

APOCALYPTIC HYSTERIA AND THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

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Abstract: Freedom of speech is a core value of democracy. This has to be regulated and protected by law. When the discourse falls within the limits accepted by the law and is still of a doubtful value, the only solution is education. The focus of the paper is such a discourse, which regards the exaggerations regarding the end of the world. As old as the first Christian generation, the feeling of urgency and soonness has been nurtured and promoted. At times, this expectation has been exaggerated to the point where there is almost no benefit, either at a personal level or in the community or the society at large. Apocalypticism and eschatological exaggeration is amply testified in history, therefore the paper touches upon the Olivet Discourse in the hope to clarify and argue that there is no way to anticipate the approach of the end of the world or the return of Jesus based on the so-called signs of the end.

Keywords: apocalypticism, freedom of speech, nearness, Parousia, eschatology

The core of the freedom of speech

Unlike in totalitarian governments where threat hovers at every step, freedom of speech is a necessary ingredient in all democratic societies. People should not fear to speak out what they think. Yet, in the absence of certain regulations, freedom of speech may become pernicious to the wellbeing of society. To regulate the freedom of speech in democracy would require the government not to shut off the possibilities of free speech (that is, to eliminate the discourse or reduce access to it) or fine

the speakers in absence of certain principles.¹ To formulate principles of adequate speech requires that the society is informed about just how a normal way to propagate a discourse should be and what pitfalls should be avoided. People are not always sure whether the governmental powers should be used to enforce certain limits to general discussions within society, though they do “sense that there must be limits to any principle and that somehow free speech has been taken far beyond those limits.”² When the public discourse does not go beyond the general human virtues of love, freedom, respect, decency, and honesty, or put differently, as long as the speech is not marked by hatred, coercive, disrespectful, indecent, and dishonest³ it should go out freely no matter what stances the speech creates in the audience in its regard. Then, our commitment to democracy does not only imply that the majority decides by vote, but that “the sovereign prerogatives of citizenry” remain untouched by governmental interference, while our self-government stays active in choosing the right way of delivery of an adequate content.⁴ Therefore, it seems to me that the real issue is not the convictions but the attitudes and modes of expression. It seems to be a matter of outward appearance rather than of inward credibility.

The issue of freedom of speech in the era of the World Wide Web confirms the conclusion of the previous paragraph and brings the issue to a whole new level of intensity. In an editorial of *The Guardian* from March 18, 2018 about the online freedom of speech, the author shows that measures against negative activism have been taken in Sri Lanka, Britain, Indonesia, and Myanmar, whether the banned actions have been of a religious (anti-Muslim) or political (pro neo-Nazi movement) nature. However, companies like Facebook, WhatsApp or YouTube are not always expedient in their reactions. In fact, they host a lot of disturbing content, without taking quick action about it. Moreover, based on the algorithms that a viewer is suggested new choices of a similar character, especially YouTube is unintendedly promoting unprofitable content worldwide, primarily because business (here advertising) prevails over

1 C. Edwin Baker, *Human Liberty and the Freedom of Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-43.

2 Lee C. Bollinger, *The Tolerant Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

3 Baker, *Human Liberty and the Freedom of Speech*, 59.

4 Bollinger, *The Tolerant Society*, 52.

ethics. But the editorial is right when it reads: “Yet the real difficulty is not the slickness of the technology but the willingness of the audience to be deceived and its desire to have its prejudices gratified.”⁵ After all, the editorial pleads for a judiciary control over social media while other journalists⁶ see a difference between the government and the private market. The former is subject to the law that requires not to infringe into other people’s freedom of speech. The latter, however, is free to limit others in this respect. Even so, it is never sure that private companies are neutral. Once more, it appears to me that the primary source of protection and control is with the audience. In this regard, it is difficult to make more than just educating the users, but this seems to remain the primary task to be fulfilled.

Apocalyptic hysteria

This study is limited to one topic, which is apocalyptic activism and speculations regarding the end of the world. Proposals of the end of the world, whether as caused by a catastrophe (secular version) or the return of Jesus Christ (Christian version) abound in the public agora of the internet. Some fresh versions (secular, religious or both) of the end include the prediction of David Meade, based on Rev 12:1-5,⁷ that the earth will reach its finish line in April, 2018,⁸ the prediction that after 70 years since the state of Israel has been founded, that is in 2018, the apocalypse may unleash,⁹

5 “The Guardian view on free speech online: let law decide the limits” *The Guardian* (March 18, 2018). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/18/the-guardian-view-on-free-speech-online-let-law-decide-the-limits> (accessed on November 5, 2018).

6 John Samples, “So, just how guaranteed is your freedom of speech online?” *New York Post* (August 19, 2017). Available at <https://nypost.com/2017/08/19/so-just-how-guaranteed-is-your-freedom-of-speech-online/> (accessed on November 5, 2018).

7 “Apocalipsa vine, Apocalipsa trece...” (June 9, 2018) Available at <http://www.mixdecultura.ro/2018/06/apocalipsa-vine-apocalipsa-trece/> (accessed on October 8, 2018).

8 Jon Rogers, “APOCALYPSE NOW Conspiracy theorists claim the world will end TODAY after ‘receiving mysterious voicemail,’” *The Sun* (April 18th, 2018). Available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6085611/conspiracy-theorists-voicemail-end-world-apocalypse/> (accessed on November 8, 2018).

9 See at <https://ortodoxinfo.ro/2018/01/06/1948-fost-anul-inceputului-apocalipsei-1948-70-2018-anul-2018-va-reprezenta-intrarea-apocalipsa/> (accessed on October 8, 2018).

and the appearance of the Antichrist on June 24, 2018.¹⁰ Similar predictions of a secular nature come also in video format and usually represent a collage of various news and warnings about the catastrophic end of our planet,¹¹ similar to the disaster movies.¹² They are all propagated freely and the question is what can and should be done concerning such contemporary prophets as they freely speak up their convictions. As argued previously, education is one of the main things. It is the purpose of this article to do that through the lines that follow.

The focus on the end-times is as old as the first Christian generation and goes throughout the history of Christianity.¹³ The feeling of urgency and soonness has since been nurtured and promoted to date. At times, this expectation was so much exaggerated that no benefit was obtained, either at a personal level or in the community or the society at large. Moreover, false predictions produced fears, disorders, and lack of involvement.

Eschatological predictions or Apocalypticism, as is sometimes called, are amply testified in history and they had both religious and social impact.¹⁴ The present paper tackles one aspect of eschatology which can de-stabilize community, fracture relationships and wrongly use the opportunities of freedom of speech and democracy. That aspect is the eschatology of imminence, that is, the proclamation of the soon

10 See at <http://www.antenasetelor.ro/vrem-sa-stii/vss3/stiinta/31804-24-iunie-2018--ziua-apocalipsei-iata-ce-spune-biblia.html> (accessed on October 8, 2018).

11 See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm-QQbxzTq4>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzqHUttIZfA> (accessed on October 8, 2018).

12 E.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb9lvrrcu3E> (accessed on October 8, 2018)

13 See for example, "Apropierea și întârzierea Parusiei la părinții ante- și post-niceeni – partea I." *Theorhēma*. Vol. 11, No. 1 (2016): 57-74. "Apropierea și întârzierea Parusiei la părinții ante- și post-niceeni – partea II." *Theorhēma*. Vol. 12, No. 2 (2016): 37-54. "Tema nou-testamentară a apropierii și întârzierii parusiei în gândirea Reformei Protestante." *Theorhēma*. Vol. 12, No. 2 (2017): 19-44. "Tema nou-testamentară a apropierii și întârzierii parusiei în Evul Mediu." *Theorhēma*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (2018): 25-54.

14 In the history of the Christian church, national unity was built at times on both secular and religious-eschatological basis. I say "religious-eschatological" because religion does not seem always sufficient for the task. When that is the case, eschatology enters the picture to contribute to unity and establishment. It suffices to mention two examples. First, when the unity of the Roman Empire was endangered in the fourth century, Christianity was embraced by the royal house of Rome and this contributed to a great extent to keeping the empire together in strength and perspective. After conversion, Rome was no more the Antichrist that was pursuing Christianity to extinction, but had become the house and protector of the church. Therefore, the end of the world was delayed for the end of Rome.

return of Jesus or the end of the world, together with the claim that one can know the times and the seasons, as the grand finale is drawing close. That many Christians from various denominations profess that Jesus is coming soon is widely visible. In fact, alarmists and secular prophets exist also outside the walls of the church. At times, saying that Jesus is soon to come represents a driving force that brings to life neglected aspects of Christian life and history. And to be clear, the message “the time is near” is biblical and Christian. But the claim to know more precisely what “the time” is in current generation is not biblical. In fact, this claim seems to be challenged by some portions of the biblical message.

The Lie of the Nearness in the Olivet Discourse

Also called the small apocalypse, the Olivet discourse represents the teachings of Jesus concerning the coming of the end. Christ’s eschatology seems short in terms of the number of words, but extremely deep and, at times, challenging. The table below emphasizes one of the warnings of Jesus with respect to false teachers and messiahs. Looking at the synoptic writers of the New Testament (i.e. Mark, Matthew, and Luke), it is interesting to note that the same exhortation is slightly modified by Luke, who is probably the one who wrote the last among the three. To the warning against the message of some pseudo-prophets — “I am the Christ”, Jesus adds that these teachers will also claim that “the time is near”. The connection between the messianic claims and imminence is important¹⁵ and the immediate referent is the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁶

....Second, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century America, unity, progress, and development was reached by the young nation around the religious idea of the millennium. Many thinkers of the time understood that the long-awaited glorious and golden era of the church was finally possible to welcome. Therefore, inter-denominational missionary projects were appearing everywhere and national unity was the sure result.

15 “Here the point is the false claim that the prophet is an eschatological figure whose appearance signifies that the End has drawn near.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 763.

16 See for example what John Nolland reasons: “Luke’s addition of ‘the time has drawn near’ has often been taken as warning against all preaching of the imminence of the eschaton. But this is to lose sight of the immediate context, in which the time we have been encouraged to focus on is that of the destruction of the temple.” John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary 35C (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 991.

However, the advice remains applicable to other periods of the Christian era.¹⁷ The impetus is: “do not follow them”.

Mark 13:6	Matt 24:5	Luke 21:8b
“Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.” ¹⁸	“For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.”	“For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ AND, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.”

The phrase “the time is near” has nothing wrong in itself. The New Testament is replete with such utterances: (1) “the kingdom is near” in the context of the first advent (Matt. 3:2 [John, the Baptist]; Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15 [Jesus]; Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9, 11 [the twelve]); (2) “the time is near” in the context of the second advent (Rom. 13:12; Jam. 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7).

The message “the time is near” is biblical. But Christ knows very well that some biblical truths can and will be wrongly applied and exaggerated.¹⁹ How should one distinguish between a true nearness and a deceptive nearness? Is the Christian today in danger of misusing the message of soon coming? What are the consequences of saying “the time is near” when it is not so near? Are there any “signs” which anticipate the soon coming of Christ? These are some of the questions I will try to address throughout this paper.

Preliminary Considerations

What started the Olivet discourse was Christ’s declaration about the Temple in Jerusalem that “not one stone will be left on another” (Luke 21:6). This is not a literal description of what was to happen,²⁰

17 Alfred Plummer contends that in light of false prophets and anti-christs of 1 John 2:18, the pseudo-messiahs mentioned in Luke 21:8 fall rather in latter category. Therefore, they represent a sign of Christ’s return. In his words: “We seem, therefore, at the outset to have a sign which refers rather to Christ’s return than to the destruction of Jerusalem.” Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke* (London: T&T Clark International, 1896), 478.

18 Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from scripture are from the NIV.

19 Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1336.

20 “This is not so much a literal description of the temple being leveled as it is a general description of destruction.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1662.

but surely a language of destruction by the enemy (see Luke 19:43-44²¹). What determined Jesus to speak more and, in fact, caused the discourse was the twofold question of the disciples. I did not say “the two questions,” but “the twofold question,” because actually there is only one question: when? Luke 21:7 reads: “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” The disciples ask what will be the sign (notice the singular) that will tell them that what Jesus said will come to fulfillment. So they asked about a temporal clue as to the destruction of Jerusalem.

For a Jewish mind time is not measured in hours, minutes and seconds like in Babylon, but in events.²² “Tell us the sign/event which will confirm that really what you said is about to take place” is their request. They will know that the time is near, not by counting the days, but by being witnesses of a sign. Although the initial concern of the disciples is about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, they were actually expecting the end of the world concurrently.²³ This we know from Matt. 24:3, “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”²⁴ This end of the world will overlap with the coming of Jesus as a Judge to rescue his people and punish the foes of Israel.

Jesus’s answer: the big picture

The general structure of the discourse is chiasmic. This means that the first element corresponds with the last, the second with the penultimate, leaving the center of the discourse to be the hearth of the message. It is

21 The text reads: “The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

22 Consider for instance the prayer of Daniel in Dan. 9. He knows that the seventy years of captivity are about to be ended, but this in itself doesn’t tell anything to Daniel. He wants to see some events that will prove the assurance of the prophecy (cf. Jer. 25).

23 “It appears ... that Matthew has deliberately expanded the question [...] to make it clear that the discourse that follows is not concerned only with the destruction of the temple. In so doing he has introduced the term *parousia*, which he alone uses among the gospel writers.” R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 895.

24 Cf. Also Luke 21:9: “‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?’” (Luke 21:7).

a Jewish literary device, virtually absent from the Western and modern mind frame.

A 21:9-11 fearful signs on the earth & from heaven – all over the world

B 21:12-19 Before all these happen, the disciples will bear witness on Jesus and they will suffer – the disciples will be hated by the Jews & Gentiles

B' 21:20-24 Jews will be scattered abroad – Jerusalem/the Jews under pressure

A' 21:25-26 anguish among the Gentiles & signs from heaven – all over the world

The apex: 21:27 – Christ's second coming

In a Hebrew manner, the material is arranged in such a way as to interpret the cover by the core. The whole discourse should be understood in the light of that middle. The first and the last part give a global perspective: there will be earthly and heavenly manifestations involving the whole planet. In the middle, the Jewish people function like a paradigm of the world. What happened to them will happen to a larger scale to the world. One central activity pervades the whole picture: the Gospel will be spread all over the world. Generally speaking, both Jews and Gentiles will reject it. Consequently, a punishment will come over the two in succession. Everything climaxes with Jesus' return.

Tentative chronology according to temporal indices

Looking at the temporal clues (nouns, adjectives, adverbs) in the text, the reader is able to create an order of the events and be clear about what comes first, and what is next. In Luke 21:9, Christ states that "These things must happen first." By "these things" he was referring to wars and revolutions. But when social and political commotions come, the believer should not think that these are signs of the end,²⁵ for Jesus affirms: οὐκ ἐθέλωσ τὸ τέλος ("the end will not come immediately"). Therefore, the end should be reserved for future. Then the list gets longer: after wars there will be earthquakes, famines, pestilences, fearful events and great signs from heaven (vv. 10-11).

²⁵ However, under Jewish influences, eschatology was marked by the idea of engaging in and fighting the last battle. "This is exactly what happened in the 60s C.E., when messianic leaders recruited revolutionary forces against Rome." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 735. Christians were not to let themselves be deceived by such perspectives.

Interestingly, Christ urges “But before all these” (Πρὸδὲτούτων πάντων, Luke 21:12), which means that there is a first before the first (all these things to happen). Before these, Christ’s followers will bear witness about Him before kings and governors and they will be persecuted, hated, betrayed, put into prison (Luke 21:12-19²⁶). In the words of Matthew, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matt. 24:14).

Jerusalem and the Jews: a paradigm of the end

The discourse explains that the preaching of the gospel in all the world, which must preclude the occurrence of “all these things” is going to flourish and expand “visiting” first the Jewish nations and then going to the margins of the earth. In fact, the gospel has been preached to the Jews through the apostolic generation. Some received it, most of them rejected it. The other signs followed. The persecutions of the Christians are clearly depicted throughout the book of Acts, plus the Roman history (e.g., Nero’s persecutions in Rome and Domitian’s persecutions in Rome and Asia Minor). The preaching of the gospel before 70 AD (when the Temple had been blotted out) has been accompanied by signs like wars and revolutions (Parthian Empire²⁷ vs. Roman Empire; 36, 58 AD), earthquakes (e.g., 60 AD Laodicea), famines (see Acts 11), pestilences, strange signs in the context of Jerusalem’s destruction (according to Josephus who says that “voices [were heard] in the Temple [saying]: ‘let’s get out of here ...’”).

The discourse discloses a particular sign meant to signal the impending destruction of the city: “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near (ἤγγικεν)”

26 The text runs as follows: “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.” (Luke 21:12-19).

27 This was located where modern Iran is.

(Luke 21:20).²⁸ In other words, unless you see this taking place, the mere signs mentioned before are not indicative of “the end” of Jerusalem.

Now, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a matter of months. But, apparently Jesus is using this event and its consequences to describe the whole Christian era until the second coming of Jesus, when not the Jews, but the whole world would experience similar judgments. In support of this, one can refer to the phrase ἄχρι οὗ πληρωθῶσιν καιροὶ ἐθνῶν. (“until the times of the Gentiles is fulfilled”, Luke 21:24). The destruction of Jerusalem unleashes a whole chain of destructive events upon the Jews. With the exception of those following Jesus advice (“Then let those who are in Judea flee²⁹ to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.” Luke 21:21), the rest of the Jews had been killed, persecuted, and scattered abroad.

The expression “the times of the Gentiles” refers to the time when the nations have an oppressive dominion over the literal Jews. Apparently, Jesus is announcing here that the treading of Jerusalem under the foot of the Gentiles will be prolonged until a time hence the Gentiles themselves will come under the focus of divine judgment. Why? Remember that the Jews suffered as a consequence of rejecting the Gospel. After they decided their stand in this matter (mostly against the Gospel), the Gentile public became the target of the apostles’ mission and preaching. But a time will come when the nations will have to face the Jesus they also rejected.

Between vv. 25-27 Jesus speaks about a great panic among the nations, as they wait for amazing things to happen. “The heavenly bodies will be shaken” (21:26), says Jesus. The verb “to shake” is used most of the times in the NT to refer to a divine manifestation (cf. Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:25; Luke 21:26; Acts 2:25; 4:31; 16:26; 17:13; Heb. 12:26-27). Hag. 2:6 refers to the first advent of Jesus as a time of shaking. Likewise, v. 27 says: “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” According to R.

28 In Mark and Matthew, the message is more cryptic: “When you see the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong-- let the reader understand-- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” (Mark 13:14, cf. Matt. 24:15).

29 There was a “time when escape was still possible because the wall the Romans built around the city had not been completed (cf. Josephus, *Wars* 7.8.5 [7.304]).” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, *The New American Commentary* 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 520.

Lenski,³⁰ these signs are to be taken as literal manifestations of nature and all concurrent, not various stages or events.

The Sign of the Second Coming

Since the destruction of Jerusalem was a paradigm of the eschaton, then it follows that as that event had a sign which announced the immediate destruction of the city, so the second coming will be preceded by an imminent sign: “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (ἐγγίζει)” (Luke 21:28). What are “these things”? In v. 27 the reader is told that “at that time they will see the Son of Man Coming”? To what does the expression “at that time” point? The answer to both questions is found in the last part of v. 26: “the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”³¹ Accordingly, only when these things begin to happen (i.e. the shaking of the literal powers of heaven), they can be sure that Jesus’ return is indeed about to happen under their eyes.

This is confirmed in Rev. 6:12-17, “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

In order to keep the expectation alive, but discourage speculation at the same time, Jesus tells a parable: when the trees sprout leaves it means that the summer is near (ἐγγύς, Luke 21:30 BNT). Likewise,

30 “What these two verses describe is not a succession of events but a simultaneous disruption.” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 1023.

31 This is an OT imagery: “at least with respect to sun, moon, and stars, this picture is deeply rooted in Old Testament prophecy.” William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 940.

ὅταν ἴδητε ταῦτα γινόμενα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγύς ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (Luke 21:31 BNT). “When you see these happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” Again, the word “these” (ταῦτα) hints back to vv. 27-28 “the powers of heaven shall be shaken.” This is tantamount to the sprouting of the leaves from Jesus’ parable.

This generation will not pass

A verse which is worth of a paper alone is “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things (πάντα) have happened.” (Luke 21:32). In this text, Christ utters more than just about how the destruction of Jerusalem will take place.³² He has the Parousia in perspective and how in the first generation of the Christian Church, all the signs preceding the great event of the Second Advent will happen. And indeed they occurred before and during the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. However, unless the immediate sign of the Second Advent takes place (i.e. the shaking of the powers of heaven) Christians do not have to exaggerate the imminence of His return. In a certain sense, the Second Advent is near since the first century. But by lacking the immediate sign of Christ’s return, nobody needs to speculate when exactly he is to come. It is safer to rather proclaim that He is coming soon allowing history to unfold until the Providence of God considers it is time to close.

It important now to return to one of the initial questions which have been addressed and provide answers from this analysis. First of all, are there any “signs” (pl.) which anticipate the immediate coming of Christ? No. There are indeed signs which form the category called in Luke 21:9 things which “must happen first.” But this type occurred all the way through the Christian age, beginning with the first generation (remember: “this generation will not pass”). However, there is a sign of immediate/impending coming of Jesus called by Luke “the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” We do not know what this means but the language indicates the literal presence of the divine. This will be witnessed before, but almost instantaneously with His coming. What we do know is that

32 “The time span here corresponds to what has been said in the first part of this end-time discourse. More than just the fall of Jerusalem must be in view.” Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, Holman New Testament Commentary 3 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 355.

the nations will be stupefied even in anticipation of those manifestations. Interestingly, John goes one step further in the book of Revelation telling us, how the nations will feel and react during those terrible times: remember the sixth seal of Rev. 6:12-17.

Jesus is very clear that throughout history, false utterances will be spread out as if the time has indeed come. One early example is the exaggerations in the Thessalonian community which happened around the mid-first century. Recall the second epistle of Paul in which the apostle has to temper a spirit of false nearness of “the day of the Lord.” It happened, it is happening, and it will happen again.

How should we distinguish between a true nearness and a deceptive nearness? By the claim to know very precisely when Parousia is to take place and by the degree of civic involvement in the community and the society. Definitely Christians today are in the danger of misusing the message of “soon coming”. Whenever nearness is preached based on *signs*, a disservice is made to the Christian message. The signs are not anticipatory of the instant return of Jesus. The only thing that they tell us in general terms that the world is fragile and, therefore, the end is near. But “near” does not mean “here, already present, or instant.”

Practical implications

Several practical implications stand out. First, waiting for Christ’s soon return is legitimate. After all, it is the result of how we read our bibles and interpret the times we live in. However, between crying out speculations regarding the end and work for the benefit of the community, while waiting, the latter is preferable.³³ Second, if Christians cry out loud that Christ is coming very soon and He is not coming, people won’t believe anymore. Christians should refrain from being too specific. The focal point

33 For clarification, I will suggest an historical fact as being illustrative of this fact. While the great powers of Europe were engaged in World War I, in another part of the world another adventurous experience had been undertaken. Far away in the Atlantic waters, nearby the bottom part of South American continent, a great explorer of Antarctica, called Sir Ernest Shackleton, departed from South Georgia Island in the ship called *Endurance*. After almost 500 days of fighting with the unfriendly ice the crew of 28 people wrecked in the near vicinity of the Elephants’ Island. Landing on that island, they soon arrived to an unavoidable conclusion. If they were to find rescue for all of them, the captain should risk his life leaving the island by boat to take another ship and return to take the others with him. So Shackleton left with five men.

should be the Man Jesus,³⁴ not the signs of the end. Third, the apocalyptic hysteria teaches us that freedom of speech should remain free as long as the only danger remains the content of the message. However, when the means of heralding a discourse go beyond the common values of respect, peacefulness, and integrity, the democratic governments should intervene.

..... The other 22 remained on the Elephants' Island under the command of Frank Wild, Shackleton's second-in-command, not knowing how much time is going to take until the captain appears again on the horizon. In his memoir, Frank Wild wrote how immediately after the captain and his small team left set all the remaining crew to work. It was important for them to combine hope and expectation with work and usefulness. Imagine what the result would have been if the 22 sailors had engaged in speculation about the time of Shackleton's return. For 104 days all seemed the same. Every day the panorama was the same: ice, ice, ice. Not a single sign of the expected ship. They did not know that out of their eyeshot, or visual range, Shackleton was trying several times to reach their island, yet unsuccessfully because of the dangerous ice. Luckily, a breach in the ice, gave the captain the opportunity to head quickly for his left behind crew. Are they ready? The time is very short before another ice chain would block the way out. Fortunately, all were safe and actively waiting. Wild invited Shackleton to see the conditions in which they waited and survived, but the captain declined. They are in a hurry. As they were safely departing, Shackleton found out the secret of their discipline and survival. Wild set all the men to work and after a certain period of time he used to repeat to them: "Work! Maybe the boss returns today!" This historical paradigm already gives us a hint about the safe way to approach the message of Christ's soon return and the speculations about it. It seems safer to work for the good of others and stay in active expectation than to speculate about when the end might come. For more details see Hal Marcovitz, *Sir Ernest Shackleton and the Struggle Against Antarctica* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2002).

34 Sometimes, the motivation of personal religion should not rely on the urgency of the end. Nobody should find the primary motivation to change their lives using "the signs of the times" and the lateness of the clock of the universe. Ellen White states: "The shortness of time is urged as an incentive for us to seek righteousness and to make Christ our friend. This is not the great motive. It savors of selfishness. Is it necessary that the terrors of the day of God be held before us to compel us through fear to right action? This ought not to be. *Jesus is attractive*. He is full of love, mercy, and compassion. He proposes to be our friend, to walk with us through all the rough pathways of life. He says to you, I am the Lord thy God; walk with me, and I will fill thy path with light. Jesus, the Majesty of Heaven, proposes to elevate to companionship with himself those who come to him with their burdens, their weaknesses, and their cares. He will make them his dear children, and finally give them an inheritance of more value than the empires of kings, a crown of glory richer than has ever decked the brow of the most exalted earthly monarch." Ellen White, "Rest for the Weary," *Review and Herald*, August 2, 1881 par. 6. Emphasis mine. The best way to demonstrate that Jesus is attractive to us is to follow His own advice in the end of the Olivet Discourse: "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36). Whether Christians see it or not, they speak more about Jesus return by their own lifestyle, plans, and concerns, than by a specific message as to what the historical time is. When Christians are more preoccupied with the One coming, than with the coming itself, the right message is spread.

Conclusions

A few conclusions are becoming evident. Freedom of speech is part of the core values of democracy and requires democratic governments to protect it by law. Exaggerated forms of discourse must be regulated at the same time, so that this kind of freedom may be well exercised in society and not abused for reasons outside the welfare of a certain community. This paper tackled the issue of the imminence of the end of the world as one example where freedom of speech implies the possibility of speculating and bluffing about the end. This is one of the instances when the only way to counterbalance such tendencies is by systematically educate society about the issue and about how should one critically evaluate the information to which they are exposed.

The biblical message is that “the time is near” even so the adverb “near” has become more elastic than the previous generations anticipated. Nearness is sometimes exaggerated by claims that a more specific mapping of the end-times is possible. However, the bible is not that precise when it comes to the exact time of the Parousia. The Gospel message is rather one that is asking for continuous watching. If an impending doom is preached, the connection of the believers with society is reduced to a minimum. Some of the natural results of this pessimistic worldview are hopelessness, carelessness, and resignation. Yet, if a general message of nearness and preparation for the end is taught, then the relationship of the Christian with the society is strengthened. Concerning the alleged signs of the end, Christ’s Olivet discourse makes it clear that there is only one sign that anticipate the immediate coming of the Son of Man, which is the shaking of the powers of heaven. The other signs are only warnings. The only development after which the end will come is the global spread of the gospel message. The worldwide mission of the church comes before the end of the earth and by spreading the gospel throughout the world Christians nurture unity, development, and qualitative growth.

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