Since Albert Schweitzer, the importance of eschatology for original Christianity has rightly been stressed. Later, a further point entered the scholarly discussion: If Christianity at its very beginnings expected that “the present generation will live to see” Christ’s second coming (Mk. XIII, 30), these hopes were not fulfilled. How much did this frustrated belief change the original structure of Christianity? Many think that this “Parousieverzögerung” was the decisive turning-point in Christian faith, which almost utterly changed its structure. According to this opinion non fulfilled eschatological expectations caused that it is worth rethinking this thesis, because in its outspread form of Christian thought: instead of expecting their salvation in future, Christians learned to look back. Their hopes now became based upon the salvation which already took place through Christ. It seems to me that it its worth rethinking this thesis, because in its outspread form it does not fit the facts as reflected in ancient Christian sources and study of parallel phenomena in history of religions does not confirm it.

In the present paper we wish merely to bring some considerations to bear upon this complex problem, basing ourselves mainly upon some Christian movements, both ancient and modern, and upon some non-Christian phenomena.

For a full discussion it would be proper to take also in account the modern messianic movements of aboriginal peoples and to see how they react when the expected liberation does not take place. Although a comparison between Christian eschatology and “messianic” movements, which are not deeply influenced by Christian thought, has a specific value, chiliastic movements within the three monotheistic religions are also of great interest for a better understanding of Christian origins. The same forces operate in them which once gave birth to Christianity and the renewal of these forces in another environment can teach us about their original nature.
The contemporary negro movement, the Black Muslims, is basically rooted in Christian traditions; the Moslem influence on it being important but superficial. Black Muslims have their own eschatology 1): the Christian era, as well as the six thousand years during which the white race has dominated the world, will expire about A.D. 2000. The destruction of the world will definitively occur some time before that year and the year 1970 has been suggested by the spiritual head of the movement, although the "exact day is known only to Allah". That the day is coming all "Muslims" believe. Adult Muslims spoke about it in 1959 and some actually looked for signs in the skies on fine summer evenings. When they see some thing of interest, they alert their neighbours and friends either by word of mouth or by telephone. "Some Muslims", said a prominent member of the movement —, "are unhappy because the final judgment or the Last Day hasn't arrived soon enough". Others are not, however, intensely preoccupied with expectation of the "Last Day". Some do not expect it to happen in their lifetime. There is a statement of a Black Muslim sister which is of greatest importance for our discussion: "For me the day itself comes into my mind seldom. It is not that it is not important. We have a work to do. We do not know when it will come, maybe today or a long time from now. In any case, we can't put all hope on one day." Believers are often more perceptive than scholars who study their believes. We can only add to the statement that the expectation itself and its ideological content, especially the movement and its social meaning ("we have a work to do"), is more important than the precise date of salvation and its delay. There is another reason why for the Black Muslims the "eschaton" is not so eagerly expected. Twenty high-school and thirty five seventh- and eighth-grade students at the University of Islam, the spiritual centre of Black Muslims, were asked whether they would want to see the final judgment in the immediate future. Not one of them was ready for it. The most frequently given reason for wanting a delay was that they have not attained the degree


About the two other modern chiliastic movements, which will be treated in this article see Yona Malachy, Jehovah's Witnesses and their Attitude toward Judaism and the Idea of Return to Zion, in Herzl Year Book, Vol. V, 1963, pp. 175-208; idem, Seventh Day Adventists and Zionism, ibidem, Vol. VI, 1964-5, pp. 265-301.