The temptation for eschatology in the period of modernism was to focus on penultimate rather than ultimate things in a way that is foreign to the broad Christian tradition with its emphasis on life eternal. Eschatology, the science of the last things (ta eschata), was associated with teleological events and the end of history. This limited understanding contributed to a one-sided emphasis on the impersonal aspect of eschatology, with much ado about chronologies or signs of the end. This approach, which has become highly lucrative in some species of evangelicalism, is an echo of the reified factuality of modernism and its approaches to history, criticised by Karl Popper in his Poverty of Historicism.

An alternative understanding might do well to focus on the One who is eschatos, Jesus Christ in person, the one who is awaited, whose presence as the “last” marks the peak of the salvation-historical designs of God.

Eschatology, in this perspective, would present the story in which God enacts the history of man’s salvation from beginning to end. Its principal actor is Jesus Christ, the alpha and the omega, the Creator, the incarnate servant, the risen Saviour and the King of the new creation. Centred on the person of Christ, eschatology can be broadly defined as the direction and objective of the active faithfulness of God to his covenant with the created order.

From this angle, eschatology is not limited to the presentation of the penultimate things of systematic theology but transcends them in an all-embracing personalism. It seeks to show how, in Christ, the ultimate reality of God’s plan breaks into history and directs the progressing story. At each stage the Trinitarian project unfolds with heightening intensity.

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Presuppositions of Christian Eschatology

The theological presupposition that directs eschatological science is the goodness of the God whose plan is accomplished throughout history, to its end and even beyond it. Divine goodness has as its correlates the power and wisdom expressed in the divine plan of salvation for the universe and humanity. In the Creed the new covenant people of God confesses the ongoing presence of salvation in every era of the history. The personalising axis of incarnation, cross and resurrection already bespeak the guaranteed end in proleptic fashion, as fruitfully described in the work of Jürgen Moltmann or Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Eschatology finds its full meaning within the body of Christian doctrine and especially in the context of the doctrine of the economic Trinity. Impersonal determinism and indeterminism are equally destructive for eschatology. The former causes the dynamics and the contingency that characterise the unfolding process of salvation history to disappear from view. In determinism the development of the temporal process is less meaningful than the forces governing it, as Greek tragedy amply demonstrates. History loses its characteristic of novelty, of the unexpected, its freedom and ultimately its poignant human tragedy. Everything becomes fatalistic rather than personal: c'est la faute de la fatalité, as Gustave Flaubert put it. If biblical prophecy announces future events, the accomplishment always goes beyond the factually foreseen. It is the opposite of eternal return or impersonal fatalism.

Indeterminism, on the other hand, tends to remove rationality from the process. Chance eliminates the possibility of a future, whose outcome could have been foreseen as the end of current events. In other words, there is no plan and there is nothing to be accomplished. Radical contingency makes history look like a puzzle lacking ultimate design, made up of random events without form. It is no wonder that those who have been heavily preoccupied by questions of historicity, such as Ernst Troeltsch, have been concerned to articulate the interrelatedness of rationality and mystery.3

Contrary to these ideas and their correlations—pure rationalism or irrationalism—Christian eschatology seeks to recognise both divine sovereignty and human liberty, each in its own place, and the