ARTICLES ON OTHER SUBJECTS

The Concept of Apokatastasis as a Symbol of Human Equality and Religious Inclusion

Wojciech Szczerba

Abstract This article analyzes the notion of *apokatastasis*, first as it appears in the Greek philosophical tradition and then in the context of Christian thought. It shows how the cosmic theory of eternal return unfolded within early currents of Hellenic philosophy, and subsequently how the personal dimension of *apokatastasis* grew out of those traditions, where questions about the fate of humanity became primary. The article then points to the fundamental philosophical assumptions of *apokatastasis* in its cosmic and personal forms. Christian thought, in the process of its evolution, made significant use of Greek methodology and concepts. One of the theories transferred to the Christian context concerned the notion of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*). Such thinkers as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and John Scotus Eriugena developed the concept into its mature form. Although *apokatastasis* has been condemned on numerous occasions, it has survived in Christian teaching. From a secular perspective, it can be regarded as a symbol of the equity of all people, beckoning us in the direction of the notion of religious inclusion. As such, it ought to be construed as translating into respect and care for the other person *sic et nunc*.

Keywords *Apokatastasis*; von Balthasar, Hans Urs; Eriugena; eschatology; Gregory of Nyssa; Hryniewicz, Wacław; Küng, Hans; Origen; Schleiermacher, Friedrich

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THE CONCEPT OF *APOKATASTASIS* AS A SYMBOL OF HUMAN EQUALITY AND RELIGIOUS INCLUSION

In this article I will argue that the concept of *apokatastasis*—combining ideas of eternal return and universal salvation, and shaped by Greek philosophy prior to its adoption in early-Christian thought[1]—has not only played a historically important role, but also can still be considered significant in the post-religious world of the early twenty-first century. *Apokatastasis* breaches the ecclesial boundaries, which are themselves often exclusivist, as it contains a universalistic potential and points to the final salvation of all people or rational beings—or, even more broadly, of all of Creation. In this sense, it somehow complements the protological concept of *imago Dei*, according to which all people are created equal in/as the image and likeness of God. *Apokatastasis* points symbolically to a restitution of the primordial order of being before the mythical, original fall of humankind. In its religious sense, the concept sketches the universalistic scope of salvation. From a secular perspective, according to the postulates of such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, *apokatastasis* can be understood as a symbolic indication of the fundamental equality and significance of all people as parts of the same, interconnected, cosmic organism. They originate within this organism, they live in it, and they also find the culmination of their existence within its borders. The end of their lives may simply mean a return to the Absolute-*arche*-principle that determines their existence. Thus construed, such a universalistic soteriology transgresses *ecclesio*-theological boundaries and divisions. It indicates a common destiny for all rational creatures, and in this way points to the equity of humankind, which can, and should, lead to the adoption of particular ethical attitudes towards other people. The present article mainly seeks to capture the broad outlines of the issue, and frequently refers to threads analyzed by the author from different perspectives in other publications. It also draws on certain themes, pertaining especially to human dignity, that will be developed more fully by the author in future studies.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT OF *APOKATASTASIS*

The philosophical concept of *apokatastasis* (Oepke 1969, 386–92; Liddell et al. 1940, 201) denotes most of all a return to the beginning, a restoration

1. In this article I mainly restrict myself to the Greek and early-Christian concept of *apokatastasis*. However, elsewhere I have devoted a number of publications to understanding this notion in a broader context: e.g., (Szczerba 1998, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014).

of the primal state of the realm or initial order of being, which has been distorted by an original sin or the law of necessity. Ancient Greek philosophical thought generally differentiates between two major forms of *apokatastasis*, or two orders, in which the restoration of the primal state of being occurs.

Cosmic Apokatastasis

The basic and—as it seems—primary form of the philosophical concept of *apokatastasis* assumes a cosmic dimension. From this perspective, the theory of the restoration refers mainly to the world in terms of the macro-scale, the cosmos. The first Greek philosophers, who sought a basic *arche*-principle for the universe, come close to such an understanding of the process of renewal of all things. The *arche* is the source of the whole of reality, in all its diversity. Everything, in a final ontic sense, can be reduced to *arche*. Everything, according to Aristotle (*De Gen. et Corr.* B 5, 332 a 19; *Phys.* A4, 187 a 12) and later *doxographers*, returns to the *arche* in unending cycles of collapsing and expanding on the part of the cosmos, a process of diversification of the world and return to the primal—or symbolically primal—form of the fundamental *principium* (Diels and Kranz, hereinafter: DK 12 A 9). The first Greek philosophers do not assume the existence of a world-transcendent deity or other source of power. Everything, they believe, is immanent to the cosmos. This assumption leads them to, amongst other things, the conclusion that the cyclic nature of the world, and consequently the cyclic nature of time (Eliade 1998, 61–106, 145–52; Shoemaker 1969, 363–81), is unending, with no beginning and no end. Thales, Anaximander or Anaximenes perceive, in their simple deduction, water, *apeiron* or air as the *arche*-principles of the entire realm, and its pure form of existence as the formal commencement of the cyclicality of the cosmos (Laertius, hereinafter: DL I, 1, 27).

The concepts of the Ionian philosophers of nature were then further developed by their successors. These multiply the *archai*-principles, and distinguish among them passive and active *principia* (Gajda-Krynicka 2007, 65–73). Still, they remain faithful to the overarching concept of the unending cyclicality of the cosmos. Thus, Heraclitus of Ephesus teaches about the regular conflagration-*ekpyrosis* of the world, at least in respect of its sublunary structure. In his lapidary statements, he indicates that "there is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things," and "the way down and the way up is the same"[2] (DK 22 B 60; Gajda 2000, 48–50). Empedocles

2. All translations come from Author (unless stated otherwise).

of Acragas points to the four passive *archai*-roots of all things—water, fire, earth and air—which are being united and separated by the two active powers, Love and Strife, in unending cosmic cycles. They shape the cyclical existence of all things, with no beginning or end, between the two poles of the realm signified by a perfectly united *Sphairos* and four separated sets of *archai* (Szczerba 2012, 20–3).

A mature form of *apokatastasis tou kosmou* is formulated by the philosophers of the Old Stoa, who after the fall of the empire of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. return to the earlier, cosmological concepts of Heraclitus and sketch the history of the world as an unending process, this being the emerging of a diversified cosmos from the fire-*logos*, and then its return to the primordial form of the latter in the act of conflagration-*ekpyrosis* (Cicero 1883, II, 46; DL VII, 157; DL 1. C; Arnim 1903–5, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* [hereinafter: SVF], II, 810-1). Furthermore, they point out that the cosmos, as a perfect being, must be—*ex definitione*—identical in its infinite cycles, not only as regards its general form, but also actually in its every detail. After all, no external factors determine it, and it is always developing from the same primal matter (*logos*-fire) and according to the same immanent principles (*logoi spermatikoi*) (Aetius 1976, I, 7, 33, SVF II, 1027; DL VII, 136–7). The concept of perfect, unending cyclicality—*apokatastasis tou kosmou*, is comprehensively formulated by the Stoics, who draw logical conclusions from the assumptions of earlier thinkers. On the macro-scale, the world delineated by them is eternal, with no beginning or end, and self-sufficient, with no transcendent creator; moreover, it is perfect, developing from itself as a form of existence of the divine *arche*-principle in the infinite process of eternal return.

Personal Apokatastasis

The second order of the concept of eternal return in Greek thought is constituted by personal *apokatastasis*, which emphasizes the restoration of the human soul-*psyche* to its primordial, perfect state. The personal form of the theory of return is developed mainly in those thought systems where anthropology, the question of what human beings amount to, plays a paramount role. The cosmos is perceived in this context merely as a stage, on which the existential drama of humanity or—more broadly—rational creation is played out. This is a play whose main acts are constituted by (1) the original, perfect existence of the creation, (2) a fall or corrupting of the latter, and (3) the restoration of the primal state of the creation, or arrival at its goal-*telos*, originally assigned to creation by some kind of creator.

It is to such a form of the concept of eternal return that, for the first time in Greek thought, philosophers of the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition seek to relate to. They refer to Orphic mythology, and point out that the human being is not just a passive tool in the hands of the gods of Olympus, and that major human transgression is not—as Homer and Hesiod had stated—an attempt to join the divine pantheon (Hus 1962, 41–5). Actually, the Pythagoreans believed that human beings were related to the gods, as they immanently contain a godly particle. This divine soul-*psyche* constitutes the essence of the person, and as such *ex definitione* deifies the human being both in an individual and a collective sense, as a person and as the human race. At the same time the *psyche*, immortal in its nature, determines the way to salvation, understood as a universal liberation from the shackles of the mortal body as one passes over into divine, eternal existence.

Such a soteriology can already be found in the early Orphic myth of Dionysus Zagreus (Spineto 2011, 37–9), which portrays the human being as a dualistic creature. His essence is constituted by a spatter of divinity—the soul-*psyche*, which is eternal and perfect. This leads the human to what is good and noble. Yet the soul is imprisoned in the body-*soma* like in a grave-*sema*, which confines a person to a temporality, transience and sensuality leading naturally to further depravation. Still, the myth brings with it a hope of overcoming the fall: i.e. liberation of the soul from the grave of the body, and a return to full divinity. The process of expiation may last through many incarnations of the *psyche*. Yet, however long it takes, the divine soul inherently strives for unification with the other, dispersed particles of Dionysus, and consequently also for a restoration of the primordial unity of being (Hus 1962, 48).

The anthropological assumptions of the Pythagoreans were taken over by Plato and his philosophical successors—mainly the philosophers of Middle and Neo-Platonism, as well as Neo-Pythagoreans and early Christian thinkers continuing the platonic tradition (Szczerba 2004, 82–88). While these philosophical currents differ among themselves, they are united in the conviction about a divine particle that is godly, or related to (the) god(s), and which initially existed in a world uncontaminated by evil, but whose existence, because of original sin, or the law of necessity, has been reduced to an earthly, sensual and transient reality. Here, in the "bodily grave" (*soma-sema*), in the temporal, created world, the soul repents for her primal transgressions (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* III, 14). Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, describes the process of this fall in respect of the incarnation of the psyche in a suggestive way. The philosopher portrays the soul there using the metaphor of a chariot driven by a charioteer and

pulled by two winged horses. The charioteer represents the intellect, the rational dimension of the soul, which should control its other aspects. One of the horses is noble and obedient (i.e. the passionate aspect of the soul), while the other is vicious and insubordinate (its appetitive aspect). They pull the chariot in opposite directions. The charioteer strives to direct the carriage (the entire soul) in a harmonious fashion, and to follow the procession of the gods (*Phaedrus* 246 a). However, this is not always possible. A disobedient horse can pull the whole chariot over, and is sometimes able to break its synergy, as a result of which the horses start fighting against each other, break their wings, fall off the cosmic procession and, when they become too heavy, collapse to the ground. Here, the fallen soul is incarnated in the human body to atone for her sin. After subsequent, necessary re-incarnations, the *psyche* can return to the heavenly procession of the souls (*Phaedrus* 248 c).

Plato depicts the problem of the fall and restoration of the soul differently in his later dialogue, *Timaeus*, where he introduces the figure of the divine Demiurge. This maker of the world uses the realm of ideas as a model, shapes the cosmos and souls out of a material substrate, and subsequently causes the souls to be incarnated. Yet, this incarnation is not an outcome of the fall of the *psyche*, but rather of the law of necessity, which underlies the Demiurge's desire to reflect in the best possible way the ideal world in material reality (*Timaeus* 41 b–e; *Politeia* X, 621 b–d). However, even here, in this cosmic structure, souls can return to their star after going through a number of incarnations and living a good, moral life (*Timaeus* 42 b–d).

In time, the Greek philosophers draw closer to the conviction that all souls will ultimately become free from the bondage of the material body and return to their original state of existence in the *noetic* realm. The end, or the formal conclusion, of history will signify a state where—to put it in mythological language—all the particles of Dionysius Zagreus are reunited, and the god is finally reborn (Rohde 1921, 130; Uždavinys 2003, 43, 46). Such an understanding of the eschatological restoration is grounded on some assumptions, amongst which the following play a fundamental role: (1) the conviction about the existence of a divine *psyche* in human beings, (2) a construal of evil in non-substantial terms as a lack of good, and (3) the idea of one or more gods who not only created the human race and now maintain its existence, but also care for its soteriological good and lead people towards the salvific *telos*.

This pedagogical dimension of the liberation of the soul is particularly emphasized by the post-platonic philosophers of the Hellenistic epoch, who seek to confront people with fundamental, existential issues. On this

basis, Neo-Pythagorean and Middle-Platonic thinkers more and more often assume the existence of a deity, frequently understood as a personal being who not only creates the universe and the human race, but also takes care of the well-being of rational creatures (Zeller 1960, 305). What is also important, the goodness of the creation is not any more understood in this context as a form of cosmic perfection stemming from the *arche*-principle (as in pre-platonic philosophy), but rather is rendered in terms of salvation, of restoration of the *psyche* to its primordial state of being. In this process, God—as the supreme *Paidagogos*—leads rational creatures to a kind of cleansing through education (broadly conceived), of a kind that aims to persuade human beings to put aside their depraved life for the sake of higher values and a virtuous existence. In this sense, Plutarch of Chaeronea, for instance, writes in his treatise *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* (hereinafter: *The Divine Vengeance*), or in *On Isis and Osiris*, about the individual way in which God leads a person towards their final liberation from material reality. "[God] does not expedite punishment for all alike," Plutarch writes,

> but at once removes from life and amputates what is incurable, as constant association with wickedness is certainly harmful to others, and most harmful of all to the sufferer himself; whereas to those whose sinfulness is likely to have sprung from ignorance of good rather than from preference of evil, he grants time for reform, but if they persist, these too he visits with condign punishment; for he need hardly fear they will escape. (*The Divine Vengeance*, 551E)

All the disciplinary means are aimed, in Plutarch's understanding, at educating the person being disciplined, but also at other people, who can learn from that example. The divine pedagogy, perfect and fully effective, will finally bring all souls to a soteriological liberation (*The Divine Vengeance*, 559 E–F).

The idea of universal salvation for rational beings finds its culmination in Neoplatonism, the last representative of the Greek philosophical tradition. Plotinus and his successors maintain the general shape of the theory of *apokatastasis*, which had been developed from the time of the Orphic--Pythagorean thinkers onwards. The assumption about a divine substance in rational creatures, and the construal of the imperfect, temporal existence of human beings in terms of pedagogy, are adopted and applied here much as they were by the earlier Greek philosophers. However, in its interpretation of reality, Neoplatonism puts aside the notion of a dualistically structured

realm, of a *gignetic* vs. a *noetic* world. It advocates the final-ontic unity of the universe. As Plotinus maintains, everything emerges from the One-*hen*, and there is no other source of being. Everything can be reduced, also, to the one source-*arche* (Bańka 1995, 31). The One-*hen*, the Mind-*nous*, the Soul-*psyche* or even the matter-*hyle* are *de facto* subsequent stages-*hypostaseis* of the process of emanation, of which material reality constitutes the limit (e.g. Plotinus *Enneads*, hereinafter: *En.*, III, 8, 10; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, hereinafter: *Metaph.*, 983 b 9; Rist 1964, 67).

What is important, with such an interpretation of reality, is that salvation does not need to be rendered in eschatological categories as a final liberation from the bondage of matter and a return to the primordial state of being. Soteriology can be understood *sic et nunc* as a deep realization of one's integral unity with the source of all present in everything, and as a direct, mystical experience of this fundamental relationship (En. VI, 9, 10). Salvation—perceived in this way—can already be experienced now, in the temporality of a person (En. I, 6, 8). The return takes place in the consciousness of the philosopher, who grasps the ontically homogenous nature of reality and his or her place in this interdependent organism. Whether salvific experience, so understood, translates into an eschatological return of the soul to a noetic final existence remains an open question (En. VI, 4, 16.; Szczerba 2008b, 249–74).

Cosmic and personal *apokatastasis* usually coexist within particular currents of Greek philosophy. *Apokatastasis tou kosmou*, even though it focuses on the cyclical existence of the world on the macro-scale, still—out of necessity—embraces within this cosmic story the fate of the creation as an integral part of the cosmos. The philosophers of the Old Stoa emphasize persuasively this overwhelming aspect of the cosmic renewal (Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis* 38, 55, SVF II, 625). On the other hand, *apokastastasis tes psyches*, even though it renders the soteriological fate of the soul, still naturally indicates the necessity of the renewal of the cosmos as a stage or background for the existential drama of rational creatures—a stage that needs to be adjusted to the various phases of existence of the creation (Philo of Alexandria, *De opificio mundi* 15–25; *De praemiis et poenis* 79–172; Penner 2019, 383–402; Szczerba 2004, 85–90).

Nevertheless, with their particular philosophical presuppositions, the Greek thinkers are prepared to assume just one form of *apokatastasis*. The Ionian philosophers of nature, as the extant fragments and later doxographers indicate, almost never refer to the soteriological fate of human beings (Gajda-Krynicka 2007, 13–28). On the other hand, such philosophers as Plato or the early Christian thinkers focus mainly on the return of souls

to a primal state of existence. They assume a linear conception of time, seeing its source not in the *arche*-principle immanent to the cosmos, but in the world-transcendent reality of, for example, ideas or the God of the Bible (Szczerba 2014, 111–141). Adopting such a perspective, they depart from cosmic cyclicality and advocate, at most, the personal dimension of the concept of *apokatastasis*. Such a form of the concept of universal salvation dominates in post-platonic philosophy, and in the thought of certain Christian philosophers who maintain the Biblical hope that finally "God will be all in all" (I Cor 15, 25), and that all evil will be eradicated by the operation of God, resulting in the conversion of all rational beings. The culmination of time will correspond to the restoration of creatures to their original state of existence (Origen, *De principiis* III, 6, 3, PG 11, 336).

Presuppositions of the philosophical concept of apokatastasis

In Hellenic philosophy, the concept of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) is based on a number of fundamental premises, which determine its scope and form. First of all, the Greek thinkers, following the general conviction of other ancient cultures (Eliade 1963, 39–54), presume the perfect nature of the primordial form of being. That which was first is—on their understanding—always better than any later reality. The original paradise has been lost, the soul has been thrown down from its star, the divine chariot has fallen to the earth and the simple form of the *arche*-principle has been diversified. The world in its present shape is far from its primal form, and history bears witness to the successive degradations of humanity (Plato, *Pheado* 16 CE; Hesiod 2018, 109–201).

Nevertheless, with the assumption in place of a cosmic time that is cyclical, the deterioration of reality cannot be unending (Eliade 1963, 51–4; Leeuw 1957, 324–50). Of necessity, it must reach a climax at a certain point, after which it starts to revert to its original state. The hegemony of Strife in the thought of Empedocles exhausts and loses its power at a certain point, and is finally replaced by the domination of Love. The created souls, as Plutarch believes, will at some point convert under the influence of divine pedagogy and go back to their primordial condition. This cyclical nature of reality is at times rendered as a form of cosmic justice, which operates in terms of compensation and, like a superior judge, brings back the prior, lost stage of the cosmos and/or being. The *arche*-principle will reappear again in its original-simple form from out of the diversified world of the Ionian philosophers and, in the epic vision of Origen, the pure spirits will once more contemplate God (Szczerba 2008b, 14–18, 25–6; Szczerba 2014, 244–54).

This law of cyclicality, of cosmic justice, is supported by an assumption about the constant quantity of the substrate. For Greek thinkers, what is perfect needs to be quantitatively limited, and only as such can it have an ideal, ordered (*kosmios*) structure. Thus the *arche*-principle is constrained in its scope, and in later Hellenic currents the number of souls that can be incarnated is limited.[3] With the presumption of the cyclical nature of the world, the rule of the preservation of substance makes clear that, amongst other things, the same substrate can be used in subsequent repetitions of the wheel of history, and the same souls can be both re-incarnated and liberated within what amounts to a closed set of elements.

The cosmic dimension of *apokatastasis* usually assumes the existence of some kind of *arche immanent* to the cosmos that determines its cyclical nature. After all, there is no outer source of energy in *hylozoistic* systems: all the formative powers stem somehow from inside the cosmic organism. Everything comes from the *arche* and everything can be reduced to the *arche*. The philosophers of the Old Stoa draw logical conclusions from this principle, pointing out that the cosmos, in its various forms of existence, is nothing more than a set of permutations of the fundamental substrate and, as such, must be identical to the smallest detail in every turn of the wheel of history (SVF II, 596).

With the reference to a personal *apokatastasis*, the *arche* can be seen to *become more and more transcendent* relative to the cosmos or, at least, the consciousness of human beings. The Idea of the Good, *Hen*-Absolute, or personal God determines the fate of the material world, and is the director of the drama: though not so much that of the cosmos any more—rather, that of the souls-*psychai*, which undergo a process of incarnation, existence and liberation. God creates the rational beings, sets their aim-*telos* and disciplines them after the fall, but at the same time points out to them the way back, and leads them through the process of purification. In the Greek philosophical tradition, especially in its later currents, the relationship between god(s) and creatures is typically defined by *love*, which is more and more often understood in terms of pedagogy or even pastoral care. As Plutarch maintains, in his treatise *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* (e.g. 550A, 551 E, 559 E–F, 560 F–561 A, 565 D), God does not take revenge, but educates and leads the fallen creatures in the direction of the soteriologically defined *telos*. The divine *Paidagogos*, in his mercy, *wants* to bring back rational beings to their primordial state, knows in his wisdom

3. E.g., the first proof of the immortality of the soul in *Phaedo* (70a–72e). In the Christian context, this concept is still defended by Gregory of Nyssa; see *De hominis opificio* 16, PG 44, 185.

the adequate means of upbringing that will lead the way to salvation, and given his power is able to execute his plan right through to its assumed end.

In relation to the theory of the eternal return of the soul, two presuppositions seem to play a fundamental role. Above all, what is important is the conviction about the divine origin of the soul in Greek dualistic anthropology (*psyche-soma*). *Psyche* is considered, for example, a mythical particle of Zagreus, the *arche*-principle, a residue of the celestial substance, or an immediate creation of the Demiurge and, as such, is *ex definitione* immortal (Plato, *Phaedrus* 245C; Alexander Polyhistor, DL, VIII 28). This means, *inter alia*, that after meeting certain requirements the soul can, or in fact must, return to its previous godlike existence. Moreover, the aspect of divinity or kinship with God in human beings means that a rational creation is in essence compatible with the nature of God (Gregory of Nyssa, *In canticum* 2, GNO 6, 68; *De hominis* 11, PG 44, 156.). Thus, if God—in the process of shaping the creation—forces people, through various disciplinary methods, towards penance and conversion, he does not violate their freedom in so doing, but rather cleanses their souls from the filth of their depravation (*The Divine Vengeance*, 550A, 560 F–561A; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* VI, 46, 3; VI, 99, 2; VII, 12, 1; Origen, *De princ.* III, 1, 13–17, PG 11, 274–283; Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. Cat.* 8, PG 45, 36). In this way God reaches to the core of the soul and its innate will, which is *de facto* harmonious with the will of the deity. The creatures, purified in this way, willingly—yet also in a way that is necessary—turn to God.

The second fundamental presupposition of the concept of personal *apokatastasis* is the conviction that evil is nothing more than being's absence (*steresis*). It does not possess an ontic status: it is simply the lack of good-being. Evil is like a fading light, which is replaced by darkness. While evil can be practically manifested in the form of sin, in the case of a person committing it, or in the form of suffering, for those who still experience it it does not in the strict ontic sense exist, and is only a delusion of being (Plotinus, *Enneads* I, 8, 11; Origen, *De princ.* II, 9, 2; PG 11, 226; Gregory of Nyssa, *In insc.*, GNO 5, 62). This means, *inter alia*, that evil is not able to destroy the ontic structure of the creatures. It can at most cover the latter with *its filth.* With such an understanding of evil there are no objective barriers to the salvific restoration of the creation—which, after all, the deity wants to save. On the other hand, no matter how depraved the creation may become in its existence, its nature-*physis* will still be good, being related to God. According to its ontic status, the creation—even if it is not aware of it—is destined to exist in the state assigned to it by the creator. God's pedagogy is designed to purify the soul from evil, bring forth its innate will

stemming from its kinship to the divine nature, and point the way back to the originally ascribed place for the soul in the order of creation.

The above assumptions determine the various forms of the concept of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) in Greek thought. The early philosophical currents develop the cosmic dimension of the theory of eternal return, according to which the universe is born out of a certain *arche*-principle and then reduced back to it, throughout the unending cycles of history. Human beings and other rational creations are *ex definitione* subordinate to an overarching fate, and can at most—as the Stoics indicate—try to understand the cosmic organism and accept it, since "the fate leads the one, who follows it and drags the one, who opposes it" (Arnim I 527, II 975). Meanwhile, personal *apokatastasis*, which takes the form of the universal scope of salvation, is developed later in Greek philosophy. It requires a fulfilment of certain conditions by the creation, and various types of intervention on the part of the deity in respect of the process of salvation, expiation from sin and assimilation to that which is divine.

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF *APOKATASTASIS* AS UNIVERSAL SALVATION

In the context of Christianity, the notion of *apokatastasis* denotes, in its basic sense, the salvation of all people—or, more broadly, of all rational creatures. What Christian *apokatastasis* signifies is that evil will finally be eradicated, and all people or rational creatures will arrive at the state originally assumed by God. In this sense, the end times entail the restitution of the commencement of things that we find manifested in Eden prior to the fall of Adam and Eve, and this will constitute the final and ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for human beings. It will be a return to the primordial state of blessedness, without evil, suffering, or death. It will reverse the effects of original sin and signify that stage in which everything is subjugated to God, and God is all in all (I Cor 15, 28).

Understood in such terms, the concept of *apokatastasis* may take on various forms and hues in Christian thought. For example, Origen, at the beginning of the third century, believed that all rational beings were created together, *en bloc*, as pure spirits devoted to contemplating God. Unfortunately, their initial love waned, and the creatures turned away from God as their source of being. As a consequence, in the wake of God's decree, they have been assigned—according to the scope of their fall—to one of three main classes of *post-lapsarian* creatures: celestial beings directly serving the Creator, terrestrial people with their material and transient bodies, and the powers of darkness openly opposing God and his kingdom. Even so,

while the scope of the fall of the creation is truly horrible, Origen holds that the way back always lies open for every creature. Following the footsteps of the Greek philosophers, he assumes the possibility of the re-incarnation of the soul, via the path of conversion and purification. After each and every earthly life, the human soul can rise up and join the procession of celestial beings on its way back to God; however, it can also fall downwards in the hierarchy of creatures, if it uses its time on Earth wrongly. In such a case it may join the powers of darkness opposing God—but the way back up is still always open to it (*De princ.* I, 6, 3, PG 11, 168).

Moreover, all rational creatures are subject to divine pedagogy, which assumes a total, cosmic scope. Hence, the sensual, temporal world, with all its inadequacies, is supposed to lead all fallen beings to penance and conversion. However, if the world becomes too depraved because of the sinfulness of creatures, and becomes more of an asylum of evil than a platform for repentance, God destroys this cosmos and creates a new one (*De princ.* II, 3, 5, PG 11, 193–194). In this way, the process of *apokatastasis* is implemented in the form of individual expiation and reincarnation, but also through the cyclicality of the world. One can imagine a spiraling towards attaining the primordial state of existence of creatures as pure spirits contemplating God. In this process, as in the cosmic procession, the pilgrimaging beings shed themselves of evil and turn to God. In subsequent cycles of incarnation and ensuing versions of the world they are joined by a new host of rational creatures, and so the procession expands. Origen believes that the culmination of history will be a state in which all intelligent beings (*logoi*), including angels, humans and powers of darkness, convert and submit to the *Logos*-Christ, and he—in a final act of obedience—will turn everything over to the Creator, so that "God will be all in all" (I Cor 15, 28). In this way, a perfect recurrence and restoration of the primal state will take place—when the pure spirits devote themselves again to full contemplation of God. "And this result," Origen writes,

> must be understood as being brought about, not suddenly, but slowly and gradually, seeing that the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages, some outstripping others, and tending by a swifter course towards perfection, while others again follow close at hand, and some again a long way behind; and thus, through the numerous and uncounted orders of progressive beings who are being reconciled to God from a state of enmity, the last enemy is finally reached, who is called death, so that he also may be destroyed, and no longer be an enemy. (*De princ.* III, 6, 6, PG 11, 338–339).

Gregory of Nyssa sketches the concept of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) in a slightly different way (Szczerba 2008b, 191–209). He lived more than 100 years after Origen, and until his time Christian theology had been significantly grounded, at least in its Christological and Trinitarian doctrines. It had become the formally dominant religion in the *Imperium Romanum* after the decree of Theodosius the Great in 381 A.D. The Canon of the New Testament had almost been established, together with such watchtowers of orthodoxy as the official creeds and the apostolic succession. In the context of Christianity as it had thus developed, Gregory of Nyssa, like the other theologians of the second half of the fourth century, abandoned a number of hypotheses of Origen, such as the concept of *metempsychosis* (re-incarnation), the notion of a succession of worlds, and the idea of the simultaneous creation of all rational beings. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to the general concept of universal salvation as outlined by Origen. Gregory maintains that together with the body, human souls are created by God successively in the moment of conception. During their earthly existence they should cleanse themselves of original sin, whose mark they bear, and enter on the path leading back to the Creator. However, if the process of cleansing during the earthly existence of the soul does not suffice, then it will be expiated by God after death. Like a jeweler purifying gold in a fire, so God will purify every soul in the fire of judgment, to cast off the evil from the *psyche* and put it on its way to deification-*theosis*. The culmination of history will be a state in which all souls turn back to their Creator. In such a model of *apokatastasis*, the concept of eternal return is understood metaphorically, not so much as a literal return of the souls to the original state of existence in Eden, but rather as a return to the primal state of blessedness of Creation in general, with no evil, suffering or death. However, taking into consideration the concept of successively created souls in the moment of conception, the theory of universal salvation of Gregory of Nyssa takes the form of a fulfillment or actualization of God's plan for the beings subsequently created, rather than a literally understood return to the protological state of existence. Either way, the climax of history will be a state where "God will be all in all and all will be united in the fellowship of good" (*In Cant.* 15, GNO 6, 469).

Yet another way of rendering the concept of universal salvation is adopted by such later Christian philosophers as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and John Scotus Eriugena. These thinkers come close to such Neoplatonic lines of thinking as the theory of reality's emanation from the One-Absolute. The emanational triad, abiding-outflow-return, which is invoked by such Neoplatonists as Proclos and Damascios

(Beierwaltes 2003, 31–56; Strumiłowski 2016, 129–40), finds its application in, for example, the thought of Eriugena, who—following Gregory of Nyssa—differentiates between the transcendent essence-*ousia* of God and his acting-*energeia* that is immanent to the world. Nothing can be said about the *ousia* of the Creator. At most, it is possible to assert that the existence of the universe, construed in terms of an overarching abiding-outflow-return, is determined by the invariable final cause of everything, which is God in his essence-*ousia*. With reference to God's acting-*energeia*, the cosmic reality, which abides, flows out, and returns to its source, is always connected with the Creator, and never loses contact with Him (Kijewska 1994, 125–6). On the deepest ontic level, this process—in the thought of Eriugena—takes place within God. From this perspective, the return of rational beings to the primordial state of things does not just denote the restoration of the original unity of human nature (*physis, ousia*)—a return to the mythical Paradise, a shared resurrection of bodies cleansed of sin, and either a transformation of bodily creatures into pure spirituality or their return to ideas, meaning primal causes (Periphyseon, hereinafter: PP II 529 a–c: *prototypa*, *prooismata*, ideas; II 546 a–b; Kijewska 1994, 129, 131); Eriugena's *apokatastasis* also, and above all, signifies a re-entering of the whole of human nature (*physis tou anthropou*) into God, so that—according to the teachings of the Scripture and of Neoplatonic thinking—God would be all in all (Kijewska 1994, 175). The highest level of the return of the souls—according to Eriugena—exhibits a full deification of these *psychai*, which are perfectly purified in God through their endeavors and the complementary process of divine expiations understood as God's grace (Kijewska 1994, 177). These souls are enraptured, and in this way attain ultimate unification with God. Thus, humanity—on the way of grace—achieves full deification, disposes of its temporality, material bodies, and differentiation into genders, and rids itself of everything that is the effect of original sin. The return is not so much to Paradise, but further: to God and then into God, who created Paradise (Commentary to the Gospel of John, hereinafter: Hom., XV, 292a; Kijewska 1994, 182). The climax of the *apokatastasis* is full existence within God. "And this is the end of all the visible and invisible things," writes Eriugena, "because all the visible things will be transformed into that, which is intelligible, and intelligible [beings] will pass in a miraculous and unspeakable unity into God, yet—as we often say—without mixing or destroying of the essences or substances" (PP V, 893d–894a; Kijewska 2005, 105).

The concept of *apokatastasis* was condemned both at the second Council of Constantinople and at subsequent councils. However, the theory certainly has not vanished from Christian thought in its various forms, be it

in medieval or in modern times. Its numerous later advocates and proponents largely base their views on the presumptions and models sketched in antiquity, for the most part adjusting these versions of the concept to the cultural context in which they themselves are living and operating. Hence, they return to the concept of emanation, which was worked out by the Neoplatonic philosophers; they stress—following Origen—the love of God, which is able to overcome all hindrances on the way to His final, eschatological aim, this being the acceptance of all human beings; they also stress—like Gregory of Nyssa—the possibility of cleansing the soul *post-mortem* in the fire of divine judgment. When outlining the concept of eternal return, they typically portray it as an eschatological hope, but—as when, for example, they stress the final, ontic unity of all of reality—they at times emphasize its status as the necessary conclusion of the history of salvation. In later currents, what we see becoming ever more important is the existential and hermeneutical aspect of the theory: e.g., Protestant thinkers read the Bible in a critical way, while their Evangelical interlocutors find hope of universal salvation in a literary reading of the Scriptures as a divine response to the deepest questions of humanity and a symbol of God's total dominion.

Thus, we find aspects of such universal soteriological hope in the thought of Juliana of Norwich (Sweetmann 2011, 66–95), while some of the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, such as John Deck, tend towards a universalistic vision of the end of times (Williams 1962, 155–7, 202, 246, 52). In the seventeenth century, the so called "Cambridge Platonists" Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White, who had connections with Cromwell and the puritans, advocate the unlimited scope of salvation (Hickman 2011, 95–116). In the context of German Pietism, the hope of salvation for all is a doctrine taught by J.W. Peterson and F.C. Oetinger (Walker 1964, 11–8), who point to the overwhelming love of God as the main hermeneutical perspective on the Creator-creature relationship. A similar eschatology is sketched by James Relly, who propagates universalism within the American Methodism of the eighteenth century (Clymer 2011, 116–41). At the same time, we see Elhanan Winchester engaged in establishing the General Convention of Universalists in the United States, which officially converts into the Universalist Church of America (UCA) in 1942 (Parry 2011, 141–71).

At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Friedrich Schleiermacher, an outstanding philosopher and Reformed theologian, displayed in his own system of thought a leaning towards the concept of universal salvation, both in its personal and cosmic aspect (Szczerba 2021, 99–123). On the one hand, Schleiermacher, in drawing the outlines of a universal soteriology,

refers to the love of God, who wants to save every person, and to the sovereignty of God, who chooses every person to be saved (Schleiermacher 2016, 190.3). On the other, this German theologian points to the cosmic dimension of universal salvation, which he grounds in his conception of the existence of everything—including human beings—within one overarching cosmic organism-*universum*. In this system of nature (*Naturzusammenhang*), all the elements of the cosmos are interconnected, constituting aspects of a coherent all-encompassing realm, the Infinite (Schleiermacher 2016, 46.2). Within such a cosmic perspective on reality, salvation is understood not so much as an eschatological goal of human pilgrimage, but rather as a *sic et nunc* realization—as in Neoplatonism—of the coexistence of everything within the universe in terms of processes of deriving from, existing in and striving towards something (Schleiermacher 2008, III, 59; 2016, 4..166, 4.12). This is the realization of a total dependence on (the) God-Universe.[4] At the same time, Schleiermacher points to the humanitarian aspect of the salvation thus implied. The realization of one's dependence on the God-*Universum* (the vertical dimension) must, on his understanding, be translated into unconditional respect for the other person (the horizontal dimension), who is also an integral part of the same system of nature (*Naturzusammenhang*) (Schleiermacher 2008, II, 25–26; Dole 2010, 36–38). The consciousness of Christ, exemplified in pan-human *sympatheia*, is to be shared by all of the saved, who following in the footsteps of the Savior understand that all people are equal before the God-*Universum*, as existing within him and participating in the same process of cosmic salvation (Schleiermacher 2016, 146; Wyman 2017, 627–44). The organic community and human unity that Schleiermacher sketches rules out any soteriological distinction between the saved and the condemned. Instead, it should lead to the building and strengthening of the earthly human community of all, based on the ontic union of the human race and the assurance concerning the equity of all people that issues from the latter (Schleiermacher 2016, 163; appendix, 722). The philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher has exerted a considerable influence upon the universalistic beliefs of such leading Protestant thinkers of the twentieth century as Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, and is still shaping some aspects of Christian thought in the twenty-first century (Dole 2004, 389–413; Wilcox et al. 2014).

4. Hegel's reading of the works of Schleiermacher, and his own idea of absolute religion, together constitute an important issue that goes beyond the scope of the present article (see Szczerba 2021).

Apokatastasis as a Symbol of Human Equality and Religious Inclusion

In the conclusion of this article, I would like to put forward the thesis that theology—construed as a rational reflection of this or that particular religion—may, in its ecclesiastical and ecclesial-political dimension, naturally manifest certain exclusivist tendencies (Szczerba 2020, 17–8). These are typically the outcome of a conviction that a particular religious confession is *the* faithful or even the only faithful depository of the metaphysical truth revealed to human beings (Congregation For The Doctrie Of The Faith 2000). A given ecclesiastical system will inherently tend to perceive itself as furnishing the best possible manifestation of the divine revelation for humanity (Polak 2020, 13–23). Taking into consideration this self-understanding, an *ecclesial institution* may consequently tend to grant itself the right to assess and influence the social order in which it functions. In the hands of denominational structures, theology, seen as an interpretation both of revelation itself and of the cosmos seen from the latter's perspective, may become a tool for initiating and strengthening social divisions into an "us" and a "them"—in line with the formula, still upheld in practice, of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (Sullivan 2002). From this standpoint, the community of the faithful is easily opposed to that of the unfaithful, believers "blessed by grace" to people "left outside of grace," children of God to children of the world, those chosen for salvation to those chosen for condemnation, the Church of Christ to the pseudo-Church, and the City of God to City of the World. Repeatedly, in the course of history, particular dogmas, doctrines, concepts and theological structures would serve, and still do serve, to create and reinforce such divisions into those who are chosen and those "in the world," the orthodox and the heterodox, the sons of the Church and apostates.[5] This type of strategy seems to be a natural way of establishing the identities of confessional communities, in which the orthodoxy asserts clearly the unbridgeable outer borders and indicators of the true faith (Kelly 2000; Pietras 2000). Yet ecclesiastically and politically empowered institutions have recurrently employed some particular theological orthodoxy or other in order to justify and strengthen their own existence in a particular cultural context: e.g., by translating religious doctrines into socio-political structures and, at times, authoritarian ways of exercising power (Arato 2016, 269–99). The extreme examples of theology becoming a tool of political ideologies (Gulczyński 2007, 172–84) include the Christian persecution of pagans in late antiquity (Athanassiadi 1993,

5. This tendency can already be seen in the New Testament; e.g., I Jn 4, 1–5.

1–29), the medieval crusades, the Inquisition, religious wars, the theological justification of slavery (Torbett 2006, 2006), fascism (Steigmann-Gall 2003), African Apartheid (Manavhela 2012), antisemitism (Gager 1983), anti-Islamism (Smith 2007), anti-Christian movements (Robert 2006), and sexism (Peek et al. 1991, 1205–21). *Historia sacra* is full of examples of utterances and attitudes in which spiritual leaders are seen to deprecate others just because they do not meet the conditions imposed by either the orthodoxy or the orthopraxy of some particular religious movement.

The contemporary ecumenical movement has been developing in a positive fashion for more than a century, with the activity of, for example, the World Council of Churches being one of its major accomplishments. Theologians of various provenances are striving to expand our understanding of such concepts as *imago Dei*, and correlative applications of the idea of the universalistic scope of salvation. Even so, the ecumenism of the twenty-first century still has a long and rough road to travel, marked as it is by multiple theological divergences between denominations, a difficult and often bloody history, and the particular policies of certain *ecclesio*-political institutions (Kasper 2003; Kobia 2005).

Nevertheless, in philosophical theology, understood as one or more systems of thought striving to read the *Book of the World* in terms that go beyond denominations and ecclesiastical structures (*Metaph.*, XI 1064a33–b1, XII 1072b24–26, 1073a3–5; Komorowski 2013, 3–26), it is possible to point to a number of concepts that move away from the theological exclusivism sketched above and contain at least some inclusivist or universalist potential. In a protological sense, the concept of *imago Dei* clearly points to the equity of all people inasmuch as they are created in or as the image of God (Szczerba 2020, 13–37). In a soteriological sense, such a universalist perspective naturally brings with it the concept of *apokatastasis*, indicating the salvation or hope for salvation of all people (Szczerba 2011, 17–32). It implies that all ways ultimately lead to *Paradise*, and the climax of history constitutes the symbolic restitution of humanity's situation prior to the original sin. From a religious perspective, the fate of humans is expressed in terms of salvation and a close relationship with God, no matter how salvation and God are defined. From a secular perspective, these metaphors—as Jürgen Habermas suggests in his project of translating religious concepts into the language of secular society—can be converted into the basic and fundamental truth that all people are equal, and are significant, as parts of the same interconnected cosmic organism. They originate in this organism, they live within it, and also they find the end of their existence within its borders; the end of their lives means simply a return to the *arche*-principle

determining their existence. Thus understood, universalist soteriology breaches any possible *ecclesio*-theological borders and divisions. After all, it points to a common destiny for all rational creatures, and in this way impacts upon the temporality of humankind (Habermas 2006; Szczerba 2020, 33–4).[6]

Although the concept of *apokatastasis* has been associated in history with a number of controversies, and condemned several times at ecclesiastical councils, it has not disappeared from theological thought broadly understood. Indeed, quite the opposite: it has found its expression in, amongst others, the thought of Maximus the Confessor, John Scottus Eriugena, Julian of Norwich, the Cambridge Platonists, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. In more contemporary times, it has been advocated by such thinkers as Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, John Hick and Jürgen Moltmann (Ansell 2013) on the Protestant side, by Siergei Bulgakov (Gavrilyuk 2006, 110–32; 2011, 280–305), Pavel Florensky (Slesinski 1984) and John Meyendorff (Meyendorff 1993, 229–52) in the Eastern-Orthodox context, and by Jacque Ellul (Goddard 2011, 325–55), Hans Küng (Küng 2003a, 2003b), Hans Urs von Balthasar (Balthasar 1957, 403–21; 2000, 2014) and Wacław Hryniewicz in the Catholic tradition (Hryniewicz 1989; 2000, 317–33; 2005). In their teachings, the concept of *apokatastasis*, or the hope for *apokatastasis*, points to the equality of all people in the context of their inevitable destiny, which should translate into both respect and care for the other person *sic et nunc*.

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6. The broad concept of demythologization, as developed by, for example, R. Bultmann, D. Bonhoeffer or J. Habermas, will be further developed in the present author's future publications seeking to analyze the important issue of human dignity.

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