

Defying Theological Overreach of Suffering

Moving Beyond the Opposed Eschatological Models

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The article presents the transition from present-oriented eschatologies developed between the 1960s and 1980s to future-oriented eschatologies that have emerged in the last decade. Both types of eschatological frameworks can be attentive to human suffering, albeit in markedly different ways. This shift is not just a theoretical change but has practical implications for theologizing about suffering. The author argues that integrating these two models of eschatology is a potential means of mitigating excessive speculation in future theologizing about suffering.

The famous phrase ‘already-but-not-yet’ has put many biblical scholars and theologians working on eschatology in quite a pickle. Many will attempt to find a perfect balance between the present and the future; however, realistically, most scholars tend to favor one side over the other. When we, however, look at the suffering person, that is, in relation to others and to God, we can find that this emphasis on the present or the future can make a radical difference to what theology can say about the problem or mystery of suffering in the world. This brings us to the distinction and shift between present-oriented eschatologies developed between the 1960s and 1980s and future-oriented eschatologies which originated especially in the last decade. These two types of eschatologies focus on different aspects of the experience of human suffering and on how to respond to this problem theologically.

In this article, I argue that this shift is not just a theoretical change but has practical implications for the theologizing of suffering. I propose merging these two models of eschatology as a possible way to avoid excessive speculation about suffering. I will argue for this proposal based on three movements of historical chronology and then conclude by arguing for a merging of frameworks: In a first step, I will outline the dominant eschatological tendencies that led to the present-oriented eschatologies of the 1960s to 1980s. This will include the debate on both Protestant and Catholic sides, which responded to and built upon each other, beginning with Johannes Weiß in 1892. In a second step, I will delineate the key theologians who contributed to present-oriented eschatologies that focused on human suffering between the 1960s and the 1980s. Since each theologian brings his or her own color to eschatology, I will focus on one theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, especially in order to offer some rather concrete characteristics of this type of eschatology. In a third

step, I will use the work of Karen Kilby to present a contemporary approach to future-oriented eschatologies that raises critical questions for other future-oriented eschatologies. Finally, I will briefly consider the merging of the two frameworks as a methodological tool.

1. Grounding the Debate: The Kingdom of God as Present or Future Reality?

Let us begin with the History of Religion School, particularly focusing on Johannes Weiß (1863-1914). With his book *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (*The Preaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God*), first published in German in 1892, Weiß initiated what is now known as ‘consistent’ or ‘thoroughgoing eschatology.’ Shortly thereafter, Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) popularized Weiß’ consistent eschatology through his book *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*), also originally published in German in 1906. For Weiß and Schweitzer, Jesus’ earthly ministry should be understood in the context of His eschatological vision. Since most of Jesus’ preaching as an apocalyptic prophet was about the coming and relatively imminent Kingdom of God, the emphasis was on the future rather than the present.¹ In other words, in a very near future, it was expected that God would transform the present into his own Kingdom, notably without the help of humans.² In response to the Protestant biblical scholars Weiß and Schweitzer, in 1907, Pope Pius X promulgated *Lamentabili Sane*³, in which he seemingly denounced their preference and use of Strauss’ category of the purely supernatural related to the interpretation of Jesus’ life, ministry, and Resurrection.

In further opposition to consistent eschatology, C. H. Dodd coined the term »realized eschatology« in his 1935 book *The Parables of the Kingdom*. For Dodd, through Jesus’ ministry, the Kingdom of God was fully revealed, demonstrated by five noticeable trends in the Gospels and in St. Paul. First, there is a fulfillment of prophecy (as seen in the Old Testament). Second, the stories of miracles correspond with the language of prophets describing the age yet to come. Third, there are clear signs that God overthrows the powers of evil, and fourth, there is a judgment of the world. But most importantly, fifth, “[...] eternal life, the ‘life of the Age to Come,’ is now realized in experience [...]. He who believes *has* life eternal.”⁴

¹ Cf. Herbert G. Wood, Important and Influential Foreign Books. Albert Schweitzer and Eschatology, in: *The Expository Times* 65/7 (1954) 206–209.

² Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology, in: *HTR* 77/2 (1984) 119–139, esp. 119.

³ Cf. Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane*. Syllabus condemning the errors of the modernists, Rome 1907 (see point 36). See also Judith Wolfe, Chapter 18: Hope, in: Philip Ziegler (ed.), *Edinburgh Critical History of Twentieth Century Christian Theology*, Edinburgh 2022, 333–343, esp. 335.

NB: This connection between the papal response to Protestant biblical scholars has not been observed in other theological works. However, having studied the debate extensively, it is a key interaction.

⁴ Cf. Charles Harold Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching. And Its Developments*, New York 1962, 85–86. See especially the appendix: Eschatology and History (79–96).

Somewhat similarly to Dodd, Bultmann theologized that Jesus came to demand a decision from us at the final hour. The choice is between the world and all its goods versus God and His Kingdom. The choice is personal, but it must be made immediately and lived out in the present.⁵ However, Bultmann and others with a more present-oriented eschatological vision have been accused of being too subjective and individualistic.⁶ What is important to retain is that, for Dodd, the Kingdom has been realized; however, there is still an element of choosing to believe in its reality. For Bultmann, this choice is a more immediate imperative. In both cases, the Kingdom of God cannot be achieved by human means.⁷ This can be seen throughout the debate among Protestant biblical scholars about the present or futuristic kingdom of God, where the present-oriented perspective is linked to human action, and the future-oriented perspective emphasizes God's action in the face of human inadequacy.

In the Protestant world, this debate among biblical scholars was the platform on which later theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann with his theology of hope that emerged in 1964, created a renewed interest in eschatology. For Pannenberg, the boom in eschatology from the 1960s to the 1980s was ignited by Moltmann and a general theological recovery of the work of Weiß.⁸ However, for Catholics, while clearly influenced by Protestants, it was another movement that allowed for the flourishing and renewed interest in eschatology. In France, further developments in the debate were brought about by the Roman Catholic movement of 'Nouvelle Théologie', led especially by the Dominicans and Jesuits. Although seemingly unconnected, Chenu, Congar, Daniélou, and de Lubac, after regaining acceptance by the Vatican, as witnessed by their participation as theological advisors in the Second Vatican Council, not only had a huge influence on the eschatologies of the 1960s to 1980s but also took part in the development of the debate. This is most visible in the debate over "schema 13," which divided the leading theologians into two camps.⁹ On one side, you have: Chenu OP, Congar OP, Schillebeeckx OP, Karl Rahner SJ, Hans Küng. From the perspective of this group, the Church is part of the modern world and not a separate institution outside or separate from society. On the other hand, the second group consisted of de Lubac SJ, Daniélou SJ, Wojtyła (future Pope John Paul II), and Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI). These theologians favored an eschatological model in which aspects of the

⁵ Cf. Mikel Burley, *Dislocating the Eschaton? Appraising Realized Eschatology*, in: *Sophia* 56 (2017) 435–452, esp. 443.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.* 445.

⁷ Cf. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching* (see fn. 4), 85–86.

See also Urban C. von Wahlde, C. H. Dodd, the historical Jesus, and realized eschatology, in: Thom Thatcher; Catrin Williams (eds.), *Engaging with C. H. Dodd on the Gospel of John. Sixty Years of Tradition and Interpretation*, Cambridge 2013, 149–162, esp. 149–150.

See also Peter C. Phan, *Eschatology*, in: Declan Marmion; Mary E. Hines (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, Cambridge 2007, 174–192, here 175.

⁸ Cf. Pannenberg, *Constructive and Critical Functions* (see fn. 2), 119.

⁹ Nota bene: 'schema 13' is the working title of what later became known as the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

world and modernity contradict the spirit of Christ.¹⁰ In this way, the first group generally prefers a more present-oriented eschatology that emphasizes human action and grace in the world, while the second group favors a rather future-oriented eschatology that rests in God's hands.

2. Present-Oriented Eschatologies from the 1960s through 1980s

As we began to see above, theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx, Gerhard Lohfink, Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg belong to a generation that worked extensively in the field of eschatology between the 1960s and the 1980s. Protestant and Catholic theologians who had witnessed or participated in the Second World War became increasingly attuned to the problem suffering and the quest of justice for their neighbors and, therefore, envisioned a very concrete hope.¹¹ Accordingly, present-oriented eschatologies tend to be political and community-focused, viewing Christians as actively bringing about the Kingdom of God while arguing that eschatology has valuable contributions to make to contemporary society. Despite some similarities, scholars are unlikely to agree on whether a theologian actually really holds a present or a future-oriented eschatology, since it often depends on which aspects of eschatology one chooses to emphasize or because it has most likely evolved over time. Therefore, the task of presenting two clear-cut and entirely different frameworks is quite challenging. Each theologian adds their own perspective; and there are various degrees of focus on the present.

For example, strongly influenced by Ernst Bloch's *Prinzip Hoffnung* (*Principle of Hope*), Moltmann argued that humanity's response to God's proclaimed gift of resurrection is a hope that inspires action in the present.¹² Essentially, this action originates from human beings making their way towards God. Due to this hope, Wolfe contends that Moltmann's eschatology is future-oriented. In dealing with this future, Wolfe summarizes that: "For both Moltmann and Pannenberg, in their different ways, the eschatological future is thus neither an extension of time nor perpendicular or parallel to it, but transforms time retroactively."¹³ Similarly to Schillebeeckx, God comes from the future into the present to transform it.¹⁴ The point is not to focus on the future but to emphasize that the eschaton is not

¹⁰ Cf. Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World. Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics*, Cambridge 2021, 241. See in particular chapter 7 'The Death and Resurrection of the Nouvelle Théologie', 221–247.

¹¹ During the second half of the twentieth century, renewed theological interest in suffering was not solely limited to the field of eschatology but also encompassed post-Auschwitz (Shoah) theology, liberation theology, theology of suffering, etc.

¹² Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God. Christian Eschatology*, London 1996, 24. See also Wolfe, *Hope* (see fn. 3), 338.

¹³ Wolfe, *Hope* (see fn. 3), 339.

¹⁴ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, in: *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx Vol. 3*, London 2018, 25–26 [037–039]; see also Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology*, in: *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx Vol. 6*, London 2014, esp. 129 [149]; see also Kathleen Anne McManus, *Unbroken Communion. The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, Maryland 2003, 39.

some distant mythical land; rather, it is a transformation of the present. In addition to a non-linear but retroactive vision of time, these theologians are attentive to how eschatology affects society in the present. Both Moltmann and Pannenberg are formulating their eschatologies in reaction to Bultmann's 'de-temporalization of eschatology.' Despite their attempts to reintroduce eschatological hope in the future into the field of eschatology, the way in which they both had their eschatology interact with secular society made it present-oriented. This point can be seen in Pannenberg's reflections on Moltmann's eschatology:

"[b]ut the restoration of the apocalyptic outlook towards future fulfillment in Moltmann's own work turned out to focus more on certain political consequences, which he and his followers derived from the eschatological hope, than on the transcendent content of the biblical hope itself."¹⁵

A similar turn to the political can be seen in Pannenberg's own work. Pannenberg argues that: "[e]schatology exposes secular man's illusions about the possibilities of self-realization in this world, and therefore eschatology is at the heart of a Christian realism in appraising the conditions of human existence in the present world."¹⁶ This differentiation of perspective shows that all theologians try to keep the present and the future in tension. Inevitably, it seems, they all tend to favor one side of the temporal spectrum. Interestingly, theologians in this period have responded to each other's work. As we have seen, Pannenberg believed that Moltmann's eschatology was overly political, whereas Schillebeeckx felt that it was excessively transcendental.¹⁷ It, therefore, seems extremely unlikely that a consensus can be reached on a unifying, present-oriented eschatological framework, even within a particular tradition. That is why, to do justice to the nuances in the proposed frameworks, I will present only one present-oriented eschatology in detail: that of Edward Schillebeeckx.

What makes Schillebeeckx's eschatology present-oriented? I have outlined six defining characteristics that can be found in varying degrees in the other present-oriented eschatologies of theologians mentioned above. A present-oriented eschatology is:

- i) attentive to and based on the historicity of Jesus' life, ministry, and announcement of the Kingdom of God,
- ii) makes nuances between the personal meaning of suffering and the universal meaning,
- iii) attentive to the outcast of society: advocates for the liberation of all the oppressed,
- iv) Christians are witnesses but also the actors who begin bringing the Kingdom of God into the present world,
- v) community-oriented,
- vi) political in nature.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, *Constructive and Critical Functions* (see fn. 2), 120.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁷ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (see fn. 14), 26 [038].

Let us, like Schillebeeckx, explore these characteristics, starting from the incarnated historical Jesus who suffered along with humanity. While he states that the universal significance of Jesus Christ can only be answered positively by faith, his historical presence on this earth gives grounds for a developed eschatological reflection. Summarizing the importance of the historicity of the incarnation of Jesus, Schillebeeckx states:

“That is why J.-B. Metz – rightly – repeatedly refers to the narrative, practical ‘essence’ of Christianity. The promised salvation founded in Jesus or ‘total meaning’ is not to be seen as a ‘transcendental’ omnipresence of the gospel. It is a *historical* presence of Christian inspiration and orientation via the story of Jesus and – in imitation of him – our concrete historical praxis of liberation, which experiences living communion with God as the source and ground of total human freedom: salvation not merely for a particular, privileged class, not merely for the living or those still alive at the time, but for *everyone* – outcasts, the oppressed and ultimately the dead, those whom our society has declassified and marginalised.”¹⁸

But while the story of Jesus inspires and moves Christians to action, Schillebeeckx makes it clear that although Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God, it is not a closed system or framework where every little thing has its place. History will always remain open, where evil will continue to occur and challenge any universal framework of meaning. The kingdom of God announced by Jesus is a promise. This promise is, in fact, a hope for an eschatological future made possible in the world by the call of all Christians to prayer and action.¹⁹ This talk of hope and the eschatological future has led authors such as Frederick Depoortere to interpret Schillebeeckx as giving priority to the future.²⁰ But it is important to remember that while Christians are oriented towards the future, their faith in the promise is not something to be contemplated but impels them to action in the present.²¹

Jesus’ historicity involves not just the announcement of the Kingdom of God but also how to live as a human being profoundly interconnected with others. As unique individuals, we each embody a personal and irreplaceable meaning that fits within the puzzle: the entire context and fabric of the world. Each strand in this fabric is essential for its composition; however, one thread cannot stand alone and call itself a fabric. Through the example of his life, Jesus embodied the idea of ‘being human for others’, serving as the reference point for the meaning of human life.²² Highlighting the importance of the neighbor and being community-centered does not solely stem from Jesus’ example. By virtue of being created in the *Imago Dei*, we are all interconnected with God and each other. That said, Schillebeeckx extends this by stating that:

¹⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Essays. Ongoing theological quests*, in: *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx* Vol. 11, London 2018, 23.

¹⁹ Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (see fn. 14), 629 [670].

²⁰ Cf. Frederiek Depoortere, *Schillebeeckx’s View on Eschatology as Public Theology Today*, in: Stephan van Erp; Martin G. Poulson; Lieven Boeve Grace (eds.), *Governance and Globalization*, London 2017, 173–190, esp. 174.

²¹ Cf. Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (see fn. 14), 25 [038].

²² Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (see fn. 14), 569 [606].

“[i]ndependently of this inner reference to God in the core of our existence, we can also reflect on the human person and reach the insight that man only becomes a person through giving himself to his fellow men in a world which he has to humanize.”²³

Therefore, at the very core of what it means to be human, within Schillebeeckx’s eschatological framework, is our interconnectedness with other human beings.

Having established the major lines of Schillebeeckx’s present-oriented eschatology, it is necessary to address the issue at the core of this article: human suffering. Schillebeeckx is deeply attuned to the plight of those living in injustice and how suffering has challenged Christians throughout history. His answer is quite clear. The appropriate response to evil and suffering in the world is not merely theoretical. Schillebeeckx nuances contemplation (envisioning the suffering being experienced is not how it ought to be) and action as the response driven by internal reflection against negative contrast experiences. Building on this contemplation of the negative contrast experience that compels individuals toward action, Schillebeeckx states: “[t]he ‘negativity’ which makes us revise earlier insights as a result of resistance offered by reality is productive; it has a quite special positive significance as a ‘revelation of reality’, even though it may be dialectically negative and critical”.²⁴ Once a person realizes that the situation they or their neighbor find themselves in is not how it should be, motivated by hope that the situation can be different, they are propelled to take action. Acts against suffering contribute to the larger eschatological vision of humanity through this hope and the effort towards a just world.²⁵ Essentially, they are about working towards the Kingdom of God.

While actions against suffering are fundamental, there remains a limit to what can truly be articulated theologically. Certain forms of suffering consistently arise throughout history, and no words can adequately convey their atrocity. In other words, there are sufferings that we cannot affirmatively and concretely state fit within a broader eschatological framework in which all perpetrators are forgiven. That is why,

“[g]iven our negative contrast experiences, shalom, universal meaning and reconciliation can only be articulated in parables and eschatological symbols, in images of promise and wrath, ultimately of God’s kingdom or reign, of forgiveness and metanoia.”²⁶

Schillebeeckx identified four eschatological metaphors: the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the body, a new heaven and a new earth, and Maranatha and Jesus’ Parousia. The concept of Maranatha unites all eschatological metaphors. Schillebeeckx summarizes:

“Maranatha refers to the eschatological key event, which permits and inaugurates three other eschatological metaphors. God’s goodness actually has the very last word: the Parousia of Jesus

²³ Ibid., 592 [630].

²⁴ Cf. *Edward Schillebeeckx*, Christ. The Christian Experience in the Modern World, in: *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx* Vol. 7, London 2014, 21 [35]. See also *Anthony J. Godzieba*, Schillebeeckx’s Phenomenology of Experience and Resurrection Faith, in: Stephan van Erp; Daniel Minch (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Edward Schillebeeckx*, London 2020, 86–107, esp. 101.

²⁵ Cf. *Schillebeeckx*, Jesus (see fn. 14), 583–584 [622].

²⁶ Ibid., 582 [620].

Christ is the revelation of the eschatological vision, what God's creation will look like as the new heaven and a new earth after the final judgment by the Son of man."²⁷

Nuancing between various aspects of God's promise, in which Christians hope, it is crucial to emphasize that at the center lies God's goodness. In the face of suffering, even when it may seem contradictory to some, we must remember that God's goodness guides us.

Many theodicies attempt to reconcile evil or suffering with a perfectly good God. By starting from the premise that suffering is a mystery, Schillebeeckx acknowledges two seemingly irreconcilable poles: evil/suffering in the world and a perfectly good God.²⁸ Precisely because God is good and accompanies us through life, the promised eschatological metaphors ground Christians' hopes in situations of injustice and suffering:

"Through the dynamics peculiar to these metaphors the four eschatological images direct Christian conduct quite specifically: it has to be aimed at greater justice, peace and the integrity of all creation, which includes social amelioration for everybody, but especially for the outcasts, the voiceless and marginalised, those who have been stricken by life."²⁹

Another way to understand the significance of these metaphors is that they are biblically rooted visions of the future meant to guide Christians in the present time.

Ultimately, the discussion of hope, promises, and eschatological metaphors depends on one's faith. Christians do not follow their faith based on concrete evidence. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx suggests a way to 'verify' that these hopes, promises, and metaphors are not merely figments of the imagination. He explains:

"[f]or this reason, the verification principle of the Christian faith and its eschatological hope can only be stated *indirectly* – it is to be found in the fact that Christians, as the 'community of those who hope', show in practice in their lives that their hope is *capable* of changing the world now and of making our history a real history of salvation which brings well-being to all men, instead of a history without glory, opposed to salvation."³⁰

This verification encapsulates what is crucial in present-oriented eschatology. Like Panenberg, Moltmann, and others, eschatology embodies a very practical approach: transforming society through the faith and actions of Christians. Whether through living out their faith visibly or advocating against injustice, the future is a hope that is realized in the present. The future promised by God is not something to be passively awaited.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Essays* (see fn. 18), 142.

²⁸ Cf. Aloysius Rego, *Suffering and Salvation. The salvific meaning of suffering in the later theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, Vol. 33), Leuven 2006, 167.

²⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Essays* (see fn. 18), 160.

³⁰ Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (see fn. 14), 110 [182].

3. Future-Oriented Eschatologies: Between 2013 and 2024

Let us now turn to what has been developed in Catholic eschatology in the last ten years or so. Compared to the eschatologies of the 1960s through the 1980s, these new eschatologies have emerged as a response to a twofold problem. First, there is resistance to present eschatologies that overemphasize how one should live in the present rather than focusing on hope. This point is best illustrated by John Thiel's use of Rahner to highlight the necessity of the future in contrast to Kant's eschatology.³¹ Second, eschatology, and more specifically a future-oriented eschatology, is viewed as the theologically appropriate way to articulate something about suffering. In other words, there is an emphasis on the limits of what can be theologically stated about suffering in the present without causing harm. This is most evident in Karen Kilby's work on suffering, which highlights an apophatic approach to the issue and will be further elaborated upon below.

While future-oriented eschatologies can differentiate themselves on a spectrum by emphasizing the future, this response interestingly tends to theologize while starting from the individual experience of suffering as evil and how this experience shapes who we are on a proudly metaphysical level. This is evident, for example, in Emmanuel Falque's intricate connection between a 'theology of Holy Saturday' (which represents a descent into hell) and a 'philosophie du Hors phénomène' (which signifies the lowest point in our traumas and suffering that completely destroys us, leaving us in extreme solitude).³² Or we can also consider Eleonore Stump's treatment of the problem of mourning as the 'leftover' issue concerning suffering. Even with a successful theodicy and doctrine of atonement, this 'leftover' is what she calls the *felix culpa* view, which suggests that the post-Fall world is so worthwhile that life would not have been as perfect without the Fall from grace.³³ In other words, there is something about suffering in this post-Fall world that implies it should occur rather than not, meaning that there is 'no (philosophical) reason'³⁴ for a person to mourn her suffering, because the good will inevitably arise from it.

Karen Kilby challenges both present-oriented and future-oriented eschatologies. This challenge manifests in the theological response to suffering. Reacting against theodicies for ethical reasons and practical theological responses aimed at alleviating suffering³⁵, she argues for a distinction between talking (or what can be said) '*within* suffering' and '*towards*

³¹ Cf. John Thiel, *For What May We Hope? Thoughts on the Eschatological Imagination*, in: *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 517–541, esp. 520. While this point is from 2006, it was republished in 2013 within the context of a larger work, which fits the time frame proposed. See also John Thiel, *Icons of Hope. The 'Last Things' in Catholic Imagination*, Indiana 2013.

³² Cf. Emmanuel Falque, *La chair de Dieu*, Paris 2023, 127.

³³ Cf. Eleonore Stump, *The Image of God. The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning*, Oxford 2022, 11.

³⁴ For Stump, there is no clear distinction between what can be said to a person suffering 'in the moment' and what can be said philosophically. In her conferences, she always mentions there is a difference between praxis and theory, and that the two do not need to be completely reconciled. That is why I have added that there is no philosophical reason, to be clear that Stump would never tell a suffering person that she has no reason to mourn her suffering.

³⁵ Cf. Karen Kilby, *Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering*, in: *Modern Theology* 36/1 (2020) 92–104, esp. 99.

suffering'.³⁶ Kilby recognizes that for some individuals, articulating or identifying their suffering can help relieve it. Illustrating this point, Kilby explains,

"[s]o while the depression in itself, this experience of suffering, may press towards inarticulacy, any progress I make in naming, in understanding, in weaving it into a broader understanding, including an understanding of that which I most value, seems to help."³⁷

From the perspective of 'within suffering,' while this weaving of one's suffering into a larger framework benefits some individuals, there are instances where this is simply impossible. Kilby's approach demonstrates significantly more restraint when we consider it from the perspective of what can be articulated 'towards suffering.' Regarding discussions about the suffering of others, she argues:

"Here, I would like to suggest, the role for something-like-apophasis, the requirement of a limitation to our speech and thought, is broader than in the case of the sufferer herself, because there are some kinds of meaning-making, or meaning-finding, which can legitimately be done in relation to 'my' suffering but not 'yours' or 'his.' The process of finding some way to be at least partly reconciled to suffering, of fitting it into a larger pattern of value, of discerning grace and growth met within suffering, is for the most part one we can properly undertake in the second or third person."³⁸

According to Kilby's argument, if theology wishes to address the suffering of others, it must inevitably be from a third-person perspective. While we cannot fully understand how another person suffers, it would be wrong to deny that suffering exists. Therefore, some theological reflections on suffering need to be articulated, but they should not impose a framework or promise to resolve all suffering. If theodicies and other practical theology methods do not meet Kilby's criteria, as discussed above, how else can theology engage with suffering? The answer lies in eschatology.

However, not just any eschatology. Kilby argues that "[t]o be capable of attending to suffering without improper evasion, in other words, Christian theology needs to maintain a future-oriented eschatology, a real eschatological hope."³⁹ Importantly, one of the primary features of a future-oriented eschatology is that it is developed in the third person perspective, which pays attention to the delicacy of the expression of the eschatological faith through a 'double apophatic pressure'. In a way, we must hold our eschatological belief in tension without applying it to particular situations of suffering (so as not to derive consolation from this belief). Put differently, we must hold the tension, most importantly: without reconciliation, between the mystery of suffering and the mystery of God.⁴⁰ This emphasis on both, recognizing a 'sense of bafflement' and the limits of what we can say in the face of suffering, comes as a reaction to John Thiel's *Icons of Hope: The "Last Things" in*

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁰ Cf. Karen Kilby, *Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology*, in: Christophe Chalamet (ed.), *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 180), Berlin 2017, 279–291, here 291.

Catholic Imagination.⁴¹ Thiel's eschatology critiques present-oriented eschatologies, which he refers to as not eschatology but 'immanentology'.⁴² While Thiel serves as an example of a future-oriented eschatology, Kilby argues that he overimagines the eschaton. To conceive of it practically, the scenario that disturbs her most is telling a victim who suffers that she will see or meet her perpetrator, but, even more shockingly, being asked to forgive the perpetrator in heaven.⁴³ To put it in a more current context, if a theologian tells an abuse victim that she will meet the priest who harmed her in Heaven and must forgive him for eternity, most would agree this is completely inappropriate, as it could cause further trauma. As a possible response, in her later article, Kilby highlights a difference in wording: "It is possible, and important, to distinguish between *being* reconciled, and hoping that there *will be* reconciliation."⁴⁴

But if Kilby also challenges Thiel's future-oriented eschatology, what characteristics does she suggest for this framework? In other words, what makes this eschatological faith future-oriented? For Kilby, the answer revolves around hope. Using Thiel's work to introduce the concept, she reformulates the relationship between hope and experiences:

"[...] Even if it [sc. Christian hope; MLH] both arises out of and is directed back towards our current experience, it is not simply *about* current experience. Eschatology is genuinely an effort to say something about the future, not a redescription of the present."⁴⁵

According to Kilby, this eschatological hope occurs in three different degrees: weak, stronger, and strong. Unlike the hope in present-oriented eschatologies, there is no mention of active resistance to suffering. Instead, there is an acknowledgment of our faith in the face of the limits of human existence. From the perspective of strong eschatological hope,

"[w]e can hope that it will all be woven into something meaningful and redemptive, but we cannot even begin to imagine what that might be, to conceive of what could make meaningful, or understandable, or acceptable, the terrors that befall other people."⁴⁶

For Kilby, we can only catch glimpses of how God might be working some good through suffering, but that is for each individual to observe, not for theology to dictate how this might fit into a larger framework filled with imagination.

To recapitulate, Kilby argues that a future-oriented eschatology is characterized by its third-person perspective and by a strong eschatological hope. However, more can be added if we consider her warnings about two risks that eschatology might encounter, which are

⁴¹ Kilby uses the phrasing of bafflement in her article "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering" (cf. *Kilby*, Negative Theology (see fn. 35), 92). Still, the same is implied, although developed explicitly against Thiel in her article "Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology" (cf. *Kilby*, Eschatology [see fn. 40]).

⁴² Cf. *Thiel*, For What May We Hope? (see fn. 31), 519.

⁴³ Cf. *Kilby*, Eschatology (see fn. 40), 285–286.

⁴⁴ *Kilby*, Negative Theology (see fn. 35), 104.

⁴⁵ *Kilby*, Eschatology (see fn. 40), 281.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 291

presented as political critiques directed toward Christianity. First, there must be no sacralization of suffering – arguing, for instance, that suffering is redemptive. Clearly, suffering must be recognized as evil and needs to be theologically treated as such. Second, eschatology cannot fall into the trap of offering a distant future that leads Christians in the present to complacency, which undermines any “motivation for emancipation.”⁴⁷ In other words, the proposed future-oriented eschatology cannot serve as an escape from the world. Nevertheless, Kilby acknowledges that it is difficult to avoid both critiques. Our best approach is to develop a future-oriented eschatology rooted in authentic Christian hope that resists becoming a framework that ‘justifies’ suffering.

4. Reconciliation of Models: Methodological Tool for Theologizing on Suffering

This categorization and systematization require further work, nuances, and the exploration of other key theologians during the abovementioned periods. It is not an exhaustive list. However, a shift has clearly occurred. Apparently, similarly to the distinction between present and future-oriented eschatologies, Pannenberg used the categories of individual and social eschatology. These categories are developed to classify the different biblical eschatological images: 1) the resurrection of the dead, 2) judgment and hell, 3) the Second Coming of Christ, 4) Peace and Salvation, 5) the Kingdom of God.⁴⁸ He outlines:

“Individual eschatology focuses on a future life of the individual in terms of bodily resurrection, immortality of the soul, and communion with God and with Christ. In the center of social eschatology, there is hope for the kingdom of God to bring about true justice and peace among all creatures.”⁴⁹

This categorization of biblical images comes from Karl Rahner, who emphasizes the significance of anthropology as the key to grasping the meaning of eschatological hope. As Pannenberg builds upon this position, the tendency to conceive some eschatological consummation is understood as part of our human nature and contributes to self-understanding.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he contends that German Protestant theologians reacted against Rahner by anchoring their eschatologies in the divine promises found in biblical traditions rather than adhering to the anthropological line of reasoning.⁵¹ According to Pannenberg, the lesson is that we cannot reject either starting point; the foundations of eschatological hope consist of anthropological and divine elements.⁵²

⁴⁷ Kilby, *Negative Theology* (see fn. 35), 103.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pannenberg, *Constructive and Critical Functions* (see fn. 2), 120.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 121.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 121–122.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, 123.

While it may seem that these categories dovetail nicely with the ones above – present-oriented eschatologies are social eschatologies, and future-oriented eschatologies are individual eschatologies – I believe that such an assessment reduces the richness each eschatology brings to the table. Focusing only on biblical images or divine promises leaves out the transformative aspect of eschatology, which can be conceived through human initiative or God's help. It also leaves out the importance of hope within both models and the repercussions of theorizing about this hope. This hope can seem oppressive to some if it is over-theologized, as seen with Kilby, while for others, it is their only source of strength in the dark abyss, as seen with Schillebeeckx. Not only would the oversimplifying assessment lose the richness that each eschatology offers for the discussion, but it also does not consider the core issue that points to a distinction between the relevant frameworks: i. e. truth versus praxis. Like most theological works concerning suffering, eschatologies, without exception, encompass the struggle between the theological positive truth that can be argued on the one side and what can be said 'in the moment' to a suffering person on the other side. For some, as suggested in David Bentley Hart's *The Doors to the Sea*⁵³, any developed truth must be presentable to a person in anguish. Similarly, Schillebeeckx, a theologian consistently concerned with the concrete issues facing individuals in his community, shapes his eschatology as a 'practical' response intended to provide hope to the suffering Christian. In contrast, Eleonore Stump often faces criticism at conferences for developing a theory that cannot be communicated to someone who is suffering.⁵⁴

Considering the theory-praxis dilemma, where can we find a middle ground between the two frameworks? One advocates an active response to suffering (*praxis*), while the other emphasizes the passive acceptance and transformation of an imposed reality (*theory*). This shift should make theologians realize that a renewed sensitivity must be implemented regarding individuals – suffering in theological discussions that have become more victim-centered. Simultaneously, the communal repercussions of a suffering person, a non-complacent stance, and active rebellion in the face of unjust suffering must become essential aspects of the discussion. The synthesis of these elements should create a unified eschatological framework surrounding the unique and unextinguishable eschatological hope. The pendulum analogy is appropriate here: due to their political nature, present-oriented eschatologies have faced criticism for neglecting the individual human person in their metaphysical conception in the context of salvation. The pendulum has now swung to another extreme that overly emphasizes the individual human being without contextualizing it in relation to the world and to other beings. Future-oriented eschatologies accept suffering by acknowledging how each of us is deeply affected by it, shaping us into who we are as we grow closer to God. Further research in eschatology must recognize this tendency and seek a just milieu that fosters a more moderate eschatology, one that is attentive to all dimensions of the suffering human.

⁵³ Cf. David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea. Where was God in the Tsunami?*, Michigan 2005, 100–103.

⁵⁴ This occurred at 'The Future of Christian Thinking' Conference hosted by St. Patrick's Pontifical University in Maynooth on April 27–30, 2022. On another occasion, similar interactions with audience occurred at the 8th Edward Schillebeeckx Lecture hosted by KU Leuven on October 5, 2023. See also Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness. Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford 2010, 14.

I propose that we aim for this just milieu by starting from the importance of a Christian's response to Christ. In his work, Thiel noticed among Catholics a widespread loss of an existential interest in Purgatory. This loss of interest is revealed in the loss of seriousness about our lives on earth and the choices we make, or what he calls a 'Matthean sensibility'.⁵⁵ While Thiel does not seem to worry about this loss, it greatly disturbs Kilby because it means that Catholics have simultaneously lost their serious response to Christ.⁵⁶ The goal should be to reclaim a certain sense of Matthean faith, which emphasizes a Christian's responsibility to be active in the present as a 'serious' response to the call of Christ to follow Him. This responsibility should not be seen only from an ethical lens, but more like Schillebeeckx's collective rebellion against suffering in the world. This response to Christ, originating from human beings profoundly impacted by suffering, is an expression of faith that can be articulated from a first-person-response viewpoint while also being theologized from a third-person eschatological stance. By genuinely emphasizing the starting point, which is at the heart of all biblical eschatological images or metaphors – namely Christ – there is an opportunity to find a nuanced space between present and future-oriented eschatologies. While avoiding Bultmann's urgency in choosing Christ's way, in an understanding that pits the world against the ways of God, the challenge is to begin theologizing from a suffering human being's answer to Christ's call, enabled by grace and motivated by a hope in the future which promises that all will be made well. In theology, very little can and should be said about suffering. But more can be said about our response to suffering as followers of Christ.

Der Artikel analysiert den Übergang von gegenwartsorientierten Eschatologien der 1960er bis 1980er Jahre hin zu zukunftsorientierten Ansätzen der letzten Dekade. Beide Modelle sind auf unterschiedliche Weise für menschliches Leiden sensibel. Dieser Wandel ist nicht nur theoretisch, sondern auch praktisch für die theologische Reflexion über Leiden relevant. Die Autorin plädiert dafür, beide Modelle zu integrieren, um übermäßige Spekulationen in einer zukünftigen Theologie des Leidens zu begrenzen.

⁵⁵ Cf. John Thiel, Time, Judgment, and Competitive Spirituality. A Reading of the Development of the Doctrine of Purgatory, in: Theological Studies 69 (2008) 741–785, esp. 749.

⁵⁶ Cf. Kilby, Eschatology (see fn. 40), 282.