to show that the eschatological view of Christianity, especially the resurrection of the bodies and their glorification at the end of time, is not contrary to reason. In his interpretation of Christian eschatology he argues that the Christian claim that time will come to an end is not in contradiction with the principles of Aristotelian cosmology and its concept of cosmic time. Of course, one cannot rationally prove on the basis of Aristotle's natural philosophy that the cosmos is part of a singular history with a beginning and an end, but by using Aristotelian cosmology as a guideline one can make the Christian eschatological view understandable and even quite plausible.

3. The end of cosmic time

One should look now at the text in which Aquinas discusses the Christian view on the end of time and of temporal existence on earth. It is the last chapter of the last book of the "Summa contra Gentiles" (IV, c. 97). The chapter

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5 Summa Theologiae I, q. 46, a. 2, sec contra.
6 Ibid. a. 2.
7 Ibid.: "Voluntas eius Dei ratione investigari non potest, nisi circa ea quae absoluta reesse est D one velle:
... Potest autem voluntas divina hominis manifestari per revelacionem, cui ipsa instituatur."
discusses the state of the world after the Judgment Day (de statu mundi post
individuo). What will happen to the physical world when human history is brought
to its final end? Aquinas starts from the anthropocentric principle that the whole
of corporeal nature somehow exists for the sake of man. Nature does not have
its end in itself, but is, in the order of divine providence, subject to the dominion
of man. It is therefore thought to be fitting that, when human nature has at-
tained its final and definitive character, the corporeal creation will be trans-
formed in order to be in harmony with the state of the men who are then, as
it were, established in God's glory. As men will then be incorruptible, the visible
world will be divested of its state of generation and corruption. This is what
St. Paul seems to intend when he says "creation itself shall be delivered from
the slavery of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God." 9
Like all eschatological statements in the Bible this one is very hard to under-
stand. But Aquinas takes this saying of St. Paul quite seriously. To be liberated
from corruption means that there is no longer generation, no longer the cycle
of life and death. The consequence is that, since the process of generation and
corruption on earth depends on the movement of the heavens, the movement
of the heavens must also come to a stop. And since time is inseparably linked
with the circular motion of the heavenly bodies, even time will cease to be. As
it is said in the Apocalypse: "time shall be no longer." 10

Aquinas' description of the final state of the world should not be regarded
as science fiction. It is not meant to be pure speculation about what might happen
to the physical universe in the remote future. His main intention is to show that
the Christian eschatological view about the end of the world is not impossible
from the point of view of what natural philosophy teaches us about the
structure and the dynamics of the cosmos. So we can see Aquinas arguing
that it is not impossible that the movement of the heavens should come to a
stop. 11 It is possible because the movement of the heavenly bodies is not natural
in the sense that they are inclined to their movement by an inner active principle.
The sun and the stars are moved not by some natural, inner force, but, according
to Aristotle, by an intellectual principle, the Unmoved Mover. But in Aquinas'
view an intelligent being must possess a will. There is no intellect without a will.
This means that the heavenly bodies are moved by a will, that is, by the com-
mand of a personal being, which acts for the sake of some purpose. 12 Now,
what can the purpose of the motion of the heavens be? Their purpose cannot
consist in the movement itself, since movement always tends to something else
in which the movement comes to rest. And neither does their purpose consist
in bringing their potency to actuality, since a body that moves in a circle always
remains a potency to the next place on the circle. So the potency of the heavenly
bodies can never be entirely reduced to act.

According to Aquinas the motion of the heavens is ordered to an end which
can be described as becoming like God with respect to being a cause of things. 13
The heavenly bodies move in order to cause and sustain the process of genera-
tion and corruption on earth, and in doing this they obtain a certain likeness of
God who brings everything into being. What Aquinas is saying here is that the
heavenly bodies are assigned a role in the divine work of creation. Their task in
creation is to cause and sustain the generation of new organic life. In this way
they serve the general purpose of nature in its process of generation, which is
to achieve a perpetuity in things by which they approach a certain likeness of
God's eternal being. 14 In Aquinas' view, God's purpose in his work of creation
and the purpose of nature in its work of generation are to some extent quite
similar: nature seeks perpetuity of the species by means of generation and in
this nature serves God's purpose of creation, which is to communicate a likeness
of his goodness as perfect as possible.

Now, if the heavenly bodies move in order to cause and prolong the life-cycle
of generation and corruption, is it then conceivable that one day the cosmic
machinery will have fulfilled its goal and come to a standstill? In so far as the
new generated life is corruptible, the process of generation must go on indefi-
nitely. But, according to Aquinas, the whole of corporeal nature is ordered
man as to its end. 15 The form of the human being is the most perfect and
ultimate form nature can produce. It is a form in which matter is reduced to its
highest possible actuality. The rational soul of man even surpasses the corporeal
dimension of natural generation, since it is not only forma corporis but also it
subsists in itself in virtue of its spiritual character. The human soul cannot be
produced by natural causes; it receives its existence directly from God through
an act of creation. 16 But even when the human soul is immediately created by
God and is through this the most god-like of all creatures, man does not stand
outside nature. The human soul, although it is incorruptible, still requires a

9 Summa contra Gentiles IV, c. 97. "Quia vero omnibus corporalibus fortasse usus quodammodo propter hominum ...
... qui sunt, sicutia creaturae corporales corrigunt comites et effundo in mundum, ut complexus totius hominum qui
tum erant. Et sicut homines in corpore edent, ita est homines incorruptibilius, et tota creationis corporalit genus generatio et corrup-
tio in statu.


11 Summa contra Gentiles IV, c. 97. "Ne debet autem impossibile videtur quod motus non esset.

12 Ibid.: "Prioritatem autem illius motus est aliquis intellectus. Ita movere rationem neque a nullitate cornpretur, solum in actu motor, in eo sicut hominis potentia, quod motus esse et a viis actum proprietat solum in actu motus.

13 Ibid.: "Finis motus coelestis est ... accipiantur Deus et nostrae." Cf. especially Summa contra Gentiles III,
c. 21, where it is argued that every creature seeks to attain a likeness of God's goodness, not only in so far as it is good in itself, but even in so far as it is the cause of the goodness of something else. According this principle the heavenly bodies fulfill a special role in the divine government (gubernatorum) in so far as they are the cause of generation and corruption in the sublunar realm of nature.

14 Ibid.: "Sunt autem fines naturae in generatione, non sunt sinctorum non de potentibus et illis, sed aliquis quod ad hoc constitutum, soluta per motum novum, per quom ad quidam simulacrum accidentem.

15 Ibid.: "Quis autem generabilis et corruptibilis quasi sanctus per motum et ad hominem ordinabile quaerimus.

16 Ibid.: "... formas hominum, sicutius animas ratione, immediatae creatur a Deo." Cf. Summa contra Gentiles II,
c. 87.
corpooreal and corruptible body, which must be generated by nature. This brings Aquinas to the conclusion that the heavens enact their life-generating motion especially for the purpose of generating human beings, since in co-operating in the creation of man they accomplish most perfectly a divine likeness. Now because human beings have an incorruptible soul, newly generated human life will not perish by natural corruption. Human life, unlike animal life, transcends the natural cycle of birth and death, in which each individual is subordinate to the life of the species. The destination of man lies outside the cycle of generation and corruption. In virtue of their incorruptible soul human beings are capable of an eternal life of everlasting bliss in the presence of God. Now, Aquinas states that the multiplicity of human souls to infinity cannot be a possible end, for infinity is contrary to the notion of end. The purpose of the movement of the heavens cannot be to produce an infinite number of human beings, since this simply cannot be realized. If one considers why the heavenly bodies move, Aquinas finds it not unreasonable to hold that the motion of the heavens will cease when a certain number of human souls have been generated and established in the final state of glory. When this is the case, the task of the life-generating cosmic machinery is, as it were, completed. But when the heavens no longer move and consequently the process of generation and corruption has come to an end, time will no longer exist.

In Aquinas' view, the end of cosmic motion and of time does not mean that the physical creation will disappear altogether. That part of the physical world which has a natural aptitude for incorruptible existence, like the heavenly bodies and the elements, will not perish, but will continue to exist because of the unchanging divine goodness. God created all things in order that they might be. He wants things to be and to be forever as a permanent expression of his goodness. So the substance of the physical world will remain, but without the intrinsic corruptible parts like plants, animals, and the mixed bodies. In the incorruptible and timeless world to come there can be no place for plants and animal life, since their life is essentially not sustainable. But the substance of the visible world and its incorruptible parts, the heavens and the stars, the seas and the mountains, will remain and will be invested by the splendor of God's glory in order to become adjusted to the state of glory of mankind. The theological meaning of this is, as I understand it, that even the substance of the corporeal nature will finally be saved and admitted to God's world as a consequence of the essential corporeality of glorified man. The consequence of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body is that even the physical universe will share in the final kingdom of God.

According to Christian eschatology, time belongs to this corruptible world, which will pass, and does not belong to the new world to come. Generation and corruption characterize this world. And the process of generation will not go on forever, as corruption and death will be finally eliminated from the corporeal world. For Aristotle this would be quite unthinkable. In his view, it is through generation that nature aims at perpetual existence. The only way for nature to achieve a permanent duration is through the endless repetition of the cycle of birth and death, which is caused by the circular motion of the heavens. In the Aristotelian view, the sublunary world of temporal existence is assimilated to divine eternity through the circular motion of the heavens. Seen from this perspective, things must be saved from the negative impact of time, that is from age and decrepitude. In order to overcome death and final loss of being nature requires constant renewal and perpetual repetition. One might therefore say that physical time, the time of nature in contrast to historical time, has no real future, since nature, in order to survive, must constantly return to its starting-point. Nature repeats itself endlessly.

From the Aristotelian point of view, the cosmic machinery must go on forever in order to prevent nature from disintegration. Now, the cosmos is moved by the First Mover who is the ultimate principle on which the cosmos and the whole of nature depend. The First Mover moves the heavenly bodies by attraction, like an object of love and desire. The heavenly bodies move through a desire to attain the full actuality of the first principle. And it is through their never-ending circular motion that they reach out for that divine unchangeable actuality.

Aquinas accepts, to a certain degree, this cosmological theory as part of true philosophy. Even for him the perfect circular motion of the heavenly bodies is somehow an image of the divine eternity which in its complete actuality subsists in itself. But the essential difference is that, in Aquinas' view, the whole cosmic machinery is created by an act of the divine will as part of a plan in which the corporeal nature exists for the sake of man. And Aquinas formulates even this anthropological turn of Aristotelian cosmology by means of Aristotelian principles. For instance, Aquinas argues that nature in its generation aims at the most perfect form in which matter receives its ultimate actuality. And the most perfect of all natural forms to which nature tends is the human soul. Man is the most perfect product of nature.

The consequence of this anthropological orientation of the cosmos is that cosmic time comes to share in the character of historical time which underlies the history of salvation. Cosmic time contributes in preparing the world for the ultimate presence of God's glory. In my view, this is the most surprising and interesting feature of Aquinas' eschatological reinterpretation of the Aristotelian cosmology. The principal purpose of the life-generating cosmic machinery is to produce a certain amount of human beings, since in the generation of men the heavenly bodies act in a most divine-like manner, that is, they co-operate in the divine act of creation. The cosmic time is the time during which life is generated, especially human personal life, which is promised a future beyond death and after "the present life". As each individual human being is destined to an eternal