Alberto Melloni / Federico Ruozzi / Francesca Cadeddu (eds.)

Faith and Pestilence

Paradigms and Historical, Theological, Hermeneutic Issues

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Alberto Melloni

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A peste, fame, bello libera nos domine

1. Empty Squares, Closed Churches

The scenes of Pius XIII in a deserted St Peter's Square once again made us laud Oscar-winning director Paolo Sorrentino's visionary creative genius. In 2016, the Neapolitan director's series *The Young Pope* told the story of a pope who refused to appear, who shunned the media, gave press conferences without journalists, recited the Sunday Angelus without the usual crowds of pilgrims… It was definitely unreal but, for that very reason, captivating and evocative.

Once again, cinema, a true mythopoeic machine, anticipated reality: the well-known restrictions on liturgies imposed by Covid-19 were incomparably documented on 27 March 2020, when Pope Francis, on the occasion of the celebration of a prayer to implore the end of the pandemic, crossed St Peter's Square – wet from the rain, empty and in silence – alone, then climbed the steps of the altar area. Two years later, in an interview broadcast as part of the religious coverage on Italian public television, he recalled those moments. "I did not know that the square would be empty. I did not know. I arrived and no one was there. Yes, I knew that, with the rain, there would be few people, but no one…"[1]

Prior to Sorrentino's sequences, nothing, in fact, had made it imaginable that the Good Friday Stations of the Cross would not take place, as usual, at the Colosseum, but would be celebrated in an empty Vatican square by Pope Francis in April 2020 without the participation of believers, again due to Covid-19 precautions. They were dramatic images that have, rightfully, entered into history, not only television history, but also religious history. In addition to empty classrooms and the online (non-)teaching, which has dramatically exposed once

1 Interview of L. Bianchetti with Pope Francis for the TV programme *A sua immagine*, Rai 1, 15 April 2022, also available at <www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2022/4/15/papa-francesco-il-27-marzo-2020-non-sapevo-che-la-piazza-sarebbe-stata-vuota-capire-bene-le-grandi-solitudini> (accessed 14 June 2024).

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again the inequalities that had been, unrealitically, thought overcome,[2] devout believers were not able to gather with their communities for the major feasts of the different religions that took place in the midst of the lockdown, particularly, Passover, Easter (both Eastern and Western), and Ramadan.

Virtual participation in worship and the suspension of liturgies not only raised issues related to optics, but also ecclesiological, legal, and theological problems that cannot be underestimated.[3] Religious communities opted for different approaches to virtual participation and, in some cases, were also internally divided. On the one hand, there were religious leaders who told their people to stay home. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, filming himself with his iPhone while celebrating Mass in his kitchen, became a kind of icon. Other communities, on the other hand, rejected the norms of confinement, like some ultra-Orthodox Jews in the suburbs of Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. The issue cannot be hastily dismissed.[4] Something similar happened in Iran where, despite the closure of mosques, there were spontaneous demonstrations in the holy city of Qom calling for worship to be resumed.

In Italy, among others, the issue became legally relevant as the government paid little reflection to the legal instruments used to support the containment

2 D. Cersosimo/F. Cimatti/F. Raniolo (ed.), *Studiare la pandemia: Disuguaglianze e resilienza ai tempi del Covid-19* (Rome: Donzelli, 2020).

3 See A. Spadaro, "Pandemia e libertà di culto", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4078/2 (2020) 362–4; J. Scarin, "Praticare la religione durante la pandemia: Mutamenti nella Comunità Evangelica Cinese padovana causati dal COVID", *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale* 58 (2022) 779–801. On the juridical-ecclesiastical questions, see D. Milani, "Covid-19 e libertà religiosa in Italia: Lo spirito di resilienza dello Stato e della Chiesa davanti alla sfida della pandemia", *Ius Ecclesiae* 33/1 (2021) 89–116; M. Madonna, "Diritto e letteratura ai tempi del Coronavirus: Gli 'occhiali' dei giuristi e lo sguardo 'lungo' dei letterati", 5 April 2021, in G. Mazzoni/A. Negri (ed.), *Libertà religiosa e Covid-19: Tra diritto alla salute e* salus animarum. *I focus del dossier Olir "Emergenza Coronavirus"* (Milan: Alessandro Negri, 2021) 164–8; V. Pacillo, "La libertà di culto di fronte all'emergenza Covid-19: Profili di diritto canonico e di diritto ecclesiastico italiano", *Il diritto ecclesiastico* 1–2 (2019) 11–33; S. Montesano, "Libertà di culto ed emergenza sanitaria: Sintesi ragionata delle limitazioni introdotte in Italia per contrastare la diffusione del Covid-19", *Quaderni di diritto e politica ecclesiastica* 2 (2020) 255–63. For a broader overview, see E.C. Del Re/P. Naso, *Religioni e pandemia in Italia: Dottrina, comunità, e cura* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2022). G. Di Renzo Villata, "Religione, fede ed epidemi: La Chiesa di fronte a una sfida complessa (una cavalcata 'episodica' a più voci attraverso i secoli)", *Quaderni di diritto e politica ecclesiastica* 29/4 (2021) 31–55. For a theological perspectives on the role of the churches and Christian praxis in the milieu of Covid-19, see C.J. Kaunda *et al.* (ed.), *Christianity and COVID-19: Pathways for Faith* (London: Routledge, 2023).

4 L.G. Sisti *et al.*, "COVID-19 and Religion: Evidence and Implications for Future Public Health Challenges", *European Journal of Public Health* 32/3 (2022); A. Yendell *et al.*, "Religion und Pandemie: Folgen der Corona-Pandemie für Religion und alternative Weltinterpretationen", *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politk* 7/2 (2023) 451–7; see also S. Iyer/S. Larcom/P.-W. She, "Do Religious People Cope Better in a Crisis?: Evidence from the UK Pandemic Lockdowns", *Cambridge Working Papers in Economics* 2403 (2024).

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measures, which undermined some general constitutional principles.[5] With respect to the freedom of worship, the measures taken regarding religious services were poorly or weakly justified at the time when they were enacted by low-level legal measures, that is, by decree of the prime minister instead of by a law. Noted by academics and intellectuals, in the ensuing days, arrangements were made in Italy to regulate both the Catholic Church and other faith communities, in a split between Catholics and non-Catholics that brought old priviledges back to light. Beyond the aspect of worship, though, the issue of religious interpretation also emerged from another point of view.

2. Guilt beyond Moral Laws

The interpretation of the momentous significance of the pestilence at first and the pandemic later ran along the lines that "it would change everything", that nothing "would be as it was before". The implication was that Covid-19 would change things for the better. A few years later, perhaps one is no longer so sure of that assumption.

At some point, likely inspired by the language used by media and in search of the meaning of what was happening, discussions of a specifically religious nature began to crop up. In the public debate (and in the publishing market, apparently more refined than the movie one, teeming with disaster movies and apocalyptic films) the themes of fear, punishment, conspiracies, and "the enemy" reared their heads.[6] Superficial quotations from Homer's *Iliad*, from Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi sposi* – someone even remembered Albert Camus's *The Plague* – were dusted off, showing that the theme of contagious disease and its spread has always been a literary trope.

It is a trope because, if you take the plague of 1348, the St Charles plague of 1575, or Manzoni's plague of 1630, you will find roughly a pattern, which is very vigorously repudiated by many today. The pattern basically follows the Bible, which links pestilence with impurity, sin, and punishment. At its core, this pattern paints contagion as an expression of latent guilt. Pestilence brings the incisiveness of sin to light, and this incisive sinfulness can and must be purified: a

5 A. Tira, "Libertà di culto ed emergenza sanitaria: Il protocollo del 7 maggio 2020 concordato tra Ministero dell'Interno e Conferenza Episcopale Italiana", *Giustizia insieme*, 16 May 2020, 1–11. For a comparison between state law and Catholic canon law in Germany, see B.J. Berkmann, "The covid-19 Crisis and Religious Freedom: The Interaction between State and Church Norms in Germany, Especially in Bavaria", *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8/2–3 (2020) 179–200.

6 A. Prosperi, *Tremare è umano: Una breve storia della paura* (Milan: Solferino, 2021). See also *Storia d'Italia: Annali* (27 vol.; Turin: Einaudi, 1978–2018), VII, F. Della Peruta (ed.), *Malattia e medicina* (1984). On the role of religion in crisis response, see F. Sibanda/T. Muyambo/E. Chitando (ed.), *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa* (London: Routledge, 2023).

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ritual purification, yes, but also an ethical one. You find it expressed in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, the Quran, as well as in the various interpretations of those texts. There is some convergence in this interpretation of retribution and redemption. This pattern has emerged even more recently, for example in the 1980s, when a famous Italian prelate, the Archbishop of Genoa, Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, used it to explain the spread of HIV.

Such interpretation of the virus was quite vigorously rejected at the beginning of the spread of the pandemic and, apart from a few voices, no one accepted it, but instead pledged to reject an idea of divine wrath or punishment for sin. Nonetheless, at the very moment of rejecting a kind of theological interpretation, of repudiating the pattern of blaming pestilence on guilt before God, a form of secular translation of the same paradigm was being made from a scientific and more generally ethical interpretation, where, instead of a violation of the law of God, it was another unspecified law that was violated, resulting in a guilt that concerned something broader and more general, an ecological guilt that explained the matter itself.

Even Pope Francis, on 27 March, during the special prayer for the health emergency, in that empty, rain-soaked piazza, said: "We thought we would always remain healthy in a sick world". That speech was then followed by an unprecedented *Urbi et Orbi* blessing and plenary indulgence. The expression would return a few weeks later, on 5 June, in a letter in Spanish addressed to the President of the Republic of Colombia, Iván Duque Marquez, on the occasion of World Environment Day hosted virtually by his country on the theme of biodiversity. The pope wrote: "We cannot expect to be healthy in a sick world. The wounds caused to our Mother Earth are wounds that bleed in us as well".[7]

3. The Return of the Enemy

Of course, the more classic anti-Semitic blight also resurfaced during the pandemic. Covid-19, it was said, was cooked up by the rich, the Jews, the Masons, with Christian worship as its target.[8]

This theme was certainly not new, as Elena Mazzini has explained well.[9] Plague and cholera epidemics have been interpreted as divine punishments and, depending on the various times, linked to the conspiratorial activities of Jews, Muslims, heretics, pagans, and schismatics. From the Plague of Cyprian in the

7 "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the President of the Republic of Colombia to Mark the World Environment Day", 5 June 2020.
8 C. Birchall/P. Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19* (London: Routledge, 2023).
9 E. Mazzini, "Malattie, epidemie, dicerie", *Bibliomanie: Letterature, storiografie, semiotiche* 53/21 (2022), available at <https://www.bibliomanie.it/?p=9878> (accessed 14 June 2024).

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second half of the second century, to the crusades, to the Spanish flu (known as such to those outside Spain, but to Spaniards as the "Neapolitan soldier" sickness),[10] the identification of an enemy (always a different one, depending on the era and the situation) reflects "the changing dominant narratives of the group over time".[11] From a religious enemy in the second century, recent times have identified a national enemy, which is just an evolution of the well-known concept. The poisoning of wells by Jews is just one of many conspiracies behind which actions in defense of Christendom were justified, updated in the futurist, nationalist version advocated by QAnon.

This volume is an attempt to put knowledge, and not labels, at the centre of the discussion on the meaning and interpretation of historical turning points such as those characterised by health crises. It is an answer to the need to reflect on the scriptural paradigms of pestilence, on the historical figures emerging from past pandemic phenomena, and on the scientific-political metrics that spanned periods of plague. Looking at the language used, interpretations offered, shared and imposed, and private and public reactions to Covid-19, we sought refuge in research. The claim of the volume is that research and the study of history, of different approaches, the knowledge of worlds and languages, are the only tools that can provide a deeper, non-superficial or generic understanding of the religious landscape of a pluralistic society. They are also the tools that can help us understand seemingly very different processes, in which ancient religious ideas not only pass through, but find themselves in religious experience and in contexts only seemingly far from it.

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Scriptural Paradigms

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Mauro Belcastro

Prophecies of the Last Days in the New Testament and Apocrypha

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;
I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.[1]
Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.[2]

1. Introduction: Prophecy as Vision, Knowledge, and Politics

Among other factors, ancient Jewish and Christian prophecies are characterised by vision, knowledge, and politics.[3] Here, vision has a "box function" that includes other ways to perceive divinity: to see,[4] to hear, or, most generally, to feel God;[5] knowledge means both to know by divine revelation what will soon hap-

1 Mark 2:17. The English translations of biblical passages are from NRSV.

2 Q 6:20 (= Luke 6:20).

3 See e.g. the classic K. Koch, *The Prophets* (2 vol.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983–4); L.I. Rabinowitz, "Prophets and Prophecy", *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (22 vol.; Farmingotn Hills: Gale, ²2007), XVI, 566–81. See also J.J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End", in B. McGinn/J.J. Collins/S.J. Stein (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (3 vol.; New York: Continuum, 1998), I, *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J.J. Collins, 129–61; S.L. Cook, "Apocalyptic Prophecy", in J.J. Collins (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 19–35.

4 To directly see God is a rare possibility in the Jewish and Early Christian traditions. See M. Belcastro, "Essere e vedere: Dichiarazioni identitarie nel *Libro delle Parabole*", *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 85/2 (2019) 421–35, on p. 428. The Christian writings *The Shepherd of Hermas* or *Ascension of Isaiah* are exceptions and contain such an event ("Behold, now it is granted to thee to see God"; *Asce. Isa.* 9:39), but the sentence was probably added at some stage of redaction. In fact, 10:2 and especially 11:32 confirm the traditional impossibility of seeing God directly.

5 According to Paul's perspective, vision (ὀπτασία) is exceeded by revelation (ἀποκάλυψις). See 2 Cor 12:1–10 where the hyperbolic sublation of revelation with respect to vision (ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων) is clear. Concerning the perfection of vision in "visionary literature", see L. Arcari, *Vedere Dio: Le apocalissi giudaiche e protocristiane (IV sec. a.C.–II sec. d.C.)* (Rome: Carocci, 2020), 27–33; see also E. Norelli, "La visionarietà apocalittica", *Humanitas* 73/4 (2018) 536–59. Concerning the definition of apocalypse, apocalyptic, and apocalypticism, see J.J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of the Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979); A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*, *Semeia* 39 (1986); E. Norelli, "Apocalittica: Come pensarne lo sviluppo?", *Ricerche Storiche Bibliche* 2 (1995) 163–200; J.J.

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pen, and – in less mythological terms – refers to a particular, human *savoir-faire*, a sensibility given to specific (elected) people (indeed, prophets), so that they may interpret the current age according to God's revelation;[6] politics concerns the address and the essential subject matter of the prophecy. Prophetic messages are, in fact, essentially addressed to a king or a "sovereign" collectivity (Israel or Christian communities) in order to reconfigure human behaviour in accordance with God. Prophecy is always defined as politics.[7]

Prophetic engagement does not mean just a reflection on the current world, a sort of picture of the present day; it is an *action* to try to change it and a *reaction* to prepare a new world after a crisis. This also means that those who are involved in prophecy anticipate through words and images the end of their world. Prophecy is tied to a transformation, a reconfiguration of the present (or presence), and a creation of a new sense of history. Thus, if prophecy is tied to the crisis of the present, it is also a disclosure of a new future.

As Ernesto de Martino suggested, prophecy is connected with the "insidious, Western apocalypticism" which is

> characterised by the loss of sense [perdita di senso] and domesticity [domesticità] of the world; by the failure of intersubjective human relationships; by the threatening narrowing of any horizon of a communally workable future according to human freedom and dignity; and, finally, by the risks of alienation that we can see, if not in a technical progress, certainly in technicality and the fetishization of technology.[8]

De Martino's suggestion weaves through the present essay like a *fil rouge*, leading it through an attempt to analyse certain early Christian passages which I will examine. In particular, my attention will be focused on specific inflections in the

Collins, "The Genre Apocalypse Reconsidered", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity* 20/1 (2016) 21–40; E. Norelli, "Introduzione", in E. Norelli (ed.), *Apocalisse come genere: Un dibattito ancora attuale?*, *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 1 (2020) 3–58.

6 See Baruch Spinoza's ingenious and still robust answers to the question "quid esset prophetia?" in B. Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (Hamburg: Henricum Künraht, 1670), *Praefatio*, available at <http://spinozaetnous.org/wiki/Tractatus_theologico-politicus/Praefatio> (accessed 14 June 2024).

7 "The history of Abrahamic religions shows how prophets frequently came to realize their role in society as a *symptom* of crisis. Not only reflecting as passive commentators, prophets became active agents who, by speaking out, pushed the crisis forward toward its radical culmination. In this sense, the prophet is a mediating figure who stands – even when passive herself – for change in general, or a principle of boundary crossing in particular. The prophet is the one who rejects any separation of religion from politics, and sovereign from community, conservative and reform camps, high and low cultures"; N. Lebovic/D. Weidner, "Prophetic Politics: An Introduction", *Political Theology*, 21 April 2020, available at <https://political theology.com/prophetic-politics-an-introduction/> (accessed 14 June 2024).

8 E. de Martino, *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), 82 (English translation is the author's).

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perspective of an ulterior, divine reconfiguration of the present world presented by Jesus, Paul, and a crucial non-biblical writing, the Christian, apocalyptic text *Ascension of Isaiah*, through categories such as "the end of this current age", "the kingdom of God that is becoming", and "the future".

I will avoid hypothetical, chronological orders, and first of all address my attention to Jesus's interpretation of prophecy, which is strongly connected to politics. In the first paragraph, I will analyse Jesus's preaching from the perspective of the synoptic Gospels, where the link between politics, society, and illness will arise. Jesus will be presented as a prophet who, in his therapeutic activity, meets certain human beings, all of whom are considered marginal as a consequence of their subaltern, social condition.[9] In the second paragraph, I will analyse reflections about the origin of evil and possible rescue from it, by investigating the *Ascension of Isaiah*, an important, second-century apocalyptic text.[10] Finally, I will turn to Paul and his considerations concerning the crisis of the last days in his present moment, and the cultural/theological reconstruction of an uncertain future, in particular as they emerge in Phil 3, and 1 Cor 7. In the last paragraph, the category of marginality will be extended (according to the Pauline perspective) to human beings as a whole, considered in a condition of illness due to their essential sinfulness.

In all of these passages, the sense of the "end of the world" will appear, understood by the poor, sick, and marginalised as a crisis of their presence (or present); it is the perception of a collapse of any possibility for a (better) future, the serious risk of not being there anymore, which de Martino calls "psychopathological apocalypse".[11] The kingdom of God that is coming is announced,

9 As I will point out, this is about poor people (who are essentially unable to work) affected by disabilities, women (not necessary affected by some illness), but also people refused by their own συγγενεῖς (kin, relatives) because they are considered traitors (e. g. tax collectors). Thus, marginality (i. e. exclusion) depends on the cultural horizon taken as a model by certain societies, and it does not necessarily coincide with subalternity (which remains functionally linked to the unfair growth of society). Concerning marginalisation and subalternity, see at least A. Gramsci, "Storia della classe dominante e delle classi subalterne", in A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere: Edizione critica dell'istituto Gramsci*, ed. V. Gerratana (4 vol.; Turin: Einaudi, 1975) Quaderno 3, §14. See also G. Liguori, "Subalterno e subalterni nei 'Quaderni del carcere'", *International Gramsci Journal* 2/1 (2016) 89–125.

10 Many other texts may be read in this context, from the Apocalypse of John to the Apocalypse of Peter or that of Paul. On the importance of the *Ascension of Isaiah* in early Christian history and theology, see E. Norelli, *L'Ascensione di Isaia: Studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* (Bologna: EDB, 1994). See also P. Piovanelli, "'A Door into an Alien World': Reading the *Ascension of Isaiah* as a Jewish Mystcal Text", in J.N. Bremmer/T.R. Karmann/T. Nicklas (ed.), *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016) 119–44.

11 On this point, the story reported by Mark 5:25–34 (// Matt 9:20–2; Luke 8:43–8) is highly significant. It tells of a "woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse". Here there is a clear example of a crisis of presence not

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and not just as an alternative to this world: as I claim, to consider the kingdom of God just as an alternative is a non-solution, because it will again reproduce, sooner or later, the same unjust outcome of marginality that constitutes the waste product of the political act of "immunising" a community.[12] Conversely, the eschatological perspective announces a future kingdom where human beings will be together in peace (ἐκκλησία) and without conflict or division[13] – a perspective that paradoxically makes present the possibility of a new sensible "cultural apocalypse".[14]

In this chapter, I will overlap two terms semantically and symbolically; in fact, I will consider the crisis mentioned above as a pandemic (the extreme possibility of annihilation)[15] from multiple points of view (disease, infirmity, famine, poverty). The goal of my investigation is to show how the early Christian perspective considered here is not a new form of power (not even a divine one) that generates a new form of societal organisation. Quite the opposite, it is the crisis of the crisis, a metacrisis that aims to deconstruct the present, ailing world[16] through

necessarily linked to a poor person. Quite the opposite, the woman initially may have had economic means to acquire medical care; nevertheless, the crisis eventually happens anyway, and Jesus is seen as the only one who can heal her: "She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well'". For a different social case (within the same thematic horizon), see Luke 15:1–7 (the parable of the lost sheep) and 15:8–10 (the parable of the lost coin).

12 The category of "immunity" or "immunisation" is employed by R. Esposito, *Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002). This important concept will be useful in the considerations that follow. Unlike Esposito, I claim that the process of immunisation (in its different inflections, according to the *nómos*, *religio*, biopolitics or anthropology) is a dispositif of marginalisation, a mechanism that, generating security and identity for a safe society, inevitably produces a waste. This waste consists of concrete human beings refused by society as a-normal, sub-normal, dysfunctional people or simply subalterns (poor, mentally and physically disabled people, women, foreigners, non-heteronormative people). This refusal is preceded and followed by a narrative of marginalisation rooted in an alleged biological or natural condition that ultimately justify inequality, totally avoiding the cultural and economic reasons of it.

13 See Is 11:1–10.

14 Once again, it is Ernesto de Martino who forges this evocative concept, "cultural apocalypse", in contrast with the psychopathological one. As will be clear, the early Christian concept of "end" moves these two horizons (psychopathological and cultural) closer than de Martino would want to admit.

15 A different case concerns death, the possibility that certainly erases any other possibility. See M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962), § 50–3. For de Martino's critique of Heidegger, see *La fine del mondo*, 186–7 and 520–31.

16 Essential here is R.A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 106: "The illnesses cannot be reduced to 'diseases' that could have been 'cured' by modern biomedicine but were rather illnesses typical (and symbolic) of peoples impacted by colonial/imperial invasion or conquest, the most striking of which is possession by alien spirits but which also include paralysis, blindness, haemorrhaging, and extreme weakness (being virtually dead). These were symptoms of a whole society undergoing disintegration".

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the revelation of the coming kingdom of God; at the same time, this revelation destroys even the possibility of injustice, prefigured in the biblical shalom.

2. Jesus, Prophecy, and the Last Days

What do "the end of the world" and "the end of the age" mean?[17] We find these expressions everywhere in early Christian writings. Speaking about the same end times, Paul says that "the present form of this world is passing away",[18] and the *Ascension of Isaiah* calls this condition "the last days".[19] In an important 1965 article, where he reports his last conversation with Ernesto de Martino, Cesare Cases preserves an important testimony. According to Cases, for de Martino

> the end of the world has always been there. What else did the Incas or Aztecs think about the Spanish conquerors – those Martians who rained down from no one knows where – but that it was the end of the world? We can say that it was the end of *their* world; after all, what is the end of the world if not the end of our own world?[20]

According to de Martino, the collapse (the "loss of presence") of one's world could have two different outcomes: on the one hand, collapse leads to a "psychopathological apocalypse"; on the other hand, it can be an occasion to reconfigure a collective horizon into a "cultural apocalypse". To make this second condition possible, people who experience a crisis have to reconnect their current lives with what anticipated them at cultural level. This reconnection is a cultural "energy", a "beyond", a "valorising transcension", that de Martino calls "ethics of transcension" ("etica del trascendimento").[21] Crisis and reintegration (that is, respectively, the self-possibility-of-not-being-there-anymore and the having-to-be-there-in-the-world) are good categories, useful in order to try to explain how prophecy – and especially Jesus's preaching – works. But the very cultural world that could become a renewed horizon giving a sense to crisis, in early Christian terms, is the same cultural horizon that determined the crisis itself.[22] Thus, it is

17 See "συντέλειας τοῦ αἰῶνος"; Matt 28:20; "ἔσχατος τῶν χρόνων"; 1 Pet 1:20; "συντέλεια τῶν αἰώνων"; Heb 9:26.

18 "παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου"; 1 Cor 7:31.

19 "In the last days the Lord, who will be called Christ, will descend into the world"; *Asce. Isa.* 9:131. The English text of *Asce. Isa.* is quoted by W. Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R.McL. Wilson (Louisville, KT: Westminister John Knox Press, 2003), II, *Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, 603–20.

20 C. Cases, "Un colloquio con Ernesto de Martino", *Quaderni Piacentini* 4/23–4 (1965) 4–10, on p. 8 (English translation is the author's; italics original).

21 de Martino, *La fine del mondo*, 186ff.

22 What is crisis for marginalised people? De Martino speaks of a "loss of domesticity" regarding a typical, domestic daily world (*La fine del mondo*, 173ff.). But what is a domestic world for the poor or marginalised? The same world that he or she perceives as "domestic" is the world

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better to interpret Jesus's preaching in dialectical terms, using those categories, but translating them as (a) presence-in-this-evil-world, (b) crisis-of-the-presence, (c) eschatological-new-horizon.[23]

If prophecies could be understood as human attempts to see beyond the veil of human activities and historical situations, the prophet – in connection with divinity – is able to say something about what is really going on in the present day (deconstruction), and what will happen to human beings in a short period of time (eschatological vision). The prophet – this special and peculiar link between this present and essentially evil world and a future, promised kingdom of God – tries to figure out divine signs littered throughout this world. Usually, prophecies are connected to terrible, inevitable happenings: it is easy to emphasise catastrophic events like earthquakes, cosmological explosions, diseases, or pandemics, especially when the most relevant parts of prophets' books are filled with them. All those situations result from moral attitudes – more collective than individual – due to which human beings are accused of perverting divine law. But the central point about prophecies is more connected to a certain understanding of reality and its perversion, which is manifested by oppression, injustice, inequality, and idolatry. To focus our attention solely on the catastrophic features of prophecies means to misunderstand their political perspective, which instead aims to put in question the *status quo* of human injustice.

This is what Jesus did too. In his activity and preaching, ideally inheriting the prophetic subversion of (or repulsion for) any form of political establishment, Jesus identifies in the established political power the structural root of a pandemic, the condition of an inevitable marginalisation of subaltern people.[24] When Jesus starts to spread the good news about the kingdom of God, he already finds the human world affected by diseases, namely, the consequences of a "pandemic" already at work in the world.[25] Thus, humanity is already affected by

that threatens him or her, the world whose political structures create his or her marginality. Any single domestic element of daily life (from the street by which the blind man reaches the place where he can beg, to the place where he recovers himself at the end of the day) becomes a cultural place imposed by a dominant culture, which understands marginal people only according to their socially imposed function. Thus, for people marginalised, domesticity, too, could be a strong cultural function of power.

23 So structured, a cultural apocalypse is not just a return to tradition, but it is a disclosure of a truly new, possible world, unexpected and, for this, apocalyptic. According to de Martino "if being-in-the-world constitutes the norm of presence, the condition for its emergence and its ever-renewed undertaking in the process of coming to presence, how can that presence that risks not being there at all in any possible cultural world possibly continue to call itself a 'world'?"; de Martino, *La fine del mondo*, 202 (all the translations from de Martino are the author's).

24 See the "woe's discourse"; Q 11:37–54.

25 According to this perspective, a pandemic is not the future consequence of evil deeds. Quite the opposite, it is the daily, human, historical condition already at work in the world.

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a pandemic: it does not need to convert itself to avoid some form of illness, but to change its own mind in order to understand the revelation offered concerning the fulfilment of time and the proximity of the kingdom of God.[26]

The difference between the prophetic action of Jesus and other Jewish forms of prophecy could be seen in the manifestation and accomplishment of the power of God.[27] As in Jewish prophecy, diseases and epidemics are the consequences of evil deeds exercised by people; Jesus's action is the realisation of the final intention of the same prophecy, that is, healing people from the consequences of sin, even removing the condition of possibility of it. In a way, the centre of Jesus's preaching is the revelation of the last mercy of God toward the world, actually marked by a "pandemic" ever since the beginning of its history. Moreover, this mercy is the realisation of Jeremiah and Ezekiel's crucial prophecies that envision a new righteous life for all, thanks to the divine gift of a new heart.[28]

In preindustrial societies there was a strong connection between marginality and pandemics, poverty, exclusion, and disease.[29] In the social context of the

26 See Mark 1:15.

27 This relationship is, of course, more a development than a caesura. See, for instance, the Gospels' obsession in picturing Jesus's preaching as the realisation of the biblical justice of God (Deut 10:18–19; Isa 61:1–9), esp. in Q 7:22: "πορευθέντες ἀπαγγείλατε Ἰωάννῃ ἃ εἴδετε καὶ ἠκούσατε· τυφλοὶ ἀναβλέπουσιν, χωλοὶ περιπατοῦσιν, λεπροὶ καθαρίζονται καὶ κωφοὶ ἀκούουσιν, νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται, πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται" (Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin desease are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them). Here, the apocalyptic tone is specifically expressed as an urgency regarding the crumbling of the world. The blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, the dead, the poor receive the good news, the final revelation that fulfils ancient prophecies (see Isa 26:18b–19), the actual sublation of the mechanism of marginalisation that will be finally settled *à-venir*. Concerning the "undeconstructable justice" *à-venir*, see J. Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority", in J. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001) 228–98, where it is clear *inter alia* that what I call "production of marginalisation by the process of immunisation" is a secret, active, performative force that intimately belongs to the organisation of (in our case, Roman and Jewish) societies that emerge from the right. But that force is also a paradoxical (and Pauline) openness to the *à-venir*.

28 See Jer 31:31–3; Ezek 36:22–30.

29 Concerning definitions of poverty in the ancient Roman imperial world, see e. g. C.R. Whittaker, "Il povero", in A. Giardina (ed.), *L'uomo romano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1993); S.J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty", in S.R. Holman (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society: Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 17–36. The insightful article of Friesen is focused on a central question: "I was not able to find a single study on early Christian analysis of the causes of poverty", he says (on p. 18). I think Jesus's dramatic answer to this point could lead us on a right way to interpret political and social mechanism of marginalisation: "In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" ("πάντοτε γὰρ τοὺς πτωχοὺς ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν"): Mark 14:7. See also S. Häkkinen, "Poverty in the First-Century Galilee", *HTS Theological Studies* 72/4 (2016) 1–9. For a wider understanding of the connections between marginality and disease, also see M. Vegetti/P. Manuli, "La medicina e l'igiene", in A. Mo-

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ancient world, where "inequality was typical",[30] Jesus goes to "the outside", taking care of people who needed curing, and it is this very concept of "outside" that concerns this present research.[31] In apocalypses (from *Daniel* or *1 Enoch* to the *Ascension of Isaiah*) it is elected people that usually beg God – beseeching that godself rescue them from their irredeemable world – whereas in Jesus's activity, God is preached as being close to the poor and active in liberating them. This proximity clearly fractures the distinction between outside and inside, without and within, alien and proper. It seems that Jesus wants – impossibly – to reach those people who are by now beyond the logic of immunisation. Hence, the presupposition of this claim is that the disease is present among humanity in the form of a pandemic, namely, an endemic stain on the human condition. In fact, if ancient prophecies threaten human beings through epidemics in order to instil changes in them, Jesus's preaching reveals the true conditions of human beings, showing that a sort of social epidemic is already at work among them.

According to Roberto Esposito, "community" and "immunity" are in an inverse relationship to one another: both of them conserve the Latin word *munus* ("law", "gift" or "cure"), however, on the one hand, community shows the deep connection among people, a connection based on gifts (in a non-economic

migliano/A. Schiavone (dir.), *Storia di Roma* (4 vol.; Turin: Einaudi, 1988–93), IV, *Caratteri e morfologie*, ed. A. Schiavone/E. Gabba (1989), 389–429; M. Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); M. Foucault, "La naissance de la médecine sociale", in M. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, ed. D. Defert/F. Ewald (4 vol.; Paris: Gallimard, 1994), III, 207–28; M. Focault, "La politique de la santé au XVIIIe siècle", in Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, 725–42; P. van der Eijk, "Medicine and Health in the Graeco-Roman World", in M. Jackson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 21–39. See also P. Chakrabarti, "Imperialism and the Globalisation of Disease", in P. Chakrabarti, *Medicine and Empire, 1600–1960* (London: Palgrave, 2014) 73–100.

30 Häkkinen, "Poverty", 1. See also M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, ^{2}1999).

31 I also understand this concept of "outside" in a temporal sense, thus showing the crucial nexus between the status of inequality and revelation. "Outside" and "inside" are important concepts for both social history and anthropology. In the ancient Roman imperial world, these concepts could refer to the relationship between Rome and the provinces or between cities and villages, but they could also refer to internal dynamics in the same context. For instance, in a village of Galilee that considers itself marginalised with respect to the centre of economic power, the same dynamic of marginalisation concerns the relationship between the government and workers, between workers among themselves, and between workers and the poor (those unable to work). For a socio-historical point of view on this point, see E.W. Stegemann/W. Stegemann, *Urchristliche Sozialgeschichte: Die Anfänge im Judentum und die Christusgemeinden in der mediterranen Welt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995); A. Destro/M. Pesce, *L'uomo Gesù: Giorni, luoghi, incontri di una vita* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008); J.S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); J.S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). See also B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, ^{3}2001).

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sense), and the necessity of a reciprocal care, while on the other hand, immunity is the category of exclusion, activated in order to avoid a wide scale contamination, to give people an idealised sense of security.[32] Ancient societies apply this paradigm to ill people – more or less consciously – through the social apparatus of marginalisation. This is clear in rural settings such as those described, for instance, in the Gospel of Mark, where mental illness, leprosy, and blindness are signs of the incurable curse of God.[33] This kind of marginalisation (along with that of women, especially if sick or prostitutes) is a form of social immunisation, the creation of a border of security. Thus, the last judgement of God – according to Jesus's action and preaching – is recovery. All of this is clearly showed in Jesus's answer to John's disciples according to the source Q: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin desease are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them".[34]

The perspective mentioned above is well expressed since the inception of the canonical Gospels. But it is important to distinguish properly the sources of the latter. While Mark, for instance, points out a more political implication of Jesus's preaching about last days, Q is more interested in presenting the event of a judgement coming over the world.[35] Referring to Mark (or the use that Luke and Matthew make of it), Q is more interested in "countryside and private spaces" as a place for the reception of the kingdom, but also as a symbol of a great place from where the great judgement will come to the cities. This may suggest a reflection about the kingdom more "internal" than social and political (as in Mark), one orientated exclusively on Judean or Jewish people (especially Galileans) without paying any attention to Gentiles.[36]

The triple attestation (Mark, Luke, Matthew) shows a general last days framework where John the Baptist addresses the people with a message of repentance. Though the subject of this announcement is quite clear ("Prepare the way of the Lord"),[37] the purpose of repentance is not so evident: "John the

32 Besides *Immunitas*, see also R. Esposito, *Communitas: Origine e destino della comunità* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006); J. Derrida, *Donner le Temps* (2 vol.; Paris: Galilée, 1991), I, *La Fausse Monnaie*; J. Derrida; *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999).

33 See also John 9:2–3.

34 Q 7:22 (= Luke 7:22 // Matt 11:4b–5).

35 J.S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

36 Kloppenborg closes his reflection on Q's social setting by saying: "Q presents us with a rural, Galilean Jewish gospel, not a gospel that already imagines the extension of the mission of the Jesus movement to Gentile areas and the cultic debates that this extension would provoke. It is this feature of Q that is perhaps the most significant, since along with the letter of James, Q provides us with one of the very few arguable instances of a document produced by and for the earliest Judean followers of Jesus"; see Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel*, 69.

37 Mark 1:3.

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baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".[38]

The "forgiveness of sins" evokes the necessary state that humans have to assume at last when God comes to unchain godself wrath. It is the usual motive that we find in the Hebrew Bible, where prophets continually exhort people to change their mind and return to God. Thus, John's preaching is the link between a prophetic "old fashioned way" that speaks of changes in mentality (μετάνοια) and Jesus's alternative way, which inaugurates not a different subject matter, but the very form of change.[39] This way is signified by the famous aim of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news".[40]

There are many parallels between this claim and those of John: the verb μετανοέω is there in both their preachments, however, Jesus does not disclose a general reference to forgiveness of sins, but the closeness of the kingdom of God – this is the good news – which is the condition of possibility of the change he evokes. In short, although the message is the same, the difference in temporal position (for John it is sometime in the future; for Jesus, a current state of humanity) changes one's entire perspective on the meaning of the claim. Now time is at an end: people have to decide where to be, but the imperative does not leave any range of choice.

Another important example can lead to a further reflection. I refer to the case of the Gerasene demoniac,[41] who lives outside the country, amongst the graves. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples "came to the other side of the sea" (ἦλθον εἰς τὸ πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης, 5:1);[42] then Jesus "had stepped out of the boat" (ἐξελθόντος αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου, 5:2a); finally, "immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met him" (εὐθὺς ὑπήντησεν αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν μνημείων ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ, 5:2b). These three steps show the interpretation that Mark gives to Jesus's activity: he "goes outside" (ἔρχομαι εἰς), to the "other side" (τὸ πέραν), and he "steps out" [of the boat] (ἐξέρχομαι ἐκ). Someone possessed by an

38 Mark 1:4.

39 The same Jesus's "double moving" described in Mark 1:10 ff. leads to a re-sematisation of both the meaning of baptism (which in Mark becomes the sign of the designation by God of Jesus as a Messiah and anticipated by John who recognises Jesus as stronger and more powerful than himself) and the wilderness (a place where Jesus has to come, and from where he has to start his mission).

40 Mark 1:15.

41 Mark 5:1–20 // Matt 8:28–34 // Luke 8:26:39.

42 Note here the presence of the verb ἔρχομαι that simply expresses a movement from one point to another. Constructions of this verb present in this passage are even more important: ἐξέρχομαι, "to move out of or away from an area", and ἀπέρχομαι, "go away, leave a place, but also change a state or condition". See *BDAG* (*Bauer–Arndt–Gingrich–Danker Lexicon*), *ad. loc.*

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unclean spirit meets him (ὑπαντάω αὐτῷ). The person who meets Jesus comes from the graves (ἐκ τῶν μνημείων) where he is dwelling (τὴν κατοίκησιν εἶχεν ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν, 5:3a). The text gives us much evidence of the social marginalisation of this possessed man: he lives in a place where there is no life, so a place incompatible with human dwellings. "No one could restrain him any more, even with a chain" (ἀλύσει οὐκέτι οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο αὐτὸν δῆσαι, 5:3b); this indicates, on the one hand, his fellows' will to remove him from their "normal" life, on the other, their will to keep him outside (by chains).[43] We can read this movement of marginalisation as a concrete process of immunisation where people keep out "abnormality" in order to live in peace.

The inability of this man to reconfigure a possible horizon of sense is clearly pointed out: "Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones" (διὰ παντὸς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἦν κράζων καὶ κατακόπτων ἑαυτὸν λίθοις, 5:4). There is no future for him; the cause of this is indicated by a demoniac origin. As Richard Horsley suggests, this demon (which is a Legion) could be the figure of the cultural oppression of the Roman Empire in that region.[44] What is interesting for my reflection is the mechanism of action/reaction that determines the reintegration of sense for the possessed and a new perspective on human (future) life on the part of Jesus. In fact, Jesus "had said to him: 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!'" (ἔλεγεν γὰρ αὐτῷ·Ἔξελθε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, 5:8).

The demon immediately intuits the discrepancy between Jesus and himself: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (5:7). The alternative is clear: this evil marginalizing world or Jesus's renewed condition. When, finally, Legion is (are) cast out, people from the village come (again, ἔρχομαι) and see (θεωρέω, i. e. to look with attention, contemplation) the man who was possessed set down, dressed, and "in his right mind" (σωφρονοῦντα): "They came to Jesus and saw the man possessed by demons sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion" (5:15). Is he returned to normality? Is he able to recoup a place in society? The people's reaction to contemplating the man is unexpected. They, in fact, "were afraid" (ἐφοβήθησαν, 5:17b). There is no joy; there are no positive emotions. They were fearful and, possibly, upset. The reaction to this new life generated by Jesus's action leads

43 This is even more clear in Mark 5:4: "For he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him" (διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν πολλάκις πέδαις καὶ ἁλύσεσιν δεδέσθαι καὶ διεσπάσθαι ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ τὰς ἁλύσεις καὶ τὰς πέδας συντετρῖφθαι, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἴσχυεν αὐτὸν δαμάσαι). Not only do his fellows want to remove him, but they hope that the chains hold in order to keep him off them.

44 Horsley, *Jesus*, 102.

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