

# CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC EXTREMISM: A STUDY OF TWO CASES

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**ABSTRACT.** The article treats two cases of large scale Christian extremism: the establishment of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in China in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Russian Old Believers movement that started in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In both cases there were intense expectations of the end of the world. In both cases their extreme actions were provoked by the violent activity of the state authorities. The extremism of the Chinese Christians was directed outside whereas the extreme behaviour of the Russian Old Believers was directed first of all inside, towards themselves. One of the reasons of the difference in their actions was the difference in their respective theological thinking.

**Key words:** *Christian extremism, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Russian Old Believers, eschatological figures, utopias and dystopias.*

There are various ways to classify the phenomena of extremism. One possibility is to divide these phenomena into external and internal ones. In the first case the extremism is directed towards others. Its aim is to change the other, usually to rebuild the whole world. It can easily become aggression. In the case of the internal extremism it is directed towards the extremists themselves. Its aim can be a withdrawal or a change of themselves. Sometimes it becomes self-denial.

The last one hundred years have mainly been an era of the atheistic extremism. Tens of millions of people have perished in the concentration camps created by national socialist or communist extremists. Nevertheless religious extremism has not disappeared. Atheism has not replaced religion. It has existed alongside religion and its extremism is merely added to the already existing extremism.

The aim of this article is to treat some aspects of classical religious extremism, more exactly – some aspects of extremism in Christianity. Usually extremism appears in the situation of intense apocalyptic expectations. People believe that the end of the world is near. In this situation the attitudes and behaviour of people change extremely. There are not only psychological factors behind these changes. The ideas and concepts dominant during these

intense eschatological expectations can also influence the patterns of human behaviour.

In this article I study two historical cases when Christian expectations of the end of the world were extremely high. Both cases involved huge numbers of human beings and in connection with both cases we have to speak about clear extremism. But in these two cases the occurrences of extremism were actually opposite. In one case the extremism was directed in the form of aggression against the outside world, against other human beings. In the other case the extremism remained inside of the community that believed itself to be in the apocalyptic situation and if we speak about aggression, then it was directed towards the believers themselves. Sometimes it became self-denial.

### The Chinese Taiping Case

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large-scale rebellion occurred in China in which at least 20 million people lost their lives. This was a Christian rebellion or at least it was strongly influenced by Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The main character of this story was Hong Xiuquan (born Hong Huoxiu, 1814–1864), a Hakka schoolteacher. His ambitions were to pass the Confucian examination and thus to make a career in the service of the government. But he failed time and again. After one failure Hong fell ill and during this illness he saw a vision, at least so he claimed. According to his story the scene of this vision was in the Heaven. Here he saw an old man with a long golden beard, who, as it appeared, was Hong's heavenly father. The old man gave Hong a sword and commanded him to destroy the demons, who had led many people astray on the earth. In this vision Hong also met a man who claimed to be his elder brother and who supported him in his fight against the demons. Hong spent quite a long time in Heaven and actually founded a new family there. Later, when Hong regained his consciousness, the dream seemed to have no meaning. This was all beyond any interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Christian mission was forbidden in China. This did not mean that there was no missionary interest towards China. Usually missionaries from Europe and from North America resided outside China not far from the borders and tried, in a clandestine way, to direct some mission. For this they had Chinese helpers. One of the first Chinese who worked for the Protestant mission was a man called Liang Afa (1787–1855). He worked for the London Missionary Society and became

<sup>1</sup> **Lee Chee Kong.** Taiping Rebellion. – A Dictionary of Asian Christianity. Scott W. Sunquist (ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 814f.

<sup>2</sup> **Jonathan D. Spence.** God's Chinese Son. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996, pp. 47–50.

the first Protestant Chinese preacher. Being intensely interested in Christianity, he wrote quite a comprehensive book about Christianity entitled “Good Words for Exhorting the Age”.<sup>3</sup> It was printed outside China but the author himself made trips into China and distributed the book among the Chinese. Hong Xiuquan happened to receive one of the copies. At first Hong did not pay attention to this work and laid it aside. But later he started to read it. To his amazement it now made sense of his one-time strange vision. According to his interpretation the older man, his father, was Jehovah, the Christian God the Father. According to Hong’s interpretation the younger man, his “elder brother”, was Jesus Christ. This was the beginning of a completely new view of the world. Even more, this was the beginning of completely new life of Hong. Now he considered himself as the younger son, the Chinese son of God the Father. According to his new understanding he had a new, powerful mission to fulfil – to convert others to Christianity as understood by him and to fight the demons and devils as “his father had commanded.”

Hong’s mission was actually quite successful. His proclamation was understandable and acceptable for many people, especially for his fellow Hakkas. Some scholars have supposed that the grounds for the Christian faith, in some areas, had been prepared earlier by Karl Gutzlaff,<sup>4</sup> the German Protestant missionary.<sup>5</sup> An important part in Hong’s proclamation was the call to fight with devils. At first it was not “quite clear who these devils were, whether they were the physical forms of the followers of the devil king Yan Luo himself, or benighted Confucian scholars who closed their eyes to truth, or Taoist and Buddhist priests, or the shamans of local folk cults, or the sinners and idolaters who broke the various versions of Hong’s or God’s commandments.”<sup>6</sup> But later, when the state authorities tried to intervene and suppress the movement, it became clear for Hong and his followers that actually the state, i. e., the ruling Qing dynasty and generally the authorities were the devil demons against whom they had the commission to fight. And more, now the leaders of the movement realised that the fight against demons was not only on the spiritual level but also on the political and military levels. The movement became more and more an organised army and their religious leader Hong became more like an army commander. We can say that the movement became the Taiping<sup>7</sup> Heavenly Kingdom and Hong became the king of this expanding state.

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<sup>3</sup> In this capacious work Liang Afa developed his own ideas about Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> Actually Karl Friedrich August Gutzlaff (Chinese name Guo Shi Li) (1803–1851) was a German Lutheran missionary in East-Asia and a translator of Bible into numerous languages.

<sup>5</sup> Spence 1996, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Spence 1996, p. 115. Yan Luo is in Chinese mythology the god of death and the king of underworld.

<sup>7</sup> Taiping means „Great peace“. Cf. John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. China: a New History. Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 207.

During next years the Taiping army was successful and the whole movement became more and more like a state. In addition to the destruction of demons its aim was the building of heaven on earth. In practice that means building a “brave new world.” In 1853 the Taiping army captured the old Chinese southern capital Nanjing. According to the movement it became the “Heavenly Capital”, the “New Jerusalem.” Hong as the head of this state was called heaven-born the “True Lord.” The leaders of Taiping understood it as paradise existing on the earth. The existence of paradise means that the whole society is divided into small units which compose bigger units and these in turn compose again bigger units. Upon this structured and organised society were laid harsh laws and severe discipline. The death penalty for small trespasses was rather common, at least according to our understanding. Theoretically we can speak about it as a communist society as private ownership of property was abolished, at least. “For all, whether active combatants, cloistered women, or sequestered elderly, daily rations are allocated, three-tenth of a pint of rice, and a small container each of salt and oil. The Taiping allow no trade of any kind within the city walls.”<sup>8</sup>

Men and women were separated, even if they were married. Sexual love was prohibited until the time when final victory over the demons had been won.<sup>9</sup> There was an exception – the leaders of Taiping were free from this prohibition. All people of the society were registered and records of their behaviour and their loyalty were kept. The whole organisation demanded a huge bureaucracy. And to uphold this system and the necessary regulations the discipline had to be strict.

The Taiping society was also a very religious one, at least its aim was to be religious. Regular public worship was compulsory for all and participation in it was checked up. Non-attendance in worship was punishable. All other religions were forbidden. Only the special form of Taiping Christianity was legal.

Thus the moral system, ethical relationships, cultural inheritance, social institutions and statutes of the past several thousand years in China, in short, the whole Chinese tradition was destroyed.<sup>10</sup> The only thing that survived was the cult of the emperor – Hong could never be wrong, he was the son of God, of the Christian God. And he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ.

In the long term the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was not able to survive. Under the attacks of the Peking government army the Christian empire fell in 1864. The Manchu Confucian state in its war against the Christian Taiping state was supported by the Christian Western states, especially by Great Britain and France.

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<sup>8</sup> Spence 1996, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Spence 1996, p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> Spence 1996, p. 227.

Was the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom actually a Christian state or was the Taiping Christianity a real Christianity? There are scholars who question its Christianity and call it merely a pseudo-Christianity.<sup>11</sup> It is true that this Christianity was a peculiar one and quite different from the mainstream Western Christianity. Its Christology was Arian as Hong did not consider himself and his “older brother” fully divine. Besides the Scriptures or actually instead of them Hong and his followers estimated their own visions and dreams as the divine word.

There are other differences as well. But if we deny the Christianity of the Taiping religion can we call Christian many currents and groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe that have been traditionally called Christian? The differences between, e.g., some Hegelian theologians and some pietistic movements are no smaller than the differences between Taiping Christianity and the mainstream Western Christianity, as presented at the same time in China by some Western missionaries.

Hong and his followers believed that he was sent by God “down to earth to direct the salvation of mankind<sup>12</sup>.” His work consisted of the fight with the demons who had led people astray. They had been obstacles to the right faith. This fight was the fight against the Chinese government. Thus salvation happened on the scene of history. According to Hong it was a this-worldly event. And although Hong as the son of God had the support of his father and of his elder brother and he had been endowed with all sorts of god-given qualities, nevertheless he was not a divine being. He was not a transcendent being. But actually according to Hong’s theology God the Father neither was a fully transcendent being. He was rather humanly God.<sup>13</sup> And this-worldly Taiping army must help this-worldly God in his this-worldly apocalyptic fight. The result was an outward directed extremism, an aggression and emergence of a nightmarish society that we can call anti-utopian or dystopian.

### **The Russian Old Believers’ Case**

We come across another example of Christian extremism in the so called Russian Old Believers movement. The Old Believers do not constitute a homogenous church or denomination. The movement contains a number of churches and smaller or bigger branches with a varying degree of extremism. This movement took its origin in the liturgical reforms initiated by the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow Nikon and the Russian Tsar Aleksey

<sup>11</sup> **Samuel Hugh Moffett**. *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II: 1500–1900*. New York. Orbis Books, 2005, p. 299.

<sup>12</sup> **Spence** 1996, p. 294.

<sup>13</sup> **Spence** 1996, p. 221f.

Mikhailovich Romanov in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Actually the Russians had already attempted to reform and unify their liturgies earlier. These earlier attempts to reform were based on the Old Russian liturgical texts. This time the reforms were rather penetrating and they were based on the Byzantine Greek usage.<sup>15</sup> According to the Russian religious understanding of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the liturgy and the piety that was closely connected with the liturgy were essential parts of Christianity and they were the pillars on which the salvation of souls relied. The correct practice of liturgy and piety makes a human being acceptable for God. Therefore, careless changes in liturgy can create obstacles for salvation. This in turn caused many believers to fear before liturgical reforms. The old liturgy of the forefathers was safe, as its usage had in the past led many pious Russians to sainthood according to their belief. But in relation to the innovations many believers were rather sceptical.

There were other reasons for the opposition to the reforms, as well. One substantial reason was the fact that the Byzantine Greek liturgical patterns were taken as examples for Russian reforms. At that time there were differences between Russian and Greek practices and the leaders of the Russian church and state considered the Greek practice as the right one. But as the Greeks had lost to the Moslems and as Constantinople, the Byzantine capital had fallen, thus many Russians interpreted all this as the consequence of their deficient liturgy and faith. Therefore, for many Russians actually the Byzantine liturgy was erroneous and precisely the Russian old liturgy was the correct and saving one.<sup>16</sup>

One reason that strengthened the resistance to the reforms was the brutality with which the state and the church tried to execute these reforms. The opponents of the reforms were condemned by the state and the church as heretics. Frequently the church and the state did not recoil from the use of military force to enforce the new liturgy and piety. In reaction to this the opponents of the reforms hardened their resistance. As they conceived these reforms as hindrances to salvation, the Old Believers started to consider the reforms as the work of the antichrist.<sup>17</sup> Antichrist is an eschatological character in the Scriptures and in the Christian tradition, who will appear at the

<sup>14</sup> The number of views on the Russian Old Believers movement in English is still rather limited. Even nowadays is one of the best short introductions **Adalbert von Stromberg**. *Sects (Russian)*. – Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics James Hastings (ed.). Volume XI. Pp. 332–339; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920.

<sup>15</sup> **Wilhelm Hollberg**. 1994. *Das russische Altgläubigentum. Seine Entstehung und Entwicklung*. Tartu/Dorpat: Tartu University Press, 1994, S. 126ff.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. **Peter Hauptmann**. *Russlands Altgläubige*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht. 2005, S. 23.

<sup>17</sup> According to Hauptmann the idea of the antichrist emerged as the reaction to the brutality of the state. **Hauptmann** 2005, S. 69.

end of time to fight against God and salvation. The insight that the end time was arriving was supported by the concept of Moscow as the third Rome that was popular at that time. According to this idea Moscow was the third and the last Rome and there would never be a fourth Rome.<sup>18</sup> Thus as the state and the Patriarch of Moscow had introduced the changes wished by antichrist, the city had fallen from the right Christianity. The reign of the antichrist and the fall of Moscow, the last Rome meant that the eschatological end time had arrived. The end of this world was near and one must expect the so called apocalyptic events to arrive. Or actually the reforms and the persecution of the opponents of the reforms were already part of this apocalyptic period. Therefore, these events were understood as such by the Russian Old Believers.

The result was that the Old Believers distanced themselves from the state and from the official church as the institutions of antichrist. But different groups of the Old Believers regarded the withdrawal from – or even the negation of – the state and the official church differently. Some groups were more radical, some were less radical in it. The varying degree of radicalism of their attitude was one of the factors that helped to divide the Old Believers into a number of different denominations. These denominations constituted quite a wide spectrum. At the one end of this spectrum were the so called Popovtsy (in Russian: поповцы, “with priests”), whose attitude towards the state and the established church was rather moderate. According to their understanding the official church was erroneous but it was still a Christian church and its sacraments were still valid. Therefore, its priests were real priests and after renunciation by these priests of the so called innovations of the established church the Popovtsy were willing to use these priests in their own church.

The attitude of the so called Bespopovtsy (in Russian безпоповцы “priestless”) to the state and the state church was more radical. According to their idea the established church was hopelessly corrupted. The antichrist ruled in it. Therefore the existing Russian church was no more the real, divine church. And therefore the priests ordained in this established church were not real priest and were not usable. Actually, according to their understanding there was no longer a real church in the whole world. God had withdrawn his grace from the world and thus till the end of the world there would be no church. The absence of priesthood was one of the signs of the eschatological end time, in addition to the above-mentioned persecutions of the opponents of these supposedly antichristian reforms. The Old Believers had to survive without a hierarchy. They considered themselves to be the only remnant of the true Christianity.

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<sup>18</sup> About the doctrine of the third Rome cf. **Alar Laats**. *The Concept of the Third Rome and its Political Implications*. – Religion and Politics in Multicultural Europe: Perspectives and Challenges. Alar Kilp, Andres Saumets (eds). Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2009, pp. 98–113.

What was the reaction of the Russian Old Believers to the “reign of the antichrist”? The main thing all the Old Believers tried to do was to distance themselves – both geographically and spiritually – from the state and from the established church. This was not by any means a withdrawal from civilisation generally. On the contrary, some denominations of the Old Believers were usually rather skilful in using the achievement of civilisation, e. g., they were more efficient in using commercial credit institution or printing than the members of the established church. But they kept as far as possible from the Russian state and from the official Russian Orthodox Church. Geographically this meant that the Old Believers tried to move away from the central districts of Russia to remote borderlands – to Pomor Land or Pomorye at the White Sea, to the Transvolga Region, to the Ural Mountains, to Siberia, to the steppes of the south and to other far and little-inhabited districts. Some groups of the Old Believers moved abroad, e. g., to territories of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth or of the Ottoman Empire.

Some especially radical Old Believers even desisted from touching money because there were and are on it the signs of the antichrist – all kinds of symbols of the state. In the same way they avoided touching any document or paper issued by the state. They were called “Wanderers” (*beguny* or *stranniki*, in Russian *бегуны́, странники*). These wanderers avoided any other contact and accommodation with the official society. As their name points they did not have a permanent abode.<sup>19</sup> Their way of life was a continuous wandering. This denomination exists in Russia up to the present.<sup>20</sup>

Although the priestless Old Believers said that it was the eschatological end time and that God had withdrawn the church from the earth, nevertheless most of them believed that the church in some limited, reduced way existed in their own communities. Their congregations were the only true Christian congregations. They believe this up to the modern days. Usually they baptize their members, they practice worship in their chapels, although their liturgy is in a reduced form and in their congregations they have especially appointed people who fulfil some limited priestly functions. Therefore, we can still speak about the existence of the church amidst of them. But there are some denominations of the Old Believers who are more consistent in their negation of the existence of the church on the earth. They are so called Spassovtsy<sup>21</sup> or Netovtsy (in Russian *нетовцы, спасовцы*). According to their understanding

<sup>19</sup> Cf. **Johannes Chrysostomus**. Die radikalen Sekten der russischen Altgläubigen. – Ostkirchliche Studien, 21/1972, S. 8f. **А.И. Мальцев**. *Староверы-странники в XVIII-первой половине XIX в.* Новосибирск: Сибирский хронограф, 1996, стр 3.

<sup>20</sup> **М. Бурдо, С. Б. Филатов**. Современная религиозная жизнь России. Опыт систематического описания. Vol. 1. Москва: Логос, 2004, стр. 173.

<sup>21</sup> Saviour's denomination. The name is from Russian Spas (Спас) – Saviour. **Chrysostomus** 1972, pp. 107f.

there is no longer any church on the earth; therefore, there are no sacraments<sup>22</sup> and no worship, no chapels and no congregations. The only hope they have is in Spas – the Saviour.

In the past some Old Believers have gone even further in their extremism. They have committed self-immolation. Some authors have asserted that it was an ascetical act of self-purification. In the majority of cases it was not so. It was not a heroic act of self-punishment or an act of repentance. Instead, it was a withdrawal. It was an escape like moving into an empty borderland, only more radical. It was an escape into a place where the pursuers could not follow the escapees. The self-immolation of the Old Believers was a reaction to the persecution by the state and the official church.<sup>23</sup> The aim of this persecution was to return the Old Believers to the established church. To achieve this, the state and the church used brutal methods. Sometimes the Old Believers were not strong enough and yielded to the brutality. They were forced to recant and return formally to the official church. But for the Old Believers this meant entering into the church of the antichrist. This in turn meant that they were left without salvation. The church of the antichrist was not the real church. Thus the self-immolation was just the escape from the influence of the antichrist. Usually a community of radical Old Believers was already prepared for this event. When the military expedition, sent to bring them back to the official church, was approaching, the Old Believers community closed themselves into a special building without exits and they set the building to fire. Thus the self-immolations were usually collective withdrawals from this world where the antichrist reigned.

Sometimes there occurred an armed resistance of the Old Believers against the government army. Perhaps the most famous was the eight years (1668–1676) siege of the Solovetsky Monastery and the resistance of the monks.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the extremism of most of the Old Believers was not aggressive. It was not directed outside and its aim was not to transform the world. It was rather directed to the Old believers themselves. Usually its essence was the withdrawal from the realm of the antichrist as far as possible.

### Similarities and differences

We have briefly examined two cases of Christian eschatological expectations when people were sure that the end of the world had nearly come. In both cases we can speak about religious extremism. Yet in these cases the extremism was realised rather differently.

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<sup>22</sup> Thus the Netovtsy are Christians who have not been baptized as there is no baptism in the world according to their belief.

<sup>23</sup> **Hauptmann** 2005, S. 67f.

<sup>24</sup> **Hauptmann** 2005, S. 49ff.

The extremism of the Taiping rebellion was directed towards the outside. Its aim was to change the world according to the understanding and expectations of Taiping Christianity. The other case – the Russian Old Believers movement – was directed rather towards the inside. Its aim was to withdraw from the world and to sever all possible contacts with the Russian official church and with the Russian state. The Taiping movement tried to change the world, the Old Believers tried to leave the world. In connection with these two cases we can speak about two types of extremism, one extroverted and the other introverted.

These two cases are not singular cases. In some way they are exemplary cases as there have been a number of other cases of Christian eschatological extremism in the history of Christianity that are more or less similar to one of these two exemplary cases. Thus, for example, to the extrovert type we can attribute the rebellion of the Münster radical Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The aim for them, at least that of their leader Jan Beukels, was “to usher in the Last Days”. He proclaimed “himself messianic king of the world, with all the royal trappings of a new David in Israel.”<sup>25</sup> Another well-known case of this type is the tragedy that occurred in connection with the Branch Davidians near Waco in Texas, USA, in 1993. The group lived in a supercharged apocalyptic atmosphere and its leader David Koresh claimed to be the Lamb of God, i. e., also a sort of eschatological character who would save the world.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to the second type of the Christian extremism we can recall the whole monastic movement, at least in its initial period. This movement was a withdrawal from the society, from the world into the desert. And although these two, the world and the desert were not yet so sharply contrasted as the world of antichrist and the Russian Old Believers community, nevertheless, according to the monastic understanding only in the desert the godly life was possible.<sup>27</sup> Another well-known example of the second, introvert type is historically and geographically quite close to the above-mentioned Münster Anabaptists. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was and still is another example, an alternative branch of Anabaptism. Members of this branch are pacifists and reject all forms of physical violence. The principal inspirer of these quietist and pacifist separatist communities was a former priest from West Friesland called Menno Simons.<sup>28</sup> He and his followers, the Mennonites, too, awaited the imminent second coming of Christ and the end of the world. Eventually,

<sup>25</sup> *Diarmaid McCulloch. The Reformation. A History. London: Penguin Books, 2003, p. 206.*

<sup>26</sup> **David V. Barrett.** *The New Believers. A Survey of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions.* London: Cassell Illustrated, 2001, pp. 85–88.

<sup>27</sup> **Peter Brown.** *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, A. D. 200–1000.* Second Edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 172–176.

<sup>28</sup> **MacCulloch** 2003, p. 210.

they also withdrew socially as well as spiritually from the common life of the world that was not Christian enough according to their understanding. Besides the Mennonites there are other pacifist Anabaptist branches as well, for example, the Hutterites and the Amishis. They all refuse to perform any type of military service and they all try to distance themselves from the modern world.

Both of these types of extremism are Christian and thus they share the common Christian linear conception of time. There is the beginning of time and the end of time. Time started with the creation of the world and it moves in the direction of its end. Therefore, the belief in eschaton, in the end of time and of the whole world is common to practically all branches of Christianity. The expectation of the eschaton in the near future is a common characteristic of both of these types of Christian extremism. In a way it is their precondition.

The other common element in these two cases is that there was a massive aggressive interference from outside. In the case of the Russian Old Believers the brutal realisation of the liturgical reforms and the attempts to convert the resistant Christians by force to the reformed worship and piety was an important factor that led to the most extreme behaviour of the Old Believers – to their self-immolation. In the case of the Taiping movement it was the attempt of the local authorities to suppress the movement that actually turned movement's activities into military counteractions and thus helped to transform the movement into a new militarized society. Thus it is likely that neither of the movements practised *an sich* extremist actions. Their extremism in actions was merely their reactions to the no less extremist attempts to destroy these movements taken by the state authorities.

Why was the extremism in the case of the Taiping movement directed towards the outside, towards the others, and why in the case of the Russian Old Believers the extremism was directed towards the inside, towards themselves? Presumably there were many historical, social, ideological, etc., reasons. Here I would like to point at one difference in the theological thinking of these two extremist Christian movements. It seems that it can give at least a partial explanation of this difference of their extremist behaviour.

The Taiping movement was centred on particular persons. Especially the person of Hong played a central role here. Besides, he was not regarded as an ordinary, earthly human being. Although he was not considered God, nevertheless he was a sort of heavenly being. He was God's Chinese son and the younger brother of Jesus according to his followers. Hong was one of the main characters in the great apocalyptic play. His task was to destroy demons, to lead his army to victory and to save humanity. He was the general in the apocalyptic battle and an eschatological figure. Its victorious end would also be the end of history. To fulfil this task, he was made able to do it, at least according to his followers.

There is no positive eschatological figure in the apocalyptic view of the Russian Old Believers. However, there are a number of outstanding characters in the story of this movement, the most famous of them, the protopope Avvakum, was one of the initiators of the movement. But he is a fully human being even for the Old Believers. His celebrated autobiography is popular among his followers. This is a story of a real historical human being, not a story of a divine or even of a semi-mythological hero. Had Avvakum been deified by his supporters, his autobiography as a very human story could not be valued by them. Gods and semi-gods do not write about their fully human aspirations and doubts.

Yet there was at least one eschatological character in the apocalyptic world of the Russian Old Believers. This fully negative figure plays an important role according to the traditional Christian eschatological drama. This was the antichrist, the opponent of God. Although some Russian Old Believers did identify the antichrist either with patriarch Nikon or with one or another of the Russian tsars, nevertheless according to most of the Old Believers these historical figures were not actually the incarnations of the antichrist. According to the mainstream Old Believers' understanding the eschatological time had arrived. In this end time the world was ruled by the antichrist. But according to their understanding this did not mean that the antichrist was really present in the world. Rather the antichrist ruled spiritually.<sup>29</sup> It is in some way like the Christian understanding of the spiritual rule of Christ in the world. This means that nobody in history – neither a particular person nor a social group – can be identified with the antichrist. In other words, the enemy is not inside the physical or historical world and Christians cannot fight with ordinary weapons against him. Therefore there is no theological sense in destroying anybody in the world.

The Russian Old Believers emphasised the distinction between the transcendence and the immanence, between this-worldliness and other-worldliness. The antichrist is a transcendent being. This means that he is not in this world. But it also means that as a transcendent being he is much stronger than the human beings. He is not a match to human beings, even to heroes. Avvakum was not fighting with the antichrist. Fighting the antichrist is actually not a human job. It is God's job. Only God is able to fight against the antichrist and defeat him. The only way that Christians can resist the rule of the antichrist is to withdraw into the wilderness. But as we saw, there was a more extreme way – escaping this world altogether, committing self-immolation.

According to Taiping Christianity the eschatological enemy was the Manchu dynasty, i. e., the state. The enemy was historical, a physically existing group of people. And it was the job of Taiping Christians to fight against them. Thus the enemy was not transcendent, it was rather this-worldly, and it

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<sup>29</sup> **Hollberg** 1994, pp. 169f.

was immanent. Destroying the enemy, the demons, was the precondition for building the heaven on earth. Thus the final aim of the Taiping Christians was the building of the heavenly kingdom on the earth. Although for this task they needed divine help, nevertheless it was a human job.

The enemy, the demons were earthly beings. But according to Hong's theology not only the demons were immanent, earthly beings but the heavenly kingdom was also achievable on the earth. It was to be an earthly, historical reality. But even more – actually God also was in some way immanent, an almost physical being. God could enter into this world and he could abide in this world. He is a tangible person. At least so Hong believed. For him and his followers the transcendence and the immanence, the heaven and the earth, the divine and the mundane are not as opposite as they are in the Russian Old Believers theology. The Taiping God is a humanized God.<sup>30</sup>

For the Russian Old Believers' theology the cleavage between the human and the divine is enormous. The principal apocalyptic events happen in the transcendent world, outside the created world. A human being cannot take part in it, they cannot contribute to it. It is beyond human reach. For Taiping theology the cleavage is not unbridgeable, the divine and the human realms exist beside each other. In a way they inhabit the same world.

On the basis of this limited study of the two Christian extremist cases one can conjecture that some elements of the theological thinking influence the ways of the eschatological extremism, whether it is directed towards the outside or towards the inside.

### **Conclusion: Utopias and Dystopias**

In this article I have addressed two types of Christian extremism. In both cases quite a large groups of believers were expecting the imminent arrival of the end of time, the eschaton. Actually millions, or even tens of millions of people were involved in these events. In one case people participated in the creation of the expected heavenly kingdom. Actually they were the main creators or attempted to be the main creators. At the head of this movement was a God-sent king, a heavenly figure. Building a heavenly kingdom was a human business, human beings were capable of this achievement. They thought in this way. Using modern secular terms we can say that they were building a utopian society. The result of this attempt was a disaster, a totalitarian antihuman society. The result of the building of a utopia was quite the opposite. The result was a dystopia.

In the second case the Russian Old Believers did not consider it humanly possible to create a heavenly kingdom upon the earth. For them the building

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<sup>30</sup> Spence 1996, p. 222.

of it was God's job. Believing that the antichrist was ruling upon the earth, they prepared themselves for the kingdom of the antichrist. *Cum grano salis* we may say that according to their understanding they were entering the dystopia, a totalitarian hell, against their own will, of course – at least so they understood the world. The real history of the Old Believers up to the present has not been easy. But there have been periods when the state has tolerated their existence, when their communities have prospered, when they have had the freedom to worship and to live as they have considered right. Thus they have had times in history that they could call God's blessing. Using modern terms we can say that they have experienced a utopia, or at least something that was not very far from utopia.

The aim of this article is not to study the other cases that are more or less relevant to these two types and that I have cursory indicated earlier. But it seems that the monks and the radical Anabaptists that have tried to evade the dystopias, the non-Christian world as understood by them, have also at least sometimes created for themselves some sorts of Christian utopias in their own terms. On the other side these radical and militant Anabaptist, sects and extremist movements that have tried to build the heavenly kingdom or in modern terms, utopia in the world, have usually arrived to real dystopia.

Both a withdrawal from, and an attack upon the others can be extremist actions. In the first case the result is usually a sort of heaven, the result of the second case is usually a hell.

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