

The Parousia: A Suitable Symbol for a Renewed Eschatological, Cosmic Narrative

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Boston College
School of Theology and Ministry

The Parousia:
A Suitable Symbol for a Renewed
Eschatological, Cosmic Narrative

A Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation in Christian eschatology affirms the cosmic implications of the notion of the parousia, and proposes the latter as a suitable symbol for a renewed eschatological narrative of God's transforming encounter with the whole of creation.

Over the last several decades, eschatological reflection has ceased to refer simply to future events, and has become an interpretative key for the entire theological enterprise. The cornerstone of any contemporary eschatological reflection is God as end and goal of the whole of creation. In addition, two other elements arise in the work of most contemporary theologians, namely the anthropological interpretation of eschatology, and an apparent sobriety in the use of images for depicting the future of creation. This dissertation will explore the complementary counterpoints of these perspectives. On the one hand, this work argues for an all-embracing eschatology that broadens those theologies that either restrict God's eschatological fulfillment only to what will happen to human beings and earth, or give to human beings a role that, seen in a broader, cosmic perspective, seems to be disproportionate. On the other hand, this dissertation maintains the necessary renewal of an eschatological narrative from a Christological, cosmic perspective in a context where the loss of figurative language for eschatology negatively affects our ability to conceive the future of the whole of creation and to be really inspired by it in the present time.

The main thesis of this dissertation is that the theological notion of the parousia grounds all eschatological statements in Jesus Christ, broadens the interpretation of God's fulfillment to a

fully transformed creation, offers an illustrative image of this cosmic process, and can empower believers to recognize and embrace their eschatological role within the framework of God's action upon all things. This seems especially urgent in the contemporary theological context, where an all-embracing narrative about future fulfillment is either challenged or has almost disappeared.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, eschatological reflection has ceased to refer simply to future events, and has become an interpretative key for the entire theological enterprise. This process can be illustrated as the shift from the classical consideration of “the last things” — “death,” “judgment,” “hell,” and “heaven” — to the exploration of the fulfillment of creation in God. Although eschatology continues reflecting on these four aspects of God’s future, the cornerstone of these considerations is God as end and goal of the whole of creation.

Alongside this major shift in the object of eschatology, three other elements arise in the work of most contemporary theologians, namely a tendency to focus eschatological reflection especially on its temporal aspect, an inclination to circumscribe God’s future mostly to its anthropological implications, and an apparent sobriety in the use of images to depict the future of creation. Even if these three perspectives show important and positive elements of eschatological reflection, the goal that prompts and frames this project is the need of complementary counterpoints for these three issues.

The thesis of this dissertation is that the theological notion of parousia helps to balance the three mentioned tendencies in contemporary eschatology. Grounding all the eschatological statements in Jesus Christ, the parousia broadens the interpretation of God’s fulfillment to a fully transformed creation, offers an illustrative image of God’s future action upon creation, and can empower believers to recognize and embrace the role that God has given humanity in it.

In this context, this dissertation argues for two intertwined ideas. On the one hand, it claims the importance of an all-embracing eschatology that broadens those theologies that either restrict God’s eschatological fulfillment only to what will happen to human beings and earth, or gives to human beings a role that, seen in a broader, cosmic perspective, seems to be

disproportionate. On the other hand, this dissertation argues for the necessary renewal of an eschatological narrative from a Christological, cosmic perspective in a context where the loss of figurative language for eschatology negatively affects our ability to conceive the future of the whole of creation and to be really inspired by it in the present time. In light of the Christian theological tradition, therefore, this dissertation proposes the notion of the parousia as a suitable symbol for a renewed eschatological narrative of God's transforming encounter with the whole of creation.

1. Theological Context

Eschatology has experienced major changes in the twentieth century. Reflection on the Christian future changed from being a specific domain among others within the theological thought to being a dimension of theology as such. The concerns about God's judgment after death, the fate of the dead, and the immortality of the soul — to name just a few examples — were replaced by the certainty that God is the goal of creation, and therefore that the whole of theology must be understood through the lens of God as the ultimate hope of all things. This shift in the role of eschatology was caused not only by the renewal in exegetical hermeneutics and in systematic theology, but also by the criticism coming from the philosophical and sociological reflections referring to the value of history. Marx's dictum describing religion as "the opium of the people" is a very well-known example of the challenges that theology faced because of its apparent disregard of the affairs of this world. This is why the eschatological reflection, strongly challenged by an alleged underestimation of history and the active, transforming role of human beings in it, is clearly influenced now by two convictions. On the one hand, hope in God's future cannot be separated from everyday expectations and the commitment to build a better world.

Because of the value of reality and its contingency, many are the theologians for whom problems such as suffering, death, or sin are not reasons to deny eschatology, but to trigger it. Rather than “*fuga mundi*,” the expectations on God’s future provoke then engagement with the historical process and a reappraisal of the anthropological hope in the fulfillment of the body and soul. On the other hand, contemporary eschatology highly stresses the social aspect of God’s salvation. In other words, the ultimate fate of human beings is not simply an individual matter. The expectation of future communion with God and with others is something that moves believers to live, in the present time, in the way they hope to live in the eschatological future. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that a significant proportion of the contemporary eschatological reflection is devoted to God as the eschatological goal of creation, the theological virtue of hope, the relationship between time and eternity, the importance of the body in the future human fulfillment, and the ethical and social role of God’s future.

This process has not been entirely free from tensions and conflicts. However, it is necessary to affirm that this renovation in eschatology has more to do with the retrieval of some classical eschatological notions than the emergence of new “foreign” ideas. In fact, consideration of the Christian future during the last century retrieved, as theological reflection did as a whole, aspects that were already included in the biblical sources and the teaching of the Fathers. In this sense, the modern reflection on history and the role of human beings within it brought to light aspects of the eschatological tensions that, even though present in the history of the Christian teaching on God's future, had almost been forgotten or seldom incorporated in the theological considerations. The first chapter of this dissertation will be particularly instructive about this process.

During the last decades, however, this reflections has been confronted with new challenges that, in a certain sense, touch the elements highlighted before. For instance, the

tendency in some eschatological stances to understand God's fulfillment in merely anthropological terms is strongly challenged by cosmological theories. The way contemporary cosmologies measure the unfolding of the universe seems to surpass, from a spatio-temporal point of view, what some eschatological reflections affirm about the fulfillment of creation. Moreover, these theories agree that the expanding of the cosmos is a process that began without human beings millions of years before, and might well continue without them millions of years after. In this context, and without denying the importance of human transformation and the worldly reality of God's salvation, it seems necessary that the anthropological reality of eschatology must be interpreted within the framework of an all-embracing eschatology that considers the cosmic scope of God's fulfillment. This task is even more important since Christian theology has affirmed that the Father — and not human beings — will transform the whole of creation in his Son through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Besides this criticism coming from cosmological theories, there is another challenge that reminds theologians of the necessity of illustrating God's future in a pertinent and inspiring way, namely the criticism of eschatological imagination. Two philosophical critiques have had great consequence in this matter: Immanuel Kant on knowledge, and Jean-François Lyotard on meta-narratives. While the former calls into question the epistemological status of eschatological images,¹ the latter disputes the totalitarianism of any kind of narrative that arrogates to itself the omni-comprehension of reality.² Despite the fact that these criticisms have given theology the

¹ According to Kant, “imagination is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), B 151. Imagination, therefore, belongs to the realm of sensibility, since all intuition comes via the body's senses. The faculty of imagination is incapable of eschatologically meaningful statements because it requires something beyond its means, namely the concreteness of sensibility. Because objects of knowledge are mediated by the subject's *a priori* faculties of representation and, therefore, the thing-in-itself is not present to the mind, the notions of “world,” “soul,” and “God” are transcendental ideas that perform only a regulative function for knowledge.

² According to Lyotard, the modern rationale “legitimizes itself with the reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the

awareness that eschatological imagination cannot either exceed its capacities or claim any kind of neutrality, it is important to reaffirm the role of images and narrative for the very existence of eschatological thought. It is true that no image can depict precisely God's fulfillment. And it is also true that the loss of many intimidating images are the good result of this limitation of the eschatological imagination. But this process should not lead eschatology to an imaginative abstraction which prevents eschatology from its inspiring role in the depiction of the Christian future. Theology has always used images to portray God's fulfillment. In fact, there is no other means of doing so.

In such as theological context, this project proposes the theological notion of parousia such as a suitable image wherein all the mentioned elements converge. This symbol has been a core part of the preaching and worshipping of the Christian church since its beginning, especially with the strong link between the Lord's supper and the petition that he come soon.³ Moreover, Christ's coming has always been associated with the idea of the transformation of the whole cosmos. Christ will come as the risen Lord to judge creation and to give all things their fulfillment. The main goal of this dissertation is, therefore, to explore how the notion of parousia could be an image that organizes a more visual eschatological narrative in cosmic terms.

emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth." See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii. Postmodernism is the "incredulity toward meta-narratives." (*The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv). In this way, he calls into question several of the most important philosophies that have provided most of the meta-narratives used to explain social life: dialectics of the Spirit (Hegelianism), hermeneutics of meaning (phenomenology), the emancipation of the rational or working subject (liberalism and Marxism), and the creation of wealth (capitalism). Although the religious meta-narrative does not appear explicitly in his list, Lyotard includes it as he denies any reference to a narrative that arrogates an omni-comprehension of reality.

³ In the *Didache*, "Maranatha" appears as part of the doxology of the eucharistic prayer (see *Didache* 10.6). In the current Roman Missal, the consecration of the bread and wine is followed by the memorial acclamation: "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again."

2. Basic Methodological Principles

Six assumptions guide the argument of this dissertation. Although these elements are not necessarily equals in either meaning or content, their presentation provides a helpful framework for understanding some suppositions that run through this project.

First, this dissertation is an exploration of certain fundamental principles on which contemporary eschatological reflection is based. This project does not aim, therefore, to respond to any specific aspect of eschatology or to call into question any theologian's particular ideas concerning the future of creation. While this project includes comments on most of the fundamental eschatological issues and the most relevant theologians of the last decades, the main goal of this dissertation is to show certain biases in the way eschatological reflection has been shaped, to underline some difficulties that this reflection should face for it to be relevant in the present, and to propose a theological notion as a suitable symbol for both balancing and renewing the eschatological narrative. In this sense, the following ideas and comments are simply a provocative approach to access the rich and complex eschatological reflection referring to God as the goal of the whole of the universe.

Second, this dissertation offers a way to understand the different tensions that form any eschatological reflection.⁴ Precisely because it is the tension between two apparently contradictory elements — and not the option of one over the other — which underlies most eschatological stances, it is important to show how any particular theology balances these tensions or how it simply forgets one of their elements. In fact, the three biases that this project

⁴ Eschatological reflection is crossed by many tensions at different levels. Among the more important tensions, it is possible to highlight the following ones: this-worldly/other-worldly forms of hope; the continuity/discontinuity between earth and heaven, this life and the next; realized/futurist eschatology; vertical/horizontal dimension of hope; emphasis on the things that are hoped for (physics)/on the phenomenon of hope itself (anthropology); an emphasis on the cross/on the resurrection of Jesus. See Ernst Conradie, "In Search of a Vision of Hope for a New Century," *Journal of Religion & Society* 1 (1999): 3.

underlines are the emphasis on the necessary temporal, anthropological, and abstract aspects of the *eschaton* over the also necessary material, cosmic, and narrative characteristics. Besides the balance within the tensions, it is also important to bring them together. For instance, this project argues that the tension already/not yet of eschatological expectation must be complemented with the continuity/discontinuity tension of the fulfillment of the whole of creation. This dissertation claims, therefore, that the eschatological hope cannot be reduced to either one element or one tension. Rather, the Christian expectation is the result of all these tensions in constructive confrontation.

Third, this project argues that the only ground of the eschatological expectations is God's revelation. In this sense, eschatology is not a consideration of the future as such, but a reflection on God's future as the future of the whole of creation. The latter implies a twofold dimension. On the one hand, any eschatological consideration must be founded on the main source of God's word, namely Scriptures. The reference to Scriptures is inevitable if the eschatological reflection wants to be distinguished from a utopic thought that ultimately bases its assertions on the inner potentialities of reality. Accordingly, this dissertation assumes Scripture — and the way they have been understood in the Christian written tradition — as the necessary starting point of any systematic reflection on the future of creation. Although this perspective is present throughout this whole project, it becomes more evident in the examination of the biblical notion of *parousia*, the exploration of the different ways Scriptures depicts “new creation,” and the appeal to two specific texts to illustrate the fulfillment of all things — Rom 8:19-23 and Col 1:15-20. Moreover, all the biblical allusions in the different chapters give an insight into the way the Scriptures link the eschatological images and present them in a narrative form.

On the other hand, if eschatology must always refer to God's word to reflect on the future of creation, this means that all eschatological considerations must be grounded in the one who is

God's Word, namely Jesus Christ. In fact, this leads to the fourth presumption of this dissertation, namely the reflection on God's future is the reflection on Christ as the eschatological goal for the whole of creation. Jesus Christ — specifically his resurrection — is the hermeneutical key to all that Scripture affirms about God's future and the principle in which all eschatological tensions find both their balance and real scope. And it is precisely from this perspective that the parousia of the risen Lord is presented as a suitable symbol to illustrate God's transforming encounter with the whole of creation. This Christological perspective is the approach that guides both the argument of this project and the organization of the chapters. It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that the hope in Christ's coming cannot be excluded from the eschatological role that both the Father and the Spirit have in the fulfillment of creation. Because the trinitarian God is the origin and goal of all things, the action of the Son reveals that the same Spirit in whom the Father called all things into being, is the Spirit by whom the Father raised up the Son, and therefore is the Spirit who will transform all things at the end of time. This is why this project, in spite of its strong Christological accent, will also show the trinitarian aspect of the *eschaton*.

The fifth assumption of this project is the value of disciplines different from theology for having a better understanding of God's fulfillment of creation. It is true that the Christian future is only based on God's revelation. The truth of the eschatological hope does not need the confirmation of other fields of knowledge. However, it is necessary to assert that, since other disciplines can provide precise knowledge of reality, they allow theology to have a better interpretation of God's revelation. Based on the theological principle that the reality created by God is one, coherent, and understandable, the contribution of other disciplines to theology in the depiction of reality is absolutely necessary. Applying this principle to this dissertation, even if both cosmological theories and philosophical criticisms of the last decades challenge the very

existence of eschatological thought, they also provide interesting insights to this reflection. For instance, a more accurate notion of what the universe is contributes to a better understanding of the theological notions of creation and Creator, as well as the role of human beings within the cosmos. From a theological point of view, then, the scientific knowledge cannot be completely isolated from theology because, despite the difference in methods and objects, both portray God's creation.

The sixth assumption is that any eschatological reflection needs images and a narrative that organizes them in a coherent way. Precisely because eschatology refers to God as creation's future by using elements in tension, the only appropriate means for these eschatological considerations are the images and the narrative. In fact, they provide a more flexible manner to articulate ideas that, rather than be mutually exclusive, must coexist in the conflict but in a fruitful way. Besides this, the capacity of representing the future in an imaginative and narrative way is the basis for the inspiring aspect of the eschatological reflection. Within a teleological vision of temporality, the representation of the future necessarily impacts and influences the decisions within the present. This dissertation assumes this approach, especially in a theological context where both the images and the narrative have become extremely abstract because of the emphasis on the relational aspect of the fulfilled future — the *eschaton* as the encounter with God. By using the notion of parousia, this project proposes a narrative explicitly visual in which the meaning and purpose of each singular narrative — the history of humanity, the history of each human being, the history of both living and inert things — are grafted upon a dynamic story that has God as both beginning and goal of everything and has Jesus Christ as the personal point of its encounter.

3. Overview of the Chapters

Chapter one traces the renewal of eschatological reflection in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the lenses of two successive conceptual shifts. The first shift refers to the transformation of eschatology from the discussion of “the last things” — the *eschata* — to reflection concerning God as the origin and goal of the whole of creation — the *eschaton*. The second shift identifies the change of the different approaches that gradually shaped contemporary eschatological reflection, namely the individual, collective, social, and cosmic aspects of the *eschaton*. In order to show these two shifts, this introductory chapter offers an overview of the contemporary eschatological reflections that start with the new approach of exegetical studies, continue during the Second Vatican Council, and finish in the different theological movements of the post-conciliar period. This review gives a general framework to understand how eschatological questions have been addressed during the last decades.

The second chapter, which constitutes one of the core elements of this dissertation, argues that these positive changes in eschatological reflection have entailed three related biases which are important to balance from a theological point of view: first, an undue temporalization of *eschaton* over its material reality; second, a tendency to reduce the scope of God’s fulfillment because of the humanization of creation; and finally, an increasing abstraction of the eschatological imagination, and, therefore, of its consequent narrative. Because eschatology itself is formed by elements in tension, the main goal of this chapter is to tackle each of these three tendencies in order to balance them by reaffirming both the unavoidable physical, cosmic scope of God’s fulfillment and the necessity of a narrative consistent with it. To this end, this chapter proposes the theological notion of parousia as a suitable image for the articulation of all these elements.

The remaining chapters develop each of these mentioned ideas. In fact, the third chapter turns to the interpretation of the parousia, in particular to explore the consequences that Jesus Christ's return will have for the whole of creation. This chapter begins by an overview of the parousia as an eschatological notion, the ways Scripture depicts it, and the roots that this Christian symbol has in Jewish apocalyptic. After showing the content the first communities gave to the parousia, this chapter examines this notion from a more systematic perspective. For this purpose, two paradoxical dualities seem extremely helpful: on the one hand, the relationship between the immanence and delay of God's coming; on the other hand, the tension between what the parousia will reveal and what it will fulfill. The notion of parousia highlights, from a Christological perspective, that God alone is the fulfillment of creation.

After exploring the meaning of the parousia, chapter four addresses the first of the mentioned biases. Through the theological notion of "new heavens and new earth," this chapter explores the biblical assertions referring to the fulfillment of the whole of creation — in particular its material aspect. Because the biblical illustration of Christ's return to renew "heaven and earth" is combined with an imaginary of cosmic crisis, this chapter also helps to clarify a problematic closely associated with these images, namely whether the material aspect of creation will be annihilated, replaced, or transformed. In this sense, the chapter asserts that the parousia will bring fulfillment to all aspects of creation. The part of reality that will be overcome when Christ comes is not matter, but sinfulness. This idea is underlined, at the end of this chapter, by the study of both the biblical "two-aeons scheme" and the distinction between "body and soul."

Chapter five refers to the second bias in contemporary eschatological reflection — the tendency to illustrate the *eschaton* exclusively in anthropological terms. Along with the conviction that the fulfillments of both human beings and the rest of creation are intrinsically associated, and that human actions have eschatological implications for humans and for the

reality they live, it is necessary to frame their role within a cosmic process that is led by God and will be fulfilled in Christ. This chapter examines the matter by using the theological way this bond between humanity and the rest of creation has been classically depicted, namely by the duality subjection/liberation of creation as it is depicted in Rm 8:19-23. In fact, this approach is very useful for showing how an eschatological reflection in tune with cosmological discoveries should not underestimate the role of human actions and the effects of sin, but fit them within the context of a theology of creation and of God's action within it.

The sixth and final chapter responds to the third bias — the abstraction of the eschatological imagination and narrative. Based on the questions that cosmological theories and narrative criticisms raise for eschatology, this chapter argues two main ideas. On the one hand, it holds that the parousia — in particular from the perspective of the dual continuity/discontinuity of Jesus's resurrection — appears as the theological lens for imagining the predicted end of the universe and its hoped-for fulfillment. On the other hand, the chapter argues for an all-embracing narrative in which Christ's return is the “imaginative moment” that, intimately associated with the current sacramental life, visually illustrates the future fulfillment of all things in God. These two ideas are framed, as was done in the previous chapter, from the perspective of a biblical text — Col 1:15-20. In fact, this hymn offers a pertinent context for exploring most of the cited challenges inasmuch it refers not only to the fulfillment of all things in Christological terms, but also narratively illustrates the entire cosmic story of salvation.

CHAPTER I

Two Major Shifts in Contemporary Eschatology: From *Eschata* to *Eschaton* and from Individual to Cosmic

“Eschatology is the storm center of the theology of our times.” This comment of Hans Urs von Balthasar concerning Ernst Troeltsch’s statement about the increasing relevance of eschatology within Christian theology has become common ground in most handbooks of Christian eschatology.⁵ Although these publications clearly recognize that eschatological reflection has existed since the beginning of Christian thought, they also wish to depict, through the use of this quote, the renewed impulse within theological debates of the relationship between everyday expectations and ultimate hope. In the space of just a few decades, eschatology ceased to be a peaceful theological locus among others, to become an important and disputed prism through which Christian theology as a whole could be interpreted.

This first chapter begins with a general overview of the renovation of eschatology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By tracing the manner in which Christian theology approached this subject during that period, the main goal of this first part is to describe, in general terms, the transformation of eschatology from the discussion of “the last things” — the *eschata* — to reflection concerning God as the origin and goal of the whole of creation — the *eschaton*. In order to depict this shift, this first part of the chapter will proceed in two steps: first, the new approach of exegetical studies with reference to Jesus Christ’s proclamation of the kingdom of God; and second, pre-Vatican II systematic reflection on eschatology.

⁵ Balthasar affirms that “Eschatology is the storm center of the theology of our times. [...] Troeltsch’s dictum: ‘The bureau of Eschatology is usually closed’ was true enough of the liberalism of the nineteenth century, but since the turn of the century the office has been working overtime.” Quoted from Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Some Points of Eschatology,” in *Explorations in Theology. I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 255.

After considering the basics in the nineteenth- and twentieth century's eschatological pre-conciliar reflection, the second section of this first chapter will illustrate, in overall terms, the different approaches that gradually shaped eschatological reflection in the last decades, namely the individual, collective, social, and cosmic aspects of the *eschaton*. This second shift will also be illustrated in two steps: first, the Second Vatican Council as a theological summit that synthesizes some of the previous reflections concerning eschatology; second, the way some theological movements have articulated eschatological thought in the post-conciliar period by including collective, social, and cosmic concerns. Without any effort to be exhaustive, the main goal of these two parts is to offer an overview of contemporary eschatologies and the way they articulate eschatological statements. Thus this first introductory chapter will give the basic framework for understanding the three biases that will be pointed out in the second chapter, namely the tendency in contemporary eschatology to depict God's fulfillment of all things mostly in temporal, human, and "abstract" terms.

1. The First Main Shift in Contemporary Eschatology: From *Eschata* to *Eschaton*

The term "eschatology" is relatively new. Patristic and Scholastic theology do not have a specific, agreed-upon term for gathering the events related to the hoped-for future. In Patristic theology, eschatological reflection is not a treatise in itself, but a notion intertwined with other theological concepts such as creation, Christology, anthropology, and ecclesiology.⁶ Although the attempt to construct a coherent theodicy against the first heresies is very clear in the earliest Christian theological reflection, the eschatological notions are spread out over homilies or

⁶ See Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

apologetic letters that link, for instance, hope with the unity of God as Creator and Savior,⁷ with the corporeality of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of ours,⁸ or with the process of human being for growing toward God and universal salvation.⁹ Augustine's eschatology can be found in his ecclesiological reflection, and in his distinction between the current temporal existence, and the final existence in eternity with God.¹⁰ The eschatological statements during the first centuries are then present within reflections and discussions on other theological themes.

In Scholastic theology, eschatological reflection began to be part of theological treatises, but the term is still ambivalent. Hugh of Saint Victor (+1141), for instance, addressed eschatology in the context of Christian sacraments under the label of "*De Fine Saeculi*."¹¹ Since the primary goal of sacraments is to save human beings from the consequences of original sin, Hugh of Saint Victor's reflection on eschatology appears just after the description of the anointing of the sick as both preparation for death and help for appearing before God.

Half a century later, Joachim of Fiore (+1202) highlighted the eschatological thought thanks to his millennarian vision of history.¹² According to his interpretation of Scriptures, in particular the book of Revelation, history is divided into three main epochs of which the third one corresponds to a millennial, peaceful reign on earth before Jesus Christ's return.¹³ In

⁷ See Irenaeus, "*Adversus Haereses*," in *The Writings of Irenaeus*, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884).

⁸ See Tertullian, *Tertullian Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh (De Carnis Resurrectione)*, trans. Alexander Souter (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

⁹ See Origen, "*De Principiis*," in *The Writings (De Principiis)*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978).

¹⁰ For Augustine's eschatological reflection within the framework of his ecclesiological stance, see Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. George Williams (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949). And for his eschatology understood through the lens of time and eternity, see Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pts. 10–11; 14–28.

¹¹ See Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, trans. Roy Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1951).

¹² See Joachim of Fiore, "Expositio in Apocalypsim," in *Abbot Joachim of Fiore and Joachimism: Selected Articles*, ed. Daniel Daniel and Daniel Randolph (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2011).

¹³ In his *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, Joachim of Fiore stated that these three epochs are the age of the Father, corresponding to the Old Testament; the age of the Son, between the advent of Jesus and 1260; and the age of the

opposition to Joachim's theology, Bonaventure (+1274) affirmed that there is no epoch after the New Testament because Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's revelation.¹⁴ Instead of an earthly reign of one thousand years preparing for God's coming, Bonaventure postulated the existence of seven grades of knowledge through which human beings can reach union with God. In fact, Bonaventure affirmed that God's main plan for human beings after the fall is their redemption, in which the contemplation of God in paradise is the highest goal for them after death.¹⁵ However, and despite this debate between these two theologians, eschatology continued as a reflection that depended on other theological treatises.

Over these same years, Thomas Aquinas' supplement to the *Summa Theologicae* (+1274) ended with a reflection concerning "the last things."¹⁶ These observations appear at the end of his dogmatics within the context, as for Saint Victor, of the treatises on the sacraments and the resurrection. It is important to notice, however, that the eschatological reflection does not have its own articulation yet. In fact, the correct understanding of Aquinas' eschatology entails theological notions that are not necessarily explained or presented in his reflections on "the last things" — for instance, concepts such as the hylomorphic theory and the beatific vision.¹⁷

Holy Spirit, one thousand years between 1260 and Jesus second coming. See of Fiore; "Liber Concordie Novi Ac Veteris Testamenti," in *Abbot Joachim of Fiore and Joachimism: Selected Articles*, ed. Daniel Randolph (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁴ For Bonaventure's reasoning behind this idea of no epoch after the New Testament, see Bonaventure, *Collations on the Six Days*, trans. José De Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony Guild Press, 1970), XVI, 2, 429.

¹⁵ See Bonaventure, *Journey in the Mind of God*, trans. José De Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony Guild Press, 1960).

¹⁶ For Aquinas' reflection on the last things, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2013), *STh* III. qq. 86-99.

¹⁷ Aquinas applied the hylomorphic theory whenever he wanted to show the metaphysical structure of different realities, including God (*STh* I, q. 3, a. 2), angels (*STh* I, q. 50, a. 2), human beings (*STh* I, q. 76, a. 1ff.), the human intellect (*STh* I, q. 88, a. 1), the human soul (*STh* I, q. 90, a. 2), the incarnate Word (*STh* III, q. 2, a. 1ff.), and the sacraments (*STh* III, q. 60, 6ff.). Referring to the beatific vision, Aquinas affirmed that human beings have a supernatural goal, toward which they are naturally oriented and toward God who moves them to acquire it: the beatific vision of the Triune God (*STh* I-II, qq. 5-1). For a full explanation of the notion of "beatific vision" and its development from medieval theology to the present, see Christian Trottmann, *La Vision Béatifique: Des Disputes Scolastiques à Sa Définition Par Benoît XII* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1995).

It can be said, then, that even if eschatological reflection had always been present in Patristic and Scholastic thought, the terminology and the content for referring to this reality was never fixed. And the same situation can be seen in professions of faith and some dogmatic statements. In the Apostles' Creed, for instance, eschatological notions appear linked to the treatise of creation: God creates everything that exists; to Christology: Jesus Christ's resurrection is the basis of human beings' hope in both eternal life and the life to come; and to soteriology: Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.¹⁸ What is important to note here is that, although the eschatological reflection continues spread out over different documents without yet forming an organic treatise, the concern for human beings' status after death and the consequences of God's judgment after death, especially during the period of scholastic reflection, progressively defined the subsequent theological association between eschatology and the reflection on "the last things."¹⁹

It was not until the seventeenth century that the term "eschatology" appeared within theological language. In a theological context in which the most common term for eschatological reflection was "*De novissimis*,"²⁰ some Lutheran theologians started using the word

¹⁸ See Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), DH 10. This *Compendium* will be referred to by "DH" and the number of the reference.

¹⁹ In dogmatic documents, the resurrection of all human beings in their own flesh was particularly defended in Toledo I (DH 189), Toledo XI (DH 533), Lateran IV (DH 801), *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1000), and Trent (DH 1822). Concerning human beings' salvation, the arguments were set out in two related ways. On the one hand, the councils affirmed that each person is judged by God in accordance with his life. Even if these documents recognize God's salvific will for all human beings, they also denied Origen's theory of *apokatastasis* – for instance, Lateran IV (DH 801). On the other hand, the councils also stated that each person receives eternal retribution in a particular judgment either in purgatory — Lyon II (DH 856); Florence (DH 1304), and Trent (DH 1820) — in the contemplation of God — Lyon II (DH 857), *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1000-1001), and Florence (DH 1305) — or in eternal damnation — Lyon II (DH 858) *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1002), and Florence (DH 1306). *Benedictus Deus* is particularly clear about this point, especially with regard to the immediate retribution of the person's soul. John XXII retracted the affirmation concerning the immediate damnation after death. In the event that this happen, the eternal punishment will occur only after the general judgment when Christ comes (DH 990-991). For a complete overview of the theory of *apokatastasis* in Christian theology, see Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013).

²⁰ The term *de novissimis* ('regarding the last things') refers to Sir 7:36 (τα εσχάτα) and its translation from Greek to Latin by the Vulgate (*novissima*).

“eschatology” for gathering under the same label the doctrine of “the last things.”²¹ The meaning of this term, the *eschata* (in the plural), was still ambivalent and could be understood in at least two different ways at that time. On the one hand, the *eschata* indicates what comes last in a temporal sense. On the other hand, the term refers to the doctrine of the ontologically ultimate things. However, and irrespective of how this new term is used, the doctrine of “the last things” is not yet a self-contained doctrinal unit, even if these elements were gathered under the same category in the last chapter at the end of most manuals of Christian doctrine.

The term “eschatology” became widespread in theological language only a century later, thanks to Friedrich Schleiermacher (+1834) and his explicit use of the term.²² However, Schleiermacher’s main contribution to eschatology is the new use and content that he gave to the term. In fact, he criticized the expression “last things” because of its relation with the perception of “time” and “things.” Rather than a matter of real and material events, eschatology entails, in Schleiermacher’s view, the process of completion of the inner life through God’s action upon both each individual and the community of believers viewed as a whole.²³ Through his reinterpretation of Christian hope about the future, Schleiermacher made a significant adjustment in the content and the approach of the subject, namely the passage from the plurality of the last things — *eschata* — to their radical unity — *eschaton*.

During this same period, however, another major shift took place in the understanding of eschatology. In addition to the change in the way that some theologians approach the subject — not as the depiction of a neutral, ultimate event at the end of time, but mainly as a personal

²¹ The term “eschatology” was introduced in dogmatic theology by Philipp Heinrich Friedlieb (+1663) in his *Dogmatics*, and by Abraham Calovius (+1686) in his *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*. See Jerry Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 248.

²² See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: T&T Clark, 1998), 703–7.

²³ See Schleiermacher, 703.

concern about one's final destiny — the actual object of eschatology changes. Instead of the “last things” or the “ultimate event,” Jesus Christ himself, the *eschaton*, became the object of eschatological reflection. Jesus Christ portrayed as “the ultimate person” is the reason why eschatology started moving from being a single subject area within dogmatics to being an interpretive principle of Christian theology as a whole, and therefore a subject of discussion and controversy.²⁴

Currently, there is a clear consensus among theologians that the term “eschatology” refers to God not only as the origin of the whole of creation but also as its future and goal. Eschatology ceased to be just a discourse about the end; it became a discourse about the present within the horizon of God's fulfilling presence within God's creation. Hence the crucial role of the term “hope” for eschatology, namely, God as both the expected goal and the goal that inspires hope.

Although this shift in perspective is gradual and cannot be accounted for with a single cause, it is possible to identify certain processes inside and outside Christian contemporary theology that explain the shift from *eschata* to *eschaton*, and how the idea of God as the future and the goal of creation became so deeply rooted in current eschatological thought. In order to illustrate this shift, two complementary processes which occurred during the twentieth century will serve as a referential framework: first, the renewal of biblical studies; second, the dialogue of dogmatic theology with the Enlightenment, particularly with its way of understanding history. Without any effort to be exhaustive, these two processes will be presented through the lens of

²⁴ This notion of Jesus Christ as the focal point of eschatological reflection is explicitly expressed, for instance, in the theology of the Protestant theologians Isaak Dorner (+1884), and Martin Kähler (+1912). See Isaak Dorner, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ (1870-1874)*, 5 vols. (New York: Cornell University Library, 2009); Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964).

some influential biblical scholars and both Catholic and Lutheran systematic theologians, respectively.

1.1. Eschatology and the New Exegetical Hermeneutics

Lutheran biblical scholars were the first to use the eschatological approach as a hermeneutical clue for the interpretation of the New Testament, specifically regarding Jesus' teaching and practice. In continuity with the assumption of Hermann Reimarus (+1768) concerning the influence of the first Christians in the way the Gospels narrate Jesus' preaching and deeds,²⁵ these biblical scholars started an inquiry into the cultural and religious background of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, as well as into the role of the circumstances of the first Christian community in the further development of theological statements. Among the biblical scholars and theologians who participate in this shift in exegetical hermeneutics, it is possible to highlight the work of Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Charles H. Dodd, and Oscar Cullmann.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the biblical scholar Johannes Weiss (+1914) showed the importance of the eschatological theme in Jesus' preaching. According to Weiss, Jesus' proclamation and practice were strongly influenced by an apocalyptic expectation of the imminent outbreak of God's kingdom, his increasing awareness of its delay, and the subsequent elaboration of this crisis by the first Christian community through the lens of the delay of the

²⁵ According to Albert Schweitzer, Reimarus stated "we have reason to draw an absolute distinction between the teaching of the apostles in their writings and what Jesus himself proclaimed and taught in his own lifetime." Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: SCM, 2000), 17.

parousia.²⁶ Weiss maintains that Christian eschatology appeared as an explanation, on the part of the Christian community, of the delay of the end times.

Some years after Weiss's publication, the biblical scholar Albert Schweitzer (+1965) also insisted that Jesus' own convictions are colored by late Jewish apocalyptic. Jesus' message and deeds, therefore, are shaped by the imminent in-breaking of the kingdom of God at the end of the world, and by the discordance between the immanent values of the latter and the values of the former.²⁷ As Weiss affirmed, Schweitzer also maintained that, because of the delay of Jesus Christ's return, the proclamation of the emerging church reoriented eschatological hopes by replacing the apocalyptic tension between *the present and the future of God's kingdom* for the tension between *time and eternity*. Thus the first Christians replaced the original discourse about "the coming of Christ and his kingdom" by the discourse about "being in Christ," producing the "de-eschatologization" of the original expectations and their consequent institutionalization – the emergence of an ecclesiastical, sacramental, organized religion.²⁸

Early in the twentieth century, Karl Barth (+1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (+1976) framed their exegetical works in terms of the presence of eternity in time. As a result, their eschatological stances focused on the objective and subjective reality of God's kingdom – God and human beings, respectively.

Consistent with Weiss and Schweitzer, Barth reaffirmed the apocalyptic understanding of Jesus' eschatological preaching and, therefore, the opposition between present reality and the one

²⁶ See Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971).

²⁷ See Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

²⁸ According to Schweitzer, "the whole history of 'Christianity' down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the delay of parousia, i.e. the failure of parousia to materialize, the abandonment of eschatology, and the progress and completion of the 'de-eschatologising' of religion which has been connected with it." Schweitzer, 328.

that comes.²⁹ Barth added, however, that the critical relationship between these two “eons” in Jesus’ preaching was due to Jesus himself insofar as he is the presence of God’s eternity confronting time.³⁰ Although Barth’s eschatology entails the risk of emphasizing God’s sovereignty at the cost of the human capacity for comprehension and apprehension of God’s revelation, his theological stance set God’s self and the dialectical relationship between eternity and time at the heart of the eschatological debate.

As with Barth, Bultmann also interpreted Jesus’ preaching in apocalyptic terms and used the dialectical confrontation of time with the eternal as his angle of approach to eschatology. But while Barth maintained that Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God was focused on the imminent coming of something completely transcendent for human beings, Bultmann stated that Jesus’ proclamation was based on the encounter of God with humanity in its free decision for or against the kingdom offered in Jesus.³¹ Consistent with his existential way of reading and interpreting the Scriptures, Bultmann claimed that Jesus’ teaching shows the critical ever-present possibility of an end to inauthentic human existence, and a beginning of the authentic life of faith here and now. For Bultmann, then, the eschatological dialectic of time and eternity lies in the continual decision for or against an offer that transcends time.³²

The debate on eschatology in biblical studies received new impetus thanks to the biblical scholar Charles H. Dodd (+1973). In his book *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Dodd challenged

²⁹ See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933). The original text was published in 1918. However, the most important version of Barth’s work is his revised second edition of 1922.

³⁰ In his commentary on the First Letter to the Corinthians, Barth added a nuance to his interpretation of the letter to the Romans and the relationship between eternity and time. In fact, he affirmed that the configuration of time and eternity does not entail the transcendental meaning of the present moment in its confrontation with God’s eternity, but the confrontation of any moment of history – past, present, or future – with the absolute future revealed and made present in Jesus Christ. See Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

³¹ See, for instance, Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 51; Rudolf Bultmann, “History and Eschatology in the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 1, no. 1 (1954): 5–16.

³² See Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957), 155.

the fundamental assumption of the former exegetical interpretations, namely, the Jewish apocalyptic roots of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom.³³ Instead of the apocalyptic expectation of an upcoming event, Jesus' preaching is based on the current presence of the kingdom of God among the people of Israel. In Jesus, the expectation of God's kingdom turns into the experience of it. Although God's kingdom still awaits its universal manifestation, it is already fully available for all who want to hear the good news.³⁴

Years later, the Lutheran biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann (+1999) took up the discussion on eschatology and biblical exegesis with the same line of argument adopted by Dodd.³⁵ Cullmann, however, questioned the way his predecessors depicted the kingdom of God in temporal terms — as a future or present event — to set the discussion of God's kingdom in terms of salvation brought by God. Because Jesus Christ is the fullness of salvation within time, he revealed that the definitive meaning of historical time became the "history of salvation." Thus, Cullmann emphasized the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's kingdom in terms of "salvation already fully offered in Christ" and "salvation not yet fully disclosed."³⁶

After this overview of the mentioned biblical theologians, it is important to highlight that, despite their different approaches to the New Testament, they shared an eschatological concern for it, in particular with regard to Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God. Alongside the reinterpretation of theology through the lens of eschatology, these biblical scholars framed, in a certain way, the subsequent eschatological discussion on the following principles. First, Jesus Christ is God's promised kingdom, and, therefore, the presence of the definitive action of God

³³ See Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

³⁴ Dodd, 165.

³⁵ See Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1950).

³⁶ See Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958), 43.

upon creation. Thus Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of a correct understanding of God's promised presence within creation. Second, the revelation of Jesus Christ as the *eschaton*, i.e., as goal of the whole of creation, is not an abstract notion that disregards the position of human beings for or against him. Salvation can be experienced by human beings through their free acceptance of Jesus Christ's kingdom within the present time. Third, Jesus Christ understood as the end of history redefines the way of understanding temporality and God's current relationship with creation. In fact, this notion initiates the subsequent dogmatic debate on the "already" and the "not yet" of God's kingdom, the relationship between both the present and the future, or time and eternity, and the kind of relationship between the present eon and the one to come.

1.2. Eschatology before Vatican II.

Contemporary eschatological thought changes not only because of the new exegetical hermeneutics, but also because the Enlightenment challenged the epistemological suppositions on which Christian theology had been based, in particular those in which eschatology was rooted. From different perspectives, the nineteenth century's critique against metaphysical epistemology forced both Catholic and Lutheran systematic theologians to rethink the relationship between eschatology and history, the critical and transformative implications of eschatology, and human participation in God's fulfillment of creation. In order to explain the shift in the eschatological reflection, this overview will be done from the perspective of the following theologians: Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Moltmann.³⁷ Although this outline does

³⁷ The publications of the following Catholic and Lutheran systematic theologians are mostly confined to their works before the end of the Second Vatican Council (1965), and therefore to the direct and indirect impact of these reflections on the conciliar documents.

not necessarily follow a chronological order of these authors and their publications, it aims to clarify how eschatology changed its role within theological reflection in the decades before the council.

The systematic theologian Karl Rahner (+1984), considered a symbol of the Catholic Church's creative engagement with modernity, reinterpreted eschatology on the basis of a twofold claim: eschatology is linked to the treatise of creation, Christology and anthropology; and Christian future is "eschatology" rather than "apocalyptic."³⁸

Rahner affirmed that Jesus Christ is creation's reason, purpose, and meaning. Because everything came about by, in, and through the eternal Word, the Word made flesh allows human beings to become aware of the experience that underlay their own existence, namely that God created in order to communicate God's self. Thus Christ reveals to human beings their origin and goal, namely human beings are fundamentally oriented to God, and, therefore, they exist in order to receive the one who has made this orientation and reception possible — God's self.³⁹ Human beings, the self-consciousness of creation in its self-transcending process, discover their fundamental *raison d'être* and purpose in Christ. He is the future experienced in the present of human beings and of all creatures.⁴⁰

This is why Rahner stated that all eschatological statements must be grounded in Jesus Christ, and in the present experience of grace.⁴¹ Given that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of

³⁸ Another important claim in Rahner's understanding of eschatology is the immanent consummation of the world by God. For Rahner, the consummation of the world comes from within the world and its history as something which is linked to human beings' freedom but can be brought about only by God. This idea of immanent and transcendent consummation of creation, and its relationship with the material and spiritual unity of human beings will be addressed further on in this chapter.

³⁹ See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 179.

⁴⁰ See Rahner, 222–23.

⁴¹ See Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 334–35; Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 433.

God's purpose for the whole of creation, eschatology is the present situation of salvation viewed in terms of its fulfillment. Because of Christ, in Rahner's view, the future is eschatology — an aetiological projection into the future of what human beings experience now in grace — rather than apocalyptic — the projection of the future into the present.⁴² This Christological depiction of God's fulfillment led Rahner to affirm the anthropological perspective of his eschatological enterprise. For Rahner, therefore, Christology is anthropology in the mode of future fulfillment, and eschatology is anthropology conjugated in the future tense.⁴³

It is important to point out that Rahner widened, after the Second Vatican Council, his eschatological statements by the introduction of a different perspective. In his works prior to the council, Rahner centered his eschatological reflection mainly on the existential interpretation of human freedom as the capacity for final and definite self-determination of the human being in his encounter with God.⁴⁴ After the council, however, he came to understand this encounter within a more communal, social, and political framework. Thus Rahner's work on eschatology increasingly dealt, especially under the influence of the council itself and the works of Ernest Bloch and Johann Baptist Metz, with notions such as ideology, liberation, and hope.⁴⁵

The Lutheran systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (+2014) stated that history itself, not Scripture, is the fundamental theological locus of God's revelation.⁴⁶ According to

⁴² See Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," 337.

⁴³ Rahner, 335; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 431.

⁴⁴ See Karl Rahner, "Dignity and Freedom of Man," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. II (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1963), 235–63; "Theology of Freedom," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 178–96.

⁴⁵ Although Rahner wrote articles concerning the relationship between the individual and the social question before 1965, his concern on this issue clearly increases after the Second Vatican Council. See, for instance, Karl Rahner, "Ideology and Christianity," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 43–58; "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 231–49; "Christian Humanism," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 187–204; "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of 'New Earth,'" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 260–72.

⁴⁶ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

him, God's action within history is the ground in which God reveals himself. Revelation is not something additional to salvific events but is rather inherent to them.⁴⁷ Thus the Word of God is essential for understanding God's revelation, because it shows the way God acts within history. History itself is where God reveals God's self to human beings.

Influenced by the biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad's interpretation of the Old Testament, Pannenberg's earlier writings maintained that history carries on God's revelation that will be seen by all at the end of time.⁴⁸ God's full revelation, in Pannenberg's view, cannot be an event relegated to interiority or to its subjective acceptance. Rather, God's revelation is a public and social issue. As God's universal and public revelation has taken place in Israel's history through God's acts, God's total disclosure must be a universal and public event, plain for all to see. And for Pannenberg, this same criterion applies to Jesus Christ. In fact, he is God's public manifestation of God's lordship within history, revelation that will reach its full public recognition when Jesus returns. In the meantime, this truth is already accessible to all those who trust that Jesus' proclamation underscores the present impact of the imminent future.⁴⁹

During the second half of the twentieth century, Pannenberg focused his theological interest on ecclesiology — with the Church as the foretaste of the future unity of humanity and of all things — and in the trinitarian character of theology — with the Trinity as the basic principle of unity-in-difference in creation. Although eschatology and Jesus as the anticipatory realization of the final reign of God over all remained Pannenberg's theological hermeneutical

⁴⁷ See Pannenberg, 136.

⁴⁸ According to von Rad, God is revealed through his acts in history. The Exodus, the possession of the Promised Land, and the return from exile in Babylon are moments in which God acts for the benefit of Israel but in order to be publicly recognized by all the nations as the Lord. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1962).

⁴⁹ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 53. For the universal character of this message, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 639.

key, his trinitarian approach highlighted the proleptic role of the Holy Spirit as the present reality of God's fulfillment. According to him, the Spirit is the power of the future new life working creatively in all events, giving all creatures their present and duration.⁵⁰

The systematic Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (+1988) was highly critical of Enlightenment thinking, especially the assumptions that relegate all reality to subjectivity. Unlike then the theologians who emphasis an anthropological approach, Balthasar adopts a theocentric-trinitarian perspective as his theological cornerstone, and therefore as his way of understanding eschatology.⁵¹

According to Balthasar, only God can interpret God. The subjective assimilation of God's revelation does not depend upon human beings, but upon Jesus Christ as the objective self-interpretation of the divine glory.⁵² Christ as God's self-interpretation is the Son who reveals the Father, in the Holy Spirit, as divine Love for all things from their creation to their fulfillment in God. Therefore, Balthasar's theocentric perspective is concerned with the life of the Trinity disclosed in Jesus Christ and with the love of the triune God as the origin and destiny of the whole of creation.⁵³

Grounded on the inner-trinitarian relationships and the divine processions, Balthasar's theology affirmed that eschatological statements about God's fulfillment refer to how creatures participate in the "offering" and "receiving" of the life and love of the divine persons. From

⁵⁰ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 98, 102. Pannenberg's theology of creation and Trinity is mostly featured in the second volume of his book "Systematic Theology." See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*. Eschatology depicted in terms of pneumatology is included in the third volume of his work. See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*. For an overview of Pannenberg's eschatological thought, see Christiaan Mostert, *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Eschatological Doctrine of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2002).

⁵¹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Only Love Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

⁵² Balthasar, 56.

⁵³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 56–57.

Balthasar's interpretation of Christ's high priestly prayer (Jn 17), he stated that the divine exchange of life and love by which the divine persons relate to each other —*perichoresis*— is not a closed relationship reserved only for them. Rather, the *perichoresis* means an open invitation for all created beings to share the divine exchange of the inner-trinitarian life of the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴ In this context, Balthasar pointed out that the Eucharist is the sacrament that best expresses the exchanges among the divine persons and the participation of human beings in this exchange.⁵⁵

From a radically different perspective, the Catholic paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (+1955) framed his theological and eschatological stance within a cosmic perspective. Teilhard maintained that the cosmos is an evolutionary process that goes from the primordial particles that configure the material realm to Christ who draws the entire cosmos toward himself, the Omega Point.⁵⁶

In clear opposition to any dualistic distinction between matter and spirit or between the natural and supernatural, Teilhard maintained that evolution cannot be seen simply as a materialistic process, but as the dynamism of the whole of reality in its process of unification toward its only single center at once natural and supernatural — Christ.⁵⁷ In this teleological evolving process of progressive Christification of reality, human beings are the self-consciousness of this collective, material process on the part of creation itself.

According to Teilhard, Jesus Christ's exaltation as the Lord after his ascension into heaven reveals that he is the unifying center of the cosmos and the unifying goal to which the

⁵⁴ Balthasar, 425.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, 477.

⁵⁶ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper, 1960).

⁵⁷ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Forma Christi," in *Writings in Time of War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 256.

evolving process is directed.⁵⁸ This cosmic interpretation of Christology led Teilhard to affirm that the Pauline notion of “body of Christ” refers not only to the mystical and ecclesial participation of creatures in God’s fulfillment, but also to the physical, cosmic unity of everything in Christ. Because Jesus Christ reveals the process of christogenesis of the entire cosmos in its aspect already accomplished, the “body of Christ” is the image of the entire cosmos fulfilled by God.⁵⁹

Although for different reasons, Teilhard highlighted, like Balthasar, the eschatological role of the Eucharist. In Teilhard’s view, the Eucharist is the archetype of the cosmic fulfillment inasmuch as the matter of the wine and bread is transformed in accordance with its innermost goal: the flesh and blood of Christ. Thus participation in the Eucharistic celebration anticipates the transformation of the universe in Christ.⁶⁰

The Catholic systematic theologian Johann Baptist Metz initially took, as with Rahner, a positive stance with regard to modernity.⁶¹ In his earliest writings, Metz agreed that modernity and its consequent process of secularization are not opposed to the Christian understanding of the world. Conversely, secularization understood as human autonomy and freedom is a process which is grounded, in theological terms, in the distinction between the Creator and creation.⁶²

⁵⁸ According to Teilhard, Christ is the evolutive center of creation. He is the biological and cosmological origin of creation, and the dynamic impulse within creation which is moving reality toward greater levels of complexity and unity through love. This notion of a Cosmic Christ, however, cannot be understood in abstract terms. In fact, Teilhard affirmed that Jesus of Nazareth is the Omega of creation. See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 95; *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harper, 1960), 181.

⁵⁹ See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 103–4.

⁶⁰ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Mass on the World,” in *The Heart of Matter* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1971), 119–34.

⁶¹ Together with Metz, the Christian systematic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx also works in the link between the eschatological expectation for the future and the present reality. They share, in some sense, the same theological project. Because of the similarities of these two theologians during the years before the Second Vatican Council, this section presents only Metz’s work. For Schillebeeckx’s first writings on secularization and Christian faith see, for instance, Edward Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” in *God, the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 57–62; “Dialogue with God and Christian Secularity,” in *God and Man* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 210–23.

⁶² Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 26.

The process of increasing autonomy of the world leads history into its eschatological reality, namely, to what is already accomplished in Christ.⁶³

By the end of the 1960's, however, Metz modified his diagnosis. Together with his concern about the social reality of eschatology rather than only the personal one, Metz contended that the relationship between eschatology and modernity is a relation of conflict. Due to his encounter with the critical theory of the School of Frankfurt, in particular with Ernst Bloch's philosophy of hope,⁶⁴ Metz affirmed that eschatology is not restricted by the possibilities of temporality reduced to the present. Although human beings live within the transcendent horizon of God, this horizon is not the pre-thematic, present, transcendental structure of the subject; rather, the transcendent horizon of human beings is none other than God himself as future.⁶⁵ Eschatology then must be viewed more as God's critical distance that challenges human beings both the personal and the collective levels than as the intimate closeness of God's presence with the individual. Eschatology, then, is essentially apocalyptic and broadly collective.

Rooted in the biblical notion of God as promise, Metz's thought already established in the early 1960's the basis of his future work based on the social and political reality of eschatology, the practical and critical aspect of hope, and the notions of "eschatological proviso"⁶⁶ and "dangerous memory"⁶⁷ based on his interpretation of eschatology as apocalyptic.

In line with Metz, the Reformed systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann maintained the apocalyptic and thus critical relationship between eschatology and the present reality. Based on

⁶³ Metz, 26.

⁶⁴ According to Bloch, the genuinely new cannot be tied to what is made possible by the past or the present. In order for the future to be really "new," it cannot be available at all. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

⁶⁵ See Johann Baptist Metz, "Responsibility of Hope," *Philosophy Today* 10 (1976): 280–88; "The Church and the World," in *The Word in History*, ed. Patrick Burke (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 69–85.

⁶⁶ See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 114, 153.

⁶⁷ See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 108.

the biblical notion of “promise,” Moltmann affirmed that God's presence in creation is as future promise, and, therefore, God reveals himself within the present as creation's future.⁶⁸ The very notions of time and history exist because God's presence opens creation to himself as its future.

According to Moltmann, this notion of God as promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. All Christian eschatology is grounded in Jesus Christ's identity, the latter understood in terms of hope and promise for creation. This is why Jesus' resurrection and his exaltation as Lord is not yet the consummation of God's future promises, but the ground and guarantee of his lordship over all.⁶⁹ Jesus Christ is the presence of God as future promise that will reach its fulfillment on the final day.

Moltmann's apocalyptic view of eschatology is underlined through his interpretation of the Easter event. For him, the latter not only shows God's future promise, but also illustrates the contradictory character of God's promise. Christ's identity — and, therefore, God's identity — is revealed through the total contradiction of the cross and the resurrection, in which God's identity appears through the radical discontinuity of these two continuous moments.⁷⁰ Thus faith in Christ does not produce rest and patience; rather, faith produces the opposite: conflict with the present and protest against suffering, until God fulfills his promises.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Moltmann emphasized that eschatology entails the mutual interaction between the history of both humanity and all creation. Thus, universal eschatology is not the interpretation of the cosmos and its history in categories of human history; rather, universal eschatology must take into account the all-embracing interaction

⁶⁸ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

⁶⁹ See Moltmann, 206.

⁷⁰ See Moltmann, 199.

of human beings with and within the cosmos. New creation entails the uniting of God and the whole of creation through the mutual indwelling of the Creator and creation.⁷¹

After this overview of eschatology in the theological reflection during the past century through the lens of these six theologians, it is possible to affirm that, while some systematic theologians took a more defensive stance against the new exegetical hermeneutics and the Enlightenment by retreating into neo-scholastic theology during the pre-conciliar period, the six cited theologians took up the exegetical eschatological perspective and assumed a dialogue between eschatology and history, as well as the critical and transformative implications of God's future for the present. Although these theologians have different approaches to these topics, it is possible to bring forward four main points that they mostly share.

First, Jesus Christ is the *eschaton*. Just as exegetical hermeneutics already stated this notion, these systematic theologians also assume the eschatological shift from *eschata* to *eschaton*. Jesus Christ is the manifestation and realization of God self-communication and its definitive acceptance. All other eschatological events must be understood through Christ, albeit under a growing trinitarian perspective. The second point is related to the previous one, namely eschatology is not just about the end things. Rather, these theologians affirm that eschatology is basically the doctrine about the ultimate importance of the present and about God as the origin and goal of history. Third, eschatology progressively evolved from a concern about what happens after death to human beings' present reality. In other words, eschatology became more concerned about people and their union with God now than about the state of affairs after death. Both God's and humanity's actions within the present are not foreign to the future configuration of creation. Finally, the concern about individual destiny after death is complemented by an

⁷¹ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 278, 295, 307–8.

eschatology which progressively becomes collective in its approach to God's future. Personal happiness and fulfillment in God must be understood in relation to a twofold reality: on the one hand, nobody will be saved alone; eschatological fulfillment refers to creation as a whole. On the other hand, nobody can save him or herself; salvation means participation in God – illustrated as either Christ's mystical body or the Trinitarian relationships. This notion is underlined through the ecclesial communion in which human beings can already participate in God's fulfillment through the sacraments — especially Eucharist.

As will be pointed out, these ideas had both a direct and an indirect influence on the ways in which the Second Vatican Council approached eschatology.

2. The Second Main Shift in Contemporary Eschatology: From Individual to Cosmic.

Assuming the differences among the foregoing eschatological approaches, there is a clear element that stands out over the others, namely God as the theme of eschatological reflection. Alongside this shift of perspective from the “last things” to God as the future of creation, it is important to note that the scope of this reflection has also been changing during these last decades. Thus, the field of eschatological discussion shifted from concerns almost exclusively focused on the individual's final destination to social and collective issues, as well as to the future of the whole of creation.

Even if this shift in eschatological scope has been gradual and has taken different expressions over the last decades, it is possible to recognize two different moments that capture this progressive change of perspective from individual to cosmic: first, the theological synthesis of the Second Vatican Council; second, post-conciliar, diverse theological reflection.

2.1. Eschatology and Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) reshaped twentieth century Catholic life and theological reflection in the period that followed it inasmuch as this ecumenical council is the Catholic Church's reinterpretation of her identity and mission in dialogue with the modern world.

Concerning eschatology, the documents of Vatican II indicate a transformed and more profound appreciation of eschatology in official Catholic teaching. As mentioned before, eschatological notions have always been present in official Catholic teaching. However, the council gave eschatology an important place in line with the new exegetical hermeneutics and systematic theological thought — in particular as regards the reappraisal of Scripture and the written tradition of the Church.⁷²

Consistent with the precedent eschatological discussion, the conciliar documents clearly affirmed that God is the Creator of everything, and participation in God's communion is the goal of all people.⁷³ This statement is made through a trinitarian perspective in which Jesus Christ is its full revelation. Jesus Christ, the *eschaton*, reveals that the triune God is the goal of human history.⁷⁴ All human desires find their responses in Jesus Christ, because he is the one in whom all people and all things are invited to be saved and summed up.⁷⁵ Thus, the conciliar documents clearly state that the divine purpose for the whole of creation, God's kingdom, is already present

⁷² The eschatological concern of the council can be already traced in John XXIII's 1962 inaugural speech. Referring to Augustine, the Pope affirmed that the efforts of the council go toward the "unity of mankind which is required as a necessary foundation, in order that the earthly city may be brought to the resemblance of that heavenly city." It is important to note that most of the conciliar eschatological statements can be found in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), and in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). While the former highlights eschatology as a core element of the Church as mystery, the latter points to the relationship between present history and the eschatological kingdom of God. Other conciliar documents also refer to eschatology, albeit in a minor way: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), *Dei Verbum* (DV), and *Ad Gentes* (AG).

⁷³ GS 18, 24.

⁷⁴ LG 45.

⁷⁵ GS 10.

in mystery through the second person of the Trinity, and will be brought into full visibility when he comes again.⁷⁶

This trinitarian perspective led the council to describe history in terms of salvation. History has a teleological dimension that points to God as its innermost goal, in which the term “pilgrimage” describes the present historical situation of both the individuals and the Church as the people of God. According to the conciliar documents, each believer’s life is a pilgrimage of renewal and conversion from this present to God’s promised future,⁷⁷ inasmuch as they are also part of the pilgrim Church on the way toward its union with the Church in heaven.⁷⁸ Thus, the council clearly framed individual salvation within the context of God’s will that all be saved.⁷⁹

Although the council states that history is the means whereby God calls human beings as individuals and the Church as people of God, it also makes a clear distinction between the progress of history and the growth of the kingdom.⁸⁰ Salvation is brought by Jesus Christ and not by history itself. This last idea leads to an eschatological topic that the council explicitly wanted to address, namely the value of human actions within God’s plan. Among all the sections, GS 39

⁷⁶ Cf. LG 39. In *Lumen Gentium*, the action of the three divine persons is depicted as a process both protological and eschatological: the Father, from eternity, offers humanity the possibility of participating in divine life (LG 2); the Father sent the Son, the one who both initiated the kingdom through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, and inaugurated the restoration of the whole of creation (LG 3); having been lifted up from the earth by the Father, Jesus Christ already inaugurated the kingdom of God that is carried forward to its full realization through the action of the Holy Spirit (LG 48); the Holy Spirit, present during this whole ongoing process, leads the people gathered in God toward the consummation of creation, which is participation in divine life (LG 4).

⁷⁷ LG 7; GS 45, 57.

⁷⁸ LG 48.

⁷⁹ Vatican II maintains that salvation is not an individual affair and is not possible without participating in the Body of Christ. The people of God journey toward their goal (LG 8) and, as a whole, will reach its consummation on the final day (LG 48). Although the Holy Spirit of Pentecost continually sanctifies the Church, the latter is called to a permanent renewal and conversion during its pilgrimage (LG 8, 15; GS 21, 42, 76, 88). By being a sign and instrument both of the union with God and of the unity of the whole human race (LG 1), the Church reveals its nature. As a result, the main goal of all missionary efforts derives from God’s will for the salvation of all (AG 3, 7, 13, 38). Finally, this collective aspect of eschatology is even more prominent through the ongoing relationship between the pilgrim Church and the Church in heaven. In fact, this community bond gathers human beings not only with those who are still on pilgrimage, but also with the saints and their departed loved ones through the liturgy (LG 51; SC 8).

⁸⁰ GS 39.

is the one specifically dedicated to this notion. In God's fulfillment of the whole of creation, "charity and its fruits will endure."⁸¹ The hope and expectation of the future consummation would not turn away human beings from their efforts to build a better world.⁸² Quite the reverse: God's future must stimulate human concerns for building a better future for all. Human progress is important for the kingdom of God inasmuch as this progress can contribute to a better organization of society.⁸³ Moreover, the council states that believers who neglect their worldly responsibilities or their duties toward their neighbor, affect their relationship with God, and put at risk their eternal salvation.⁸⁴ Love of God and neighbor is one single commandment. **Thus, because believers trust on God who fulfills all things, they are called, by their own faith, to act in the benefit of God's kingdom.**

In one way or another, the conciliar documents assumed most of the main shifts concerning eschatology in exegetical hermeneutics and systematic theology since the beginning of the twentieth century. The renewed appreciation of eschatology on the part of the council sets God, rather than the afterlife or the last things, as the main object of eschatology. This reality willed by the Father since the beginning is both fully accomplished in Jesus Christ - the one who reveals that the triune God is the goal of all human beings — and led by the Holy Spirit — the one who not only inspires the desire of God's future within believers' hearts, but also animates, purifies, and strengthens the present efforts of humanity to make life more human. This trinitarian perspective frames history as the context in which human beings collaborate with God insofar as the fruits of their actions are the material of God's fulfillment of the whole of creation in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

⁸¹ Idem.

⁸² GS 20.

⁸³ GS 39.

⁸⁴ LG 43.

2.2. Eschatology after Vatican II.

Alongside these notions assumed by the council documents, Vatican II was also the catalyst for a further development of eschatological reflection. In fact, conciliar statements such as human beings' role within God's fulfillment of creation have played a significant role in subsequent theological thought in which human responsibility, social engagement, environmental issues, and scientific matters became the principal arena of theological debate concerning eschatology.

This section will examine the way eschatological thought has taken shape since the council, and how the discussion has progressively shifted from individual to social and cosmic concerns. Unlike the first part of this chapter consecrated to pre-conciliar eschatological reflection, this section will not focus on specific authors but on the theological stances which emerged during the second part of the twentieth century. These stances can be grouped into the following categories, namely liberation theology, ecotheology, ecofeminism, the dialogue between faith and science, and the most recent Church teaching. It is important to note that most of the already mentioned systematic theologians continued writing about eschatology — in particular about the collective and social aspects of the hoped-for future. Their stances, however, will not be addressed here, but later in this same chapter.⁸⁵

Three years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Latin American conference of bishops gathered in Medellin (1968) and later at Puebla (1979) received and interpreted the main conclusions of the council through the perspective of the “preferential option for the

⁸⁵ For a presentation of the shift from individual to social and cosmic concerns in eschatology, see John Haught, “Destiny: From Individual to Cosmic,” in *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 115–26.

poor.”⁸⁶ The context of violence and poverty led the bishops to understand God’s salvation fundamentally as liberation, and therefore the experience of faith as the praxis of liberating people from any kind of oppression. Even if the Medellin conference did not expressly use the term “liberation theology,” most liberation theologians recognize this conference as an inspiring origin of their theologian reflection.⁸⁷

The eschatological perspective significantly colors most of the liberation theologians’ stances.⁸⁸ They based their eschatological statements mostly on Jesus Christ as the full accomplishment of God’s promise of salvation. He is God’s definitive salvific, liberating presence within history. Thus Jesus Christ is the historical beginning of God’s fulfillment inasmuch as he is the eschatological consummation of God’s promises that will take place within history at the end of it.⁸⁹ Liberated in Christ, human beings can already live the freedom of the children of God.

Yet, the idea of salvation as liberation frames “the beginning of the end” in a particular way. Liberation theologians state that, because the kingdom of God is already present and God’s salvation is already an historical fact in Jesus Christ, believers are called to live both this “already” from within and to act on behalf of those who are the first addressees of God’s kingdom, namely the poor. God’s salvation as liberation implies criticizing and

⁸⁶ Even if the expression “preferential option for the poor” belongs to the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) held in Puebla, the latter affirms that this idea is clearly present in Medellin (n. 1134). Concerning eschatology, Puebla assumes the teaching of GS 39: the call of Jesus involves not only human beings, but also the world and the whole of creation; the kingdom of God is built through human beings ‘works, but it does not either limited to or identified with them. Cf. Medellin, *Conclusiones*, n.193.

⁸⁷ Among the first generation of liberation theologians, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973); Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976); José Comblin, *Théologie de La Révolution* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1970); Enrique Düssel, *History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).

⁸⁸ See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 93, 95.

⁸⁹ See Gutiérrez, 97.

transforming systems and structures that contradict the kingdom of God and working for a more human world. The eschatological future has an impact upon the present, opens history to the “already” of salvation, and inspires human beings to collaborate in God's salvific action through the praxis of liberation.⁹⁰

Another idea emphasized by some liberation theologians is that the poor are the place for historical verification of God's anticipated future. The eschatological role of the poor is twofold. On the one hand, the liberating praxis toward the victim takes God's side in his preferential option for them.⁹¹ On the other hand, however, the victims themselves announce the “already” of the “not yet” of salvation through their own actions and faith in the midst of their suffering. By making victims the center of both theological reflection and ecclesiological praxis, God is not only better served by human beings, but also better understood by them.⁹²

Although liberation theologians have their own nuances and criticisms concerning their theological endeavor, it is possible to state that they agree upon three ideas concerning

⁹⁰ Although liberation theologians underline history and its eschatological meaning – God's action transforms present time in history of salvation – they also move the reflection concerning eschatology from history itself to the poor and the praxis on behalf of them. Or more precisely: God's liberating action on behalf of those on the margins transforms history into history of salvation. This is why eschatological thought is not simply a reflection on history. Rather, it is the praxis that folds the poor back into history, transforming it in accordance with God's plan. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 212; Juan Luis Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 90; Jon Sobrino, “The Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 350–88.

⁹¹ In Jon Sobrino's view, for instance, God not only shows a preferential option for victims through Jesus' words and actions, but God also identifies God-self on Jesus' cross with the victims. Taking down the crucified people from the cross, believers act as God does. See Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Sobrino borrows the concept of ‘crucified people’ from Ignacio Ellacuría's thought. For him, the crucified people are the poor people who owe its situation to the way society is organized. See Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 580–604.

⁹² For the eschatological role of the Church on behalf of the poor, see Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 543–64; Jon Sobrino, *Resurrección de La Verdadera Iglesia: Los Pobres, Lugar Teológico de La Ecclesiología* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1981), 163. And for the role of the praxis of the poor in order to understand God's fulfillment, see Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 289–328.

eschatology: first, the centrality of the poor and victims for theological thought and the importance of historical praxis for grasping God's revelation. Second, God's future is already present in Christ, and human beings' praxis on behalf of the poor is a way of giving present reality to what has been historically inaugurated, namely the kingdom of God. Finally, even though God's kingdom is available for human beings only as God's gift, the efforts to build a better, more just society show the already active liberating reality of the kingdom of God.⁹³

Besides liberation theology, there is another theological post-conciliar trend that reflects on the relationship between the future of creation and human responsibility, namely ecotheology. Although ecotheologians are not a clearly defined group and they do not have a particular theological method as liberation theologians have, new scientific discoveries regarding nature, and the growing awareness of the ecological crisis give rise to a theological perspective that gathers theologians in their concern for a renewed theology of creation, and the relationship between human beings and their environment.⁹⁴

Despite the different approaches among ecotheologians, it is possible to affirm that they rethink some main theological notions in two complementary ways. On the one hand, they move away from a static God who is only "guarantor" of the natural fixed process to one of "becoming" who is fully engaged in the natural ongoing process. Recognizing divine immanence in the entire cosmos, these theologians have a sacramental understanding of reality, and, therefore, they comprehend creation as a fundamental place of God's revelation. On the other

⁹³ Another important element for understanding liberation theology's eschatology is its interpretation of the conciliar notion "signs of the times" (GS 4, 11). The signs of the times are messianic signs of the presence of God within the present that anticipate the eschatological consummation because they point in the same direction of God's kingdom. See, for instance, Juan Luis Segundo, "Revelation, Faith, Signs of the Times," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 328–49.

⁹⁴ For a map of ecotheologies see Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ernst Conradie et al., eds., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2014).

hand, ecotheologians agree with assumptions focused on the uniqueness of human beings, but state that this theological notion must be based on the interconnectivity and interdependency of all creation. In theological terms, this relational rather than hierarchical understanding of creation relies on God's self, which is the origin and foundation of the coexistence of unity and diversity in creation.⁹⁵

Although eschatological thought is not one of the prevalent topics in ecotheologies, it is important to note that the reflection concerning ecology has eschatological consequences. First, ecotheologies change in some way the question about God's fulfillment from a temporal scope — the discussion on time, future, and eternity — to a spatial, material one — the concern for the planet and all the species. History is in danger because the future of the ecosystems is in jeopardy. Moreover, ecotheologies generally agree that the environmental crisis is “calling into question” God's plan for human beings not only because they risk their eternal salvation, but also because they undermine the right relationships that God has established between human beings and nature of which they are part.⁹⁶ Finally, the environmental crisis deforms God's plan for the whole of creation, in general, and endangers the growth of creatures, in particular. Indeed, in a world with ecological disasters and fewer resources, the first victims are the weakest members of society.⁹⁷ However, the question concerning justice is not limited solely to human beings. All

⁹⁵ For the uniqueness of human beings based on the interdependency of the whole of creation, see Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 79–182; Denis Edwards, “Anthropocentrism and Its Ecological Critique. A Theological Response,” in *Being Human: Groundwork for a Theological Anthropology for the 21st Century*, ed. David Kirchhoffer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 107–22.

⁹⁶ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 227.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Celia Deane-Drummond and Lisa Sideris, “Ecology: A Dialogue,” in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon, and Kevin O'Brian (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64–72.

creatures manifest God's glory, and therefore their endangerment or even their extinction overtly contradicts God's revelation concerning both the present and the future of creation.⁹⁸

Sharing the concerns of ecotheology but from a feminist point of view, there is a theological stance called ecofeminism. Similar to ecotheology, this approach does not entail its own theological method but gathers theologians with a similar consciousness, namely the relationship of both male's oppression of women and the human domination of the natural world. Sexism as the reason for ecological degradation is perhaps the salient feature of this theological stance.⁹⁹

According to most ecofeminists, Western thought tends to depict reality in terms of binary opposites: God and creation, spirit and matter, soul and body, men and women, humanity and nature. Because the first element in these pairs is understood to be of more importance, the second element is conceived as something not only of less value but also subject to the control of the first element. Thus this binary approach to reality justifies an anthropocentric view of creation by which matter-body-women-nature form one single logical unity that can be used at will.¹⁰⁰ This is why these theologians state that theological thought must be aware of this bias, replacing the latter by an interconnected and interrelational theology of creation in which the

⁹⁸ Among ecotheologians, Santmire and Haught are perhaps the ones who address more explicitly the link between ecology and eschatology. According to Santmire, fulfilled creation is foretasted through the notion of "Kingdom of God" and the justice that it brings. God's kingdom is the broader framework for human beings' behavior within creation, in which they are allowed to dominate the earth but without exploitation. See Paul Santmire, *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in Time of Crisis* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1970), 174–76, 191. On the other side, Haught affirms that ecology, evolution, and eschatology form a unity. In his view, creation must be understood as an unfinished adventure open to what is perpetually new. Thus, the unfinished reality of creation prevents its sacralization, basing the care of it on the promise of its future fulfillment. See John Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 158; "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, ed. David Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 226–245.

⁹⁹ For a map of ecofeminism, see Ernst Conradie, *Creation and Salvation: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Lit, 2012), 237–66.

¹⁰⁰ See Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 12–15; Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 156–70.

immanent presence of the Spirit of God permeates and links everything within the evolutionary process. Some theologians use the image of creation as Body of God to underline this presence of God in everything, the consequent holiness of all bodies, the interrelation of all creatures, and human beings' responsibility against environmental degradation, the unequal distribution of goods, and gender-based violence.¹⁰¹

As just mentioned in relation to ecotheologians, ecofeminists are not explicitly concerned about eschatology.¹⁰² In some cases, they are even against the way eschatology has been made.¹⁰³ However, eschatological implications can be found within their theologies of creation. For instance, the interpretation of God's immanent presence within creation leads some ecofeminists to affirm that the justice of God's kingdom is based on the codependent and correlational relationships that the whole of creation has had since the beginning, has in the present, and will have in the future.¹⁰⁴ God's justice entails liberation and healing of the present physical world in accordance with God's plan for it.

¹⁰¹ Grace Jantzen, Sallie McFague, and Catherina Halkes use the metaphor of creation as God's body. See Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); Catherina Halkes, *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth* (London: SPCK, 1991).

¹⁰² For a general vision on feminism and eschatology, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Eschatology in Christian Feminist Theologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 328–42. According to Peter Phan, feminist theology has given systematic treatment to almost all fundamental Christian doctrines, except to eschatology. See Peter Phan, "Woman and the Last Things: A Feminist Eschatology," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 206.

¹⁰³ For instance, Ruether affirms that the way eschatology is done, in a certain sense, must be denied. According to her, eschatological thought has been shaped by a male rationale in a way that negates women. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 143. Catherine Keller is also of the opinion that eschatology has a fundamental patriarchal orientation. See Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005). Emily Pennington holds that traditional eschatological formulations are mostly androcentric in their core values, and therefore, they must be completely dismantled. Using the tools of feminist theologians, she claims the rebuilding of an eschatology that appraises women's experiences of their bodies as the primary focus or the initial grounding of the eschatological reflection. See Emily Pennington, *Feminist Eschatology: Embodied Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2, 6.

¹⁰⁴ See Catherina Halkes, "Humanity Re-Imagined: New Directions in Feminist Theological Anthropology," in *Liberating Women: New Theological Directions*, ed. Ursula King (Bristol: University of Bristol, 1993), 85.

Although God's goal for the whole of creation will be consummated in the future, creation has always been filled with the empowering, diversifying force of God's Spirit. In other words, God's future is already ongoing through the presence of the Spirit as the most inner dynamism of creation's evolutionary process.¹⁰⁵ This is why ecofeminists understand the human being's salvation mostly in terms of metanoia from behaviors that contradict this awaited future to others that protect and guarantee the transformation, renewal, and flourishing of the whole of creation.¹⁰⁶ Rather than an otherworldly and non-spatial reality, God's salvation entails concern about the protection of the natural world, engagement in politics that promote the common good, and practices that respect the singularity and worth of human beings, other living creatures, and the global environment.¹⁰⁷

Along with theologies concerned about social issues and the impact of the ecological crisis, there is another post-conciliar group of theologians who want to think anew about the relationship between theology and science. As with ecotheology and ecofeminism, this group of theologians does not refer to a homogenous stance but gathers diverse theologians with different questions, approaches, and methodologies.¹⁰⁸ However, these theologians — most of whom came from the scientific field to theological reflection — share the common conviction that Christian theology must rethink its message and language in a context where science shapes both the way of understanding reality and the grammar for describing it.

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁶ See Halkes, *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth*, 141; McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 178; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 279.

¹⁰⁷ See Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ For a map of theologians concerned with the relationship between faith and science, see Conradie, *Creation and Salvation*, 2:173–214.

Despite the diversity among theologians who link faith and science, they mostly agree on the following main ideas.¹⁰⁹ First, they presuppose that, although God is not part of the evolutionary process of the universe, God is present within it. As a result, they maintain the importance of the dialogue between science and faith, and the need of reestablishing appropriate links between these two disciplines. Moreover, these theologians agree that this dialogue presupposes the unity and intelligibility of reality. The dialogue is important inasmuch as both science and theology try to describe this single, many-layered, and dynamic reality in order to have a comprehensive account of it.¹¹⁰ This is why, instead of a reflection which just uses science's data for describing God, they want to develop a theology that explicitly links scientific discoveries with revelation and written teaching in order to show how science inspires a better understanding of the theological truths. The goal is a credible theology of creation in which science sharpens its verisimilitude and its real possibilities.¹¹¹

These presuppositions are relevant for understanding the scope and approach of these theologians referring to eschatology. Following Teilhard's theology as an important inspiration for their own reflections, they affirm that science challenges Christian eschatology to move its focus from redemption to creation. **Because the evolutionary process has shown that the universe is significantly bigger and more complex than its instance of self-awareness — human beings — from a theological point of view God's fulfillment cannot be understood just as God's intention to save creation from the consequences of human beings' choices and actions.** Rather, fulfillment

¹⁰⁹ For a quick overview of different ways to understand the relationship between faith and science — conflict, independence, dialogue, or integration — see Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 1–6.

¹¹⁰ See Arthur Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 51; John Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians: A Comparison of the Writings of Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne* (London: SPCK, 1996), 11.

¹¹¹ See Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians*, 14–17; John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 17, 30.

of creation is the accomplishment of God's permanent-creative presence within a cosmic open process in which human beings are the self-aware part of it. This ongoing cosmic process that God initiated, sustains, and will fulfill, **must be the scope of eschatological statements, and therefore the framework of any reflection on humanity's future in God.**¹¹²

But though these theologians share the cosmic range of God's action within creation, their approaches to eschatology are not the same. Arthur Peacocke, for instance, explicitly states his indifference to the end of creation.¹¹³ Inspired by process theology,¹¹⁴ he affirms that the evolutionary activity itself must be theologically understood not only as the expression of God's plan, but also as the fulfillment of his purpose. He uses the notion of *creatio continua* to account for this idea of realized eschatology.¹¹⁵ Ian Barbour is also attracted to a process theology in which God empowers creation since the beginning in order to self-realize its goal. In Barbour's view, God acts within reality "persuading" it toward its fulfillment.¹¹⁶ John Haught shares this same perspective, except that he stresses that God's action does not push creation from the past,

¹¹² See Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming - Natural, Divine, and Human* (London: SCM, 1993), 222–23; John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), 98–99.

¹¹³ See Arthur Peacocke, *Paths From Science to God: The End of All Our Exploring* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 48, 135.

¹¹⁴ Influenced by the thought of Alfred Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, *Process Theology* bases its theological claims on the radical dynamism of reality, using this same principle for speaking about God and the relation with creation. Unlike theological stances that mainly ground their assertions on the substantial, immutable "attributes" of God, *process theology* points out the creative process of reality as a way of interpreting God's nature and God's interaction with creation. For an example of Whitehead's understanding of God through process theology, see Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), 521.

¹¹⁵ The notion of *creatio continua* conveys the dynamic process by which reality is always open and oriented to new opportunities through the actively creating action of God. This notion, therefore, illustrates the continuous process of emergence which leads creation from within to increasing complexity, enrichment, and novelty. See Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 79–80. See also John Polkinghorne, "Creatio Continua and Divine Action," *Science and Christian Belief* 7, no. 2 (1995): 101–15; Robert Russell, "Does 'The God Who Acts' Really Act?: New Approaches to Divine Action in Light of Science," *Theology Today* 54, no. 1 (1997): 43–65.

¹¹⁶ See Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (London: SCM, 1990), 29, 224; *Nature, Human Nature and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 31–36.

but draws it from up ahead forward the future.¹¹⁷ For all these theologians reality, conceived as evolving process, is already empowered by its creator toward its goal.

John Polkinghorne and Robert Russell are more explicit in their eschatological stances inasmuch as they theologically reflect on the end of the universe. Both based these reflections mostly on the radical discontinuity of Jesus Christ's resurrection as image of the fulfillment of matter in general. It is precisely Jesus' death and resurrection that can give some theological clues about the future of the cosmos and its eventual meaninglessness.¹¹⁸

From the perspective of Church teaching, it is possible to identify four main post-conciliar church documents: a 1979 letter of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (SCDF),¹¹⁹ a 1992 document of the International Theological Commission (ITC),¹²⁰ the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCCh),¹²¹ and Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (LS).¹²²

¹¹⁷ See Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 81, 41–42, 100–102.

¹¹⁸ See John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (London: SPCK, 2002), 113, 121; *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 163–70; Robert Russell, "Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: The Mutual Interaction of Christian Theology and Science," in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 3–30; "Eschatology and Physical Cosmology: A Preliminary Reflection," in *The Far Future: Eschatology From a Cosmic Perspective*, ed. George Ellis (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 266–315.

¹¹⁹ This 1979 letter – "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology" – examined concerns regarding misinterpretation of the baptismal creed. The Sacred Congregation wants to clarify the dogmatic statements relating to those after death and, therefore, life everlasting. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology," 1979, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19790517_escatologia_en.html.

¹²⁰ This 1992 document – "Some Current Questions in Eschatology" – aimed to review the most important elements of Christian eschatology in order to clear up some erroneous contemporary interpretations of it, in particular with regard to the resurrection of the dead. See International Theological Commission, "Some Current Questions in Eschatology," 1992, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1990_problemi-attuali-escatologia_en.html.

¹²¹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published in 1992. Its eschatology is found under the last two articles of the Creed: "I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body" (988-1019), and "I Believe in Life Everlasting" (1020-1160). See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

¹²² Even though this 2015 encyclical letter is not about eschatology, it contains pointed statements about eschatology inasmuch as the document relates to the future of the planet Earth and the care of it as a common home. See Pope Francis, "Laudato Si'," 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

The first three documents share, in a certain sense, the same line: the review of Christian traditional beliefs about the afterlife. Albeit in different ways, their approaches focus on Jesus Christ's resurrection as the irreplaceable principle on which all other eschatological reflections concerning the afterlife must be based.

The eschatological statements of these three documents may be grouped under three main ideas. First, the documents maintain that Jesus Christ's resurrection is the cause of Christian hope and the model of the resurrection of human beings. The risen Christ shows the innermost vocation of human beings — the beatific vision — and the importance of the bodily aspect of human beings' existence.¹²³ Second, the documents affirm the existence of an "intermediate state", namely a state "in-between" which illustrates the distinction between personal death and the universal collective bodily resurrection.¹²⁴ Despite that the beatific vision of God and union with Christ are things that can happen immediately after death, neither personal nor collective bodily resurrection occur immediately but at the final day.¹²⁵ This "in-between" state is possible because of the immortal human soul as the element of continuity between these two moments.¹²⁶ Finally, the documents refer to the Christian written tradition about heaven, purgatory, and hell.¹²⁷ Moreover, these documents affirm, among other things, the validity of the intercession for

¹²³ See "Certain Questions," 2; "Some Current Questions," 1. 1; *Catechism*, 996. This theological argumentation focused on Jesus Christ's resurrection as the basis of the human beings' hope in their own bodily resurrection is reiterated in the 2016 document of the International Theological Commission "*Ad resurgendum cum Christo*." In this document, the commission uses the same arguments as previously mentioned, but now directly used to argue the correct destination of the ashes of deceased persons. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction *Ad Resurgendum Cum Christo* Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation," 2016,

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_en.html.

¹²⁴ See "Certain Questions," 5; "Some Current Questions," 3.4.

¹²⁵ See "Some Current Questions," 8. 1; *Catechism*, 1022.

¹²⁶ See "Certain Questions," 3. For a theological interpretation of the "intermediate state," see Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 119–28.

¹²⁷ For heaven, see "Certain Questions," 7; "Some Current Questions," 4. 1; *Catechism*, 1024.); for purgatory, see "Certain Questions," 7; "Some Current Questions," 8. 1; *Catechism*, 1031.); and for Hell, see "Certain Questions," 7; "Some Current Questions," 10. 3; *Catechism*, 1033.)

the dead,¹²⁸ and the consequent importance of the Eucharist as a moment of communion with them in Christ.¹²⁹

While these three documents mainly review and reaffirm the church's traditional teaching concerning eschatology in terms of afterlife, the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* takes up the post-conciliar theological debate regarding the future of the whole of creation. In clear accordance with the previously mentioned debates on the relationship between ecological concerns and Christian faith, Pope Francis states that the current ecological crisis is a strong call to attention in two entwined ways: to human beings' relationship with the natural environment and their common future, and to the crisis human beings live both as individuals and as community, the way they conceive progress, and the way they organize the means of production without caring much for a sustainable and integral human development.¹³⁰ This encyclical, therefore, is a call to ecological conversion — first to Christian believers, and then to all people of good will — in order to find new ways for engaging with nature, for encountering each other, and for organizing society.¹³¹

Although the encyclical does not directly address eschatology, statements concerning Christian hoped-for future can be found within its theology of creation. For instance, the encyclical affirms that all creatures have God as their common goal toward which they move, in whom they will meet Jesus Christ embracing and illuminating all things.¹³² Creation receives this dynamism from its Creator. From the very beginning, God fulfills everything with the infinite creativity of the Spirit, the one who guarantees the autonomy of creation and opens it from

¹²⁸ See "Certain Questions," 4; "Some Current Questions," 7. 1.

¹²⁹ See "Some Current Questions," 7. 3; *Catechism*, 1402–5.

¹³⁰ See LS 13, 18, 50.

¹³¹ See LS 5, 216–221.

¹³² See LS 83

within to ever-new forms and possibilities.¹³³ From this viewpoint, the encyclical states that both every single creature and the whole of creation reveal and manifest the divine presence toward which they move.¹³⁴

This is why the ecological crisis questions human beings about their actions for or against God's plan for the world. Since creation "unfolds in God, who fills it completely,"¹³⁵ they are invited to respect God's rationale imprinted in creation, and therefore to live in communion with God, with others, and with all creatures. The degradation of the planet, the unfair use and distribution of the goods, and the exclusion of the poor not only put the future of the planet and the coexistence of human beings at risk, but also contradict God's ongoing plan for the interconnected and interdependent creation of which they are part. Rather than destruction or instrumentalization of both nature and others through a rationale based on consumerism, human beings are called to participate in God's empowering presence within creation by building a more just and equitable society.¹³⁶

3. Implications

After this overview of the eschatological thought before and after the Vatican II, it is possible to affirm that two major shifts have taken place in contemporary theology: the shift from the discussion on the *eschata* to the reflection on the *eschaton*, and the understanding of individual eschatology within the framework of the collective, social, and cosmic aspects of God's fulfillment of all created things. Most of contemporary eschatologies are based on these

¹³³ See LS 80

¹³⁴ See LS 85, 87, 88.

¹³⁵ See LS 233.

¹³⁶ See LS 189-198.

two main changes in the way of conceiving the Christian future, namely God as the future of all things. However, and despite these two common theological presuppositions, it was also displayed that not all the cited theological stances either highlight the same eschatological tensions or consider the same statements for shaping their reflections. In fact, one of the main characteristics of post-conciliar reflection is the difference of motivations, concerns, emphases, and goals. Thus, while most of the contemporary eschatologies are based on these two common shifts, the questions that initiate or provoke the reflection, and therefore the consequent way of resolving the eschatological tensions, are quite different among theologians. Precisely because contemporary theologies have shown that eschatology is shaped by elements in tension, the reflection tends to fluctuate between them.

Assuming these differences within this common framework, it is possible to recognize certain trends concerning eschatological reflection in conciliar and post-conciliar thought. First, God is the future of God's creation. God will fulfill all things. But it is important to note that this fulfillment of the whole of creation is the goal of the whole trinitarian process which creates and sustains creation. In this sense, a more accurate statement is that the triune God — Father, Son, and Spirit — is involved in the creation of all things, their sustenance in existence, and their fulfillment. The Trinity is both the origin and goal of creation. Within this trinitarian context, the way to illustrate this divine process of creation and fulfillment of all things depends on the different theological approaches. For instance, some theologies give an important role to the Holy Spirit as the Father and Son's loving force which guarantees difference within unity. Thus the fulfillment of creation will be the perfect communion among all things inasmuch as it is the accomplishment of their diversity, and vice-versa. The Spirit of Christ, when he comes again, will fulfill each particularity in its original and fundamental common destiny, namely be one in the triune God. Other theologies underline the role of the

Son in the fulfillment of creation in two complementary ways: on the one hand, Incarnation stands as the main theological notion for understanding both the way God is present within creation and the reason of God's salvation. Thus the Incarnation is the manifestation of God's self and the revelation of God's loving process of creation initiated in and by the Son through the Spirit. His second coming will be the manifestation, for the whole of creation, of what has been already realized in the Incarnation. On the other hand, Jesus Christ's resurrection is the notion used to either emphasize the foundation of Christian faith in the resurrection of the body or to illustrate the way the entire cosmos will be fulfilled by God's presence. Christ's return, therefore, will be the realization, within the whole of creation, of what has already happened with him. These two perspectives, moreover, must theologically integrate the importance of Jesus' cross which is, using the terminology of Trent, the *meritorious cause* of salvation.

Together with this trinitarian approach to the eschatological reflection, another aspect highlighted by this overview was that the individual aspect of God's fulfillment cannot be detached from either its collective or its environmental scopes. Human responsibility is not limited to individual future destiny, but it includes the well-being of all human beings and right relationships with the environment within the present. Hope in God's fulfillment of creation does not mean detachment from social and environmental present reality, but rather active involvement in and respect for it. In fact, the pluralism brought by the council is related in a certain way to the positive estimation of the cultural and geographical context, as well as the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and other sources of knowledge.

Finally, and despite the apparent lack of concern for an explicit eschatological reflection in some post-conciliar theological stances, the renewed interest and emphases on the treatise of creation has a direct impact on eschatological reflection. The discussion on the

origin of the universe and the evolutionary process, for instance, has brought back within theology the question about God's agency, and therefore the purpose and goal of God's ongoing presence within creation. Although this link between the treatises of creation and eschatology is already present among the Fathers as well as some contemporary systematic theologians, the influence of the latest scientific findings has led to both an "enlargement" of creation and a renewed interest in the physical reality of it. This is why concerns on social and ecological justice are increasingly framed within this larger scope.

All these ideas will come back during the following chapters. For the moment, it is important to affirm that this movement of eschatological reflection from *eschata* to *eschaton* and from "individual" to "cosmic" — including the trends just highlighted — have had clear positive effects on theology in general and on eschatology in particular. The reflection on God as the goal and fulfillment of all things has naturally gained in richness, diversity, and scope. However, and despite the latter, there are some particular aspects of the fulfillment of the whole of creation which have been either minimized or somehow dismissed. This is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter II

Parousia as a Suitable Symbol for Balancing Three Biases in Contemporary

Eschatology

The first chapter showed the shift in eschatological reflection from discussion of “the last things,” to reflection concerning God as the origin and goal of the whole of creation. It is well settled now that the reflection concerning specific theological notions is framed within the reflection on God as the eschatological goal of all. Along with this shift, the previous section illustrated the progressive movement from concerns about an individual’s final destination to social and community issues, as well as human beings’ relationship with creation. Thus in less than a century, eschatological discussion moved from being a single area within dogmatics reflective of the last things to being an interpretative principle of Christian theology as a whole.

Despite these differences of approaching eschatology based on these common principles, it is possible to recognize similar tendencies in the interpretation of some eschatological tensions. Taking into account the approaches overviewed in the previous chapter, this second chapter will explore the way three specific ideas have directly shaped most contemporary eschatologies: the relationship between the *eschaton* and time, the role of human beings in God’s plan, and the limited use of images for describing eschatological fulfillment. The main goal of this part is to underline that the interpretations of these particular ideas have entailed three related consequences or biases for eschatology which are important to balance: first, an undue temporalization of *eschaton* over its material reality; second, a tendency to reduce the scope of God’s fulfillment because of the humanization of creation; and finally, a loss of eschatological imagination, and, therefore, of its consequent narrative. Thus this second chapter will tackle each

of these three tendencies in order to balance them by reaffirming both the unavoidable physical, cosmic scope of God's fulfillment and the necessity of a narrative consistent with it.

1. The Temporization of Eschatology

Eschatological reflection has always entailed a temporal emphasis. The links between creation, eschatology, and time are clearly stated in Scripture, and in Christian written tradition.¹ As mentioned before, this temporal aspect of eschatology was particularly underlined by the attention drawn toward history during Modernity, forcing theology in a sense to reflect afresh on eschatology and its apparent a-temporal, mythical, abstract, individualistic, and unworldly way of picturing creation's fulfillment. In a certain sense, the shift in the way history was conceived prompted theology to focus mostly on the temporal reality of the *eschaton*, and therefore to reconsider some principles on which eschatological thought concerning time was based until that moment.

¹ Scripture opens and closes with temporal references (Gn 1:1 and Rev 22:20). God is before time (Pr 8:22f) and God's eternity contrasts with the transitory nature of both cosmic time (Ps 90:4) and human time (Ps 102:12) which God created. However, God not only rules over creation's cycles, but also God creates history in opening the present time to a promised future (Gn 12:1-4). Time became the history of salvation (Dt 26:5f.; Jos 24:3f.), because God's salvific actions make it point to the final outcome of God's promises (Jer 31:31-34; Is 61:1-11; Ez 16:59-63). The whole of creation will participate in this renovation at the end of time (Is 40-55) inasmuch as God will renew everything (Is 43:18-19; Rev 21:5). This time is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Mk 1:15; Gal 4:4), the one who saved creation through his death and will come again at the end of time (Mk 8:38; Mt 25:31-46; Acts 1:9-11). The Christian written tradition also affirms the temporal aspect of God's fulfillment. From the very beginning, the Fathers of the Church were clearly concerned with time as long as they moved from the expectation of the end of this historical order to a more systematic reflection of "the end of time" as a crucial aspect of their christological interpretations of history. The conviction that time is a history of salvation which goes in a linear direction from its origin and its end both rooted in God, is common doctrine among the Fathers. Time has an end, in the dual sense of purpose and completion. Therefore, and against stances that maintain the circular reality of time and the eternal existence of creation, the Fathers affirm that time was created as everything was, and it moves in a single direction as the whole of creation does: toward God. This idea will be confirmed in Lateran IV (DH 800) and the First Vatican Council (DH 3002).

Contemporary eschatological reflection combines two entwined temporal polarities to illustrate the temporal aspect of God's future, namely the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the *eschaton*, and the relationships between time, eternity, present, and future.

The first of these temporal notions — the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" — is currently the best known way to describe the paradox of eschatological thought. Just as the discussion about "the last things" was the previous widespread way of referring to eschatology, the polarity already/but not yet is one of the current formulas for depicting eschatological reality. In fact, there is common ground among contemporary theologies that since God's kingdom is present in Jesus, its complete future manifestation is "already" experienced and available. And there is also agreement that since this fulfillment is an object of hope, its manifestation is "not yet" complete. The difference between these theological stances, therefore, lies in the way they highlight either aspect of this paradoxical reality.

The second notion linked to the discussion concerning the temporal reality of the *eschaton* — the relationships among time, eternity, present, and future — refers to the relation between the intrinsic finitude of time and the way God is present within creation granting to time its fulfillment. These four temporal elements have tended to illustrate the temporal tension by forming two pairs. On the one hand, the duality time/eternity is used to depict eschatology as the presence of God's eternity within time. On the other hand, the duality present/future highlights that present time is not confronted with eternity, but with its future fulfillment in God.

It is important to note that while the duality time/eternity can be found in theological stances that stress the already of God's fulfillment, the duality present/future tends to be more present in theologies that underline the not yet of the eschatological fulfillment. In order to show the way these perspectives shape most of contemporary eschatological reflection, they will be illustrated through the lens of some important contemporary theologians.

1.1. The “Already” of Eternity within Time

Among the systematic theologians who tend to emphasize the “already” of this eschatological temporal tension and the presence of eternity within time, it is possible to highlight the work of Rahner, Pannenberg, and Balthasar.

Concerning time, Rahner criticized the idea of a future as just an extension of the present or the actualization of possibilities already possessed. Conversely, the true future is a mystery that human beings can neither control or predict, not a preview of coming events. Future, then, is an uncertain mystery because it is God himself.²

This does not mean, however, that human beings do not have experience of this future. Jesus Christ reveals that this experience of God as mystery is the horizon against all human experiences, thinking, and loving taking place, and the goal in which all these experiences will reach their fulfillment. As creation’s reason, purpose, and meaning, Jesus Christ allows human beings to become aware of this experience which underlies their own existences. While human beings do not have control of the future because it is God, and therefore they must deal with it on its own terms — incomprehensibility and infinitude — they already have experience of it as their most inner goal.³ This is why Rahner affirmed, as stated earlier, that eschatology is the aetiological anticipation of the salvific present which is already fully realized in Jesus Christ. Eschatology is the futurity of the present situation of grace.⁴

In Rahner’s view, this future already present becomes evident in the human experience of responsible freedom as the definitive and free response for or against God’s self-

² See Karl Rahner, “A Fragmentary Aspect of a Theological Evaluation of the Concept of the Future,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 237.

³ For the three ways that, according to Rahner, human beings can experience permanency in time, see Karl Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIX (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 172–76.

⁴ See Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 432.

communication.⁵ And here is where Rahner uses the duality time/eternity. According to him, human freedom is possible because time is the finite, one-way, irreversible series of moments that opens human beings to the future which is God himself.⁶ Time, therefore, is the condition of possibility of the exercise of human freedom, and, therefore, the possibility of eternal, definitive consummation of human beings' material and spiritual unity.⁷ Eternity is made of that spiritual freedom which has been exercised in time, and which God will consummate and fulfill. At the end, then, human history and the works of love will endure into the definitive consummation of God.⁸

Pannenberg also underlined the "already" of this temporal tension, but from the doctrine of creation. According to him, this doctrine supposes not only the existence of something different and autonomous from God, but also that God leads and guides creation to its eschatological consummation. The present of creation is already configured by its future, and creation exists in anticipation of that which will be its fulfillment. At the end of time, everything that is already present but hidden will be manifested: God as Creator, creation as participation in God's lordship, and God's kingdom as the consummation of creation.⁹

Even if these considerations led Pannenberg to ground his eschatology mostly in the "already" of the temporal tension, he also pointed out the "not yet" of this reality. According to him, the concepts of "promise of God" and "kingdom of God" illustrate this tension. The concept

⁵ See, for instance, Rahner, "Eternity from Time," 174–75.

⁶ See Rahner, 176; "Theological Observations on the Concept of Time," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XI (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 298.

⁷ See Karl Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 153–77; "The Secret of Life," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 141–52; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVII (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 71–89.

⁸ See Rahner, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of 'New Earth'," "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 273–89.

⁹ See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 531, 541.

of promise puts the present in relationship with the future and with the one who made the promise — God — but also keeps the distance between the present and this promised future.¹⁰ Likewise, the concept of “kingdom” shows God’s actual lordship over creation, but also portrays something that has yet to take place: God’s reign in all its power and glory.¹¹ In turn, these two concepts also apply to understanding the proleptic role of Jesus Christ and the Spirit. On the one hand, Jesus Christ is the already presence of a kingdom that will take place at the end of time.¹² On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is already working in the transformation of creation into a new heaven and a new earth.¹³

In describing this tension between the already/but not yet of the eschatological fulfillment, Pannenberg also used the duality time/eternity. According to him, time as “duration” is decisive to the independent existence of creatures. However, this time is not the antithesis of eternity. Time presupposes eternity insofar as the former is participation in the latter. The differentiation of each event from all others and its dependency on the future unity in God’s eternity is willed by God as well as the differentiation and the dependency between the Creator and creation. This is why this differentiation and dependency will continue in eternity. The latter is the consummation of the temporal process because what is divided into moments of time will remain forever present as themselves in the eternal Today and Now of God.¹⁴ Thus the end of time is not the annihilation of it, but its consummation through its participation in God’s own eternal life.¹⁵

¹⁰ See Pannenberg, 545.

¹¹ See Pannenberg, 531.

¹² See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977), 391.

¹³ See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 553.

¹⁴ See Pannenberg, 595–607.

¹⁵ See Pannenberg, 594.

Finally, Balthasar also emphasized the “already” of the eschatological fulfillment through his trinitarian theology. He affirmed that the Son as the Word incarnate reveals linked things, namely he is the Word deeply hidden in all created things, and his loving mission to reconcile all in God is the way for creation to participate fully in the divine exchange of the inner-trinitarian life. Thus, Jesus Christ as revelation of the triune God shows that the fulfillment of creation belongs to the divine purpose from the beginning, that the love of the triune God is the foundation of this entire process, and that the whole of creation is invited to reach fulfillment through participation in God’s inner-trinitarian relationships of unity and difference.¹⁶ At the end, Alpha and Omega will show as two aspects of the same loving reality.¹⁷

According to Balthasar, this offering and receiving of life and love among the divine persons is fully revealed on the Cross and at Holy Saturday. Through the utter offering and submission of Jesus’ will to the Father on account of the solidarity of the Son with sinners both on the Cross and among the dead, Jesus Christ reveals two intertwined truths: on the one hand, that the Son draws his entire existence from the Father and, on the other hand, that any alienation between God and creatures cannot be bridged through the uniting Spirit now.¹⁸ Thus, the furthest separation between the Son and the Father — Balthasar call this event “the hour” — reveals that the extreme self-emptying of God is the full manifestation of God’s nature and glory,¹⁹ and that creation is already saved in Christ inasmuch as created things share the fate of the one in whom

¹⁶ See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: The Last Act*, 100.

¹⁷ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 423.

¹⁸ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 320.

¹⁹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 263–64.

they exist.²⁰ Even though creation will be fulfilled at the end of time, “the hour” is the eschatological “already” of God’s salvation in Christ.²¹

Like the two other mentioned theologians, Balthasar also used the duality time/eternity to illustrate the temporal aspect of God’s fulfillment. Rather than an antithesis, there is a relationship of analogy between time and eternity in which the former will be fulfilled by embedding into the latter.²² This participation of creation in God’s own history is made possible through the history of Jesus Christ. In Balthasar’s view, finite time is admitted to God’s time through the mediation of Jesus Christ’s time.²³ This role of Jesus Christ as mediator is dramatically “concentrated” in the “hour” in which the Son reveals the eternal trinitarian exchange of life and love. Thus the promise of fulfillment already realized in Jesus Christ’s time entails communion with God’s eternal mode of existence in love, divine duration in which human beings can already participate through the Eucharist.²⁴

1.2. The “Not yet” of the Future Confronting the Present.

In contrast to theologians who underline more the “already” of the eschatological fulfillment by using the duality time/eternity, there are theologians who emphasize the “not yet” of this temporal reality through the lens of the duality present/future. In this case, it is possible to highlight the work of Metz, Schillebeeckx, and Moltmann.

²⁰ In his book *Cosmic Liturgy*, Balthasar affirmed that “the highest union with God is not realized ‘in spite of’ our lasting difference from God, but rather ‘in’ and ‘through’ it (p. 96).” Thus, all things “had become organic parts of ever-more comprehensive syntheses, and had become themselves syntheses pointing to the final synthesis of Christ, which explained them all.” See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 66–67.

²¹ See Balthasar, *Exploration in Theology IV*, 438.

²² See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: The Last Act*, 126.

²³ See Balthasar, 126.

²⁴ See Balthasar, 128.

As mentioned before, Metz's initial works showed a confident interpretation of the growing secularity of the world, and therefore of the notion of history related to it. Some years later, however, he adopted a more critical stance toward modernity and its idea of time. According to him, modernity assumes an unbounded temporal horizon which presupposes not only an empty continuum, extending evolutionary time into endlessness, but also the overcoming of the past because of its irrelevance.²⁵ Against this notion of unbounded time, Metz affirmed that only in the eschatological horizon of God as time's limitation and cessation does the world appear as history,²⁶ and only within history do free human actions obtain their relevance.²⁷

Given that God is the promised future of creation, Metz affirms that human beings are open to a reality that can be neither extrapolated nor anticipated from the present. In God, humanity is called to a future that has never existed and cannot be predicted in its concrete realization.²⁸ Accordingly, and against the theologians just mentioned, Metz states that the promised future is not primarily the expectation of the unveiling of something already present but hidden. Rather, the future is an emerging and arising not yet grounded in God's promises and entrusted to the responsibility of human beings' praxis.²⁹

In Metz' view, the presupposition of a future already accessible through the transcendental structure of the individual and his personal decisions clearly contradicts the intrinsic novelty of the eschatological fulfillment.³⁰ If everything is drawn from what already exists and the future stands in direct continuity with what has been already realized, nothing

²⁵ See Johann Baptist Metz, "Theology versus Polymysticism: A Short Apology for Biblical Monotheism," in *A Passion for God. The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 76.

²⁶ See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 88.

²⁷ See Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 162; "Time without Finale: The Background to the Debate on 'Resurrection or Reincarnation,'" in *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 79–86.

²⁸ See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 94, 98–100.

²⁹ See Johann Baptist Metz, "Creative Hope," *Cross Currents* 17, no. 2 (1967): 174–75.

³⁰ See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 95.

“wholly new” can be expected of the eschatological future.³¹ On the contrary, God’s promise constantly breaks the cyclical repetition of the same, transforming time into history through the promise of his future dwelling within creation. This is why eschatological hope is not rooted in the identity and continuity of the duality time/eternity, but in the discontinuity between the present time and the promise of a genuinely novel future. The terms “eschatological proviso”³² and “dangerous memory”³³ describe this critical relationship between the present and the transcendent hope in Metz’ theology.

Schillebeeckx also underlines the “not yet” of the eschatological temporal tension, but from the question of human suffering and how the latter opens to God’s future. According to him, true salvation does not depend on either human effort or history itself but on God’s action. Although the history of human emancipation cannot be detached from God’s redemptive history, the perfect and universal response to suffering — salvation — comes only from God.³⁴

This claim, however, remains provisional in the midst of the ongoing history of suffering. Even if God will heal all forms of suffering — not only the present ones and those to come but also the suffering of past generations — true salvation cannot be reached outside suffering and history, but only from God’s action within them.³⁵ Jesus Christ as God’s revelation shows that God resists evil by historically sharing this suffering with creation, and that salvation is a

³¹ See Metz, “Responsibility of Hope,” 284.

³² The notion “eschatological proviso” refers to the permanent, critical dynamic of God’s promised future in its relationship with the present. The eschatological proviso shows the gap between God’s fulfillment and any assumption of definitive earthly progress or any tendency to absolutize structures and institutions. The hoped future is not already here, creating an “eschatological meanwhile.” See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 114, 153.

³³ The notion “dangerous memory” prevents the present from the forgiveness of catastrophes and atrocities in human history, as they were just moments of an evolutionary process. God will save the whole of history, and the concrete history of Jesus Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection reminds human beings that nothing and nobody will be forgotten or left behind. Thus the memory of Jesus Christ’s suffering and resurrection gives both a dangerous promise of future freedom for all those who have suffered, and stimulates human beings in their current political engagements on behalf of those who actually suffer. See Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 108.

³⁴ See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 762–89.

³⁵ See Schillebeeckx, 769, 796.

promise and gift of God that exceeds any possible expectation. This is why, in Schillebeeckx's view, Christian hope is not based on a full available and grasped future, but on a surplus of meaning anticipated in and through Jesus's critical opposition against evil and his concrete love of others. The final, perfect, and universal realization of God's kingdom remains in the not yet of God's future yet accessible through eschatological praxis on behalf of those who suffer.³⁶

Even though Schillebeeckx also illustrated the temporal eschatological tension using the duality present/future in terms of conflict, he did not share Metz's apocalyptic depiction of it.³⁷ Indeed, Schillebeeckx affirmed that the present cannot be identified with the hoped-for future. God's action resisting suffering is not the confirmation of the present, but rather the constant confrontational judgment of the human present in the light of how reality should be and will be when God's kingdom comes. But this hoped-for future, Schillebeeckx claimed, cannot stand in complete historical discontinuity from the present. Precisely because God's future and total liberation is historically present in Jesus' activity, this future of liberation is in discontinuity with suffering but in continuity with God's salvific actions within history.³⁸ While apocalyptic places God's fulfillment in the future alone because of the present irresolvable situation of suffering, Schillebeeckx stated that the present is confronted with God's future but as a reality already available.

Finally, Moltmann also stresses the "not yet" of eschatological fulfillment, in particular through his biblical interpretation of God as future promise. Moltmann argues that God's presence creates history inasmuch as God reveals God self to Israel as promised lordship over creation; even particular accomplishments of this promise are expressions, confirmations, and

³⁶ See Schillebeeckx, 769; *Church: The Human History of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 155.

³⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 119–20.

³⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 8.

even expansions of a promise that always overflows the present.³⁹ This experience of a present always open to God's future reaches its total manifestation in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection – the one who will come bringing God's glory over all.⁴⁰ In fact, he is God's full presence within creation as future promise. The future of creation is Jesus Christ and his future.⁴¹

According to this idea of a promised future, Moltmann affirms that the present cannot be experienced as the epiphany of God's eternal present. Quite the opposite, God's promise causes a contradiction between the present and the new reality promised by God. For Moltmann, the promise of God introduces contradiction within reality inasmuch as the promise announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist, creates an interval of tension between the present and the fulfillment of the promise, and "divides" reality into one which is passing and another which must be expected. Rather than assimilation between an experienced present and a hoped-for future, God's presence within creation produces confrontation between them.⁴²

For this reason, Moltmann is perhaps the one who underlines most of all the temporal eschatological tension of the duality present/future. According to him, the presence of God within time overflows the present, creating a tension that has its origin in God's promise and its goal in God's fulfillment of this promise.⁴³ Thus, the present becomes a moment of tense expectation and active hope in God's promise, rather than an experience of the epiphany of God's eternal now.⁴⁴ This is why Christian faith, in Moltmann's view, is not consolation in present suffering but effective protest against it. Following Christ is not a cause of rest and

³⁹ See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 95–138.

⁴⁰ See Moltmann, 197–203.

⁴¹ See Moltmann, 203; *The Coming of God*, xi.

⁴² See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18. This confrontation, however, is not a denial of reality but its criticism. In this sense, Moltmann affirms "in the medium of hope our theological concepts become not judgments which nail reality down to what it is, but anticipations which show reality its future possibilities." Moltmann, 35–36.

⁴³ See Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 22; *Theology of Hope*, 106–12.

⁴⁴ See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 84.

patience. On the contrary, faith entails hope in God and conflict with the present, until God fulfills God's promises.⁴⁵

1.3. Excessive Temporization of Eschatological Language.

As already pointed out, the temporal polarity already/but not yet is one of the current formulas for depicting eschatological reality. The two main ways of understanding this temporal characteristic of the *eschaton* in contemporary theology — either the “already” of eternity within time, or the “not yet” of the future confronting the present — are different approaches to the same reality. In spite of the tendency to prioritize one of the temporal aspects over the other, and therefore to interpret the eschatological tension from one of the two elements involved on it, most contemporary theologies recognize that eschatological reality does not lie in the option between these two elements but in their tension. In fact, these two interpretations of eschatological fulfillment have been interwoven since the beginning of Christianity.⁴⁶

This way ways of describing the *eschaton* has dominated the discussion concerning God's fulfillment during the last century, concentrating the discussion primarily on the temporal aspect of the *eschaton* over its material reality. As mentioned, the contemporary eschatological discourse is focused mostly on speculation about something that either already happened in the past, the presence of an existential and eternal now, or the closeness or distance of the future.

⁴⁵ See Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 227; *Theology of Hope*, 100.

⁴⁶ According to Jacob Taubes, Christian eschatological thought was shaped early by both an axiological interpretation — i.e. an experience relative neither to space nor time, but as the attribution of new significance to time through the presence of an eternal now — and a teleological interpretation — i.e. a future event that, although it is not yet realized, influences the present time. He states that, while the first interpretation comes from the Christian assimilation of Gnosticism, the other interpretation stems from Jewish apocalyptic literature. See Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–40.

Even if the material reality of the *eschaton* is not denied, concerns about matter and space are clearly less developed than those about time and history.⁴⁷

This has not always been the case. In fact, Christianity has been concerned about matter since its very beginning. Paul strongly upheld the consummation of all things in Christ on the base of the bodily resurrection.⁴⁸ From the same perspective, the early discussion between Irenaeus and Gnosticism focused on the goodness of material reality and on its consummation by God at the end of time.⁴⁹ This certainty based on the goodness of God's creation has always gone along with Christian teaching, even during periods in which the spiritual aspect of reality has tended to prevail over and even against the material one. Indeed, this is the bias pointed out by both ecotheologians and ecofeminists.

And the same can be said about the importance of space. Israel is created from God's promise of the land.⁵⁰ John clearly stated that the Word of God made his dwelling among human beings.⁵¹ While Paul disengaged the Christian faith from any heritage attached to places and objects, he claimed that believers are temples of the Holy Spirit⁵² and members of the Body of Christ.⁵³ The Christian way of understanding public space is reinterpreted in social and political terms after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, reaching its peak in the medieval organization of society. The place of pilgrimage received special attention during these years, progressively changing its destination from Jerusalem to Rome as the "capital" of Christianity. The imaginary of afterlife as a place other than current reality has also changed during the

⁴⁷ See Victor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space : The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴⁸ 1 Co 15:14.

⁴⁹ See Irenaeus, "*Adversus Haereses*."

⁵⁰ Gn 12:1.

⁵¹ Jn 1:14.

⁵² 1 Co 6:19.

⁵³ 1 Co 12:27.

centuries.⁵⁴ Even the tomb as a space for the dead has shifted its meanings — for instance, from a common space in which the dead await together the final resurrection to a personal, individualized space in which the dead await their final, particular judgment. And although the Reformation, Modernity, and Postmodernity progressively reconfigured the significance of space and its relationship with the sacred, privatizing it in a way, the value of space itself as a site of encounter with God continues to be an important element both for Christian practices and for their reflection.⁵⁵ But despite these concerns about the material and spatial reality of creation during both Christian written tradition and contemporary thought, these two aspects of creation have not received the same attention as the temporal dimension of it in the present eschatological reflection on the *eschaton*.

Among the reasons for the temporal bias in contemporary eschatological reflection, it is possible to underline at least three elements. First, the abstract, timeless, and individualistic tendency of describing the afterlife criticized by modernity was attached to an imaginary excessively concrete in which “afterlife place” where human beings will go after death occupied a very important role. This place and its variants — heaven, purgatory, and hell — were progressively dismissed because of their mythological nature, their propensity to link good behavior with fear of eternal damnation, and their tendency to decouple Christian faith from social engagement. Considering that the progressive disappearance of this imaginary of the afterlife had impacted positively on eschatological statements, the lack of an adequate spatial and

⁵⁴ In this dissertation, the notion of “imaginary” will be understood as an historically transmitted scheme of representations in which human beings communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge. For an interpretation of this notion, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 3–32; Charles Taylor, “What Is a ‘Social Imaginary’?,” in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23–30.

⁵⁵ For the understanding of space during different moments of Christianity, see John Helgeland, “Land and Eschatology,” *Dialog, A Journal of Theology* 19 (1980): 186–92. For the transformation in the understanding of the Christian representation of the afterlife and its consequent impact on the way of burying the dead, see Philippe Ariès, *Essais Sur l'Histoire de La Mort En Occident, Du Moyen Âge à Nos Jours* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975).

material eschatological framework has led to a temporization of eschatological language. Secondly, it is also possible to recognize the theological presupposition that space and matter would be homogenous realities over which – and not of, in, and through which – events take place as if they were simple neutral backgrounds. Unlike the temporal vector that points forward and drives history, space and matter would have some kind of neutrality, and therefore would not have any intrinsic goal or intentionality.⁵⁶ Finally, this temporal bias is reinforced by the interpretation of God’s revelation in mostly temporal terms. Although God as Creator is source and goal of all that exists — a statement that includes the material aspect of reality — God is described as “the Lord of history” who acts within reality leading the historical process to its accomplishment. From the exegetical perspective, von Rad contributed to this temporal understanding of God by affirming that God is firstly recognized by Israel as the Lord of history. According to him, creation faith was incorporated for Israel after, and within the context of a theology of history.⁵⁷ This historical understanding of God’s revelation directly influenced, for instance, the Second Vatican Council,⁵⁸ and the works of some systematic theologians such as Pannenberg and Paul Tillich (+1965). The latter even sustained that God understood as “Lord of history” allows theology to state the importance of time over space.⁵⁹

Although this temporal bias in theological reflection has been underlined in different sources, these remarks are minimally addressed to eschatology in its treatment of matter and space. As mentioned in the first chapter, the observations concerning the material, physical aspect of reality are mostly confined to human beings, society, and the ecosystem. In other

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Lonnie Kliever, “Story and Space: The Forgotten Dimensions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 2 (1977): 221.

⁵⁷ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper, 1962), 106, 136.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, GS 10, 41, 45.

⁵⁹ See Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 39.

words, the temporal bias is clearly pointed out, but the scope of the reflection concerning matter and space is only human. Most of the post-conciliar theological stances are good examples of this. Liberations theologians, for instance, affirm that God's proclamation involves a specific, located addressee — the poor — a concrete place in which this proclamation must be embodied — the Church — and concrete political actions against structures that create injustice.

Ecotheologians also underline the concrete, material reality of creation, but it is limited to the ecosystem. This line of reasoning is shared by Pope Francis' encyclical. Ecofeminists highlight the theological importance of space and matter, but through their concerns about the earth, women, and the mistreatment of their bodies. Maybe the theologians who link faith and science are the ones who point most to the value of matter and space, not only from a biological and ecological perspective, but also from a cosmic scope; however, it has already been mentioned that these theologians do not necessarily share the eschatological concerns about the fulfillment of matter and space. **This point will be worked in the final chapter of this dissertation.**

For the moment, it is important to highlight that, although this bias against the apparent neutrality of the material aspect of reality is underlined from different theological perspectives, their criticisms do not have necessarily focused on eschatological statements. The temporal vector marks most eschatological reflection on the fulfillment of the whole of creation; even contemporary eschatological language is configured mostly in temporal categories. As a result, reflection on the material aspect of the fulfillment of creation tends either to disproportionately amplify the impact of human beings' actions or to reduce the understanding of creation to merely what human beings can reach with their actions.

2. The Humanization of Eschatology

This mentioned bias against the material aspect of reality is not easy to justify since, along with the unavoidable temporal overtones of eschatology, both the Scriptures and Christian written tradition have always stated the material aspect of creation's fulfillment. This material, spatial, and physical aspect of eschatological fulfillment have been depicted mostly by the duality continuity/discontinuity between this world and the one to come. Thus, God's fulfillment of creation does not entail either the salvation of certain aspects of reality or the total destruction of it. Rather, the claim concerning the fulfillment of the material, physical dimension of creation entails that God will transform all the aspects of reality in accordance with God's plan for it.

Although this duality continuity/discontinuity remains an important tension in contemporary eschatology, it is important to note that the discussion on history and time during the past century changed the way most current eschatologies refer to this duality. While the latter used to illustrate the continuity and discontinuity of matter, in general, and the bodily reality of human beings, in particular, this duality is mostly used now for describing the continuity and discontinuity of human beings' actions and their eschatological consequences. In other words, the quest for the eschatological meaning of history involved a certain "humanization" of the material aspect of the *eschaton*. This is why the eschatological discussion concerning the continuity and discontinuity of creation — illustrated by the images of "the kingdom of God," "new creation," and "the new heavens and the new earth" — focused mainly on human beings' responsibility within God's plan and the eschatological value of their actions rather than on the fulfillment of matter itself.

Alongside this anthropological perspective of the fulfillment of matter, there is another theological line that underlines the intrinsic value of matter, in particular against any kind of dualism. Instead of separate the reflection on matter from the spirit, several theologians argue the

fundamental and indissoluble unity between them. Rather than distinction or even antagonism between matter and spirit, the whole cosmic process is one of the becoming of matter toward spirit. In order to illustrate the way these reflections on the material aspect of the *eschaton* run through most contemporary theological stances, these two ideas will be highlighted in the following terms: the role that human beings play in the fulfillment of the whole of creation, and the intrinsic value of the material reality of the world.

2.1. The Eschatological Role of Human Beings.

According to Scripture and Christian written tradition, hope in God's action on creation presupposes an intrinsic solidarity between the fulfillment of both human beings and the rest of creation.⁶⁰ This link implies that human beings will not be saved without the rest of creation, as well as that human beings' actions have an impact not only for their salvation, but also for the rest of creation. This hope in the future fulfillment of the whole of creation by God is ultimately based on God's faithfulness shown in Jesus Christ's resurrection. The latter is the basis of the hope in the fulfillment of all aspects of reality by God's action at the end of time. Faith in "new creation" is, in a certain sense, faith in the resurrection driven to its utmost consequences.

Therefore, hope in God's fulfilling action upon creation has been always based on faith in Jesus

⁶⁰ In the Scriptures, this solidarity between human beings and the rest of creation is illustrated, for instance, in the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience, the flood both for humans and the earth (Gn 8:21; 9:9-13) and the benefits that they will receive from God (Ez 36:1-15; Is 11:6-9). This is why the announcement of the new creation involves all dimensions of reality (Is 65:17-21; 66: 22) event that will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is not only the savior of human beings, but also the one who reconciles all things in himself (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20) reality that is still groaning as in the pains of childbirth (Rm 8:19-23). In the recent official documents, this intrinsic link between the consummation of human beings and the rest of creation is highlighted, for instance, in GS 39 and LG 48. This idea is also present in the document of the International Theological Commission "Communion and Stewardship." See International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," 2004, n24, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html.

Christ's resurrection and the recognition of the bond between human beings and all dimensions of reality.

The Second Vatican Council laid important foundations for the way of interpreting this link between the accomplishment of both human beings and creation in contemporary eschatology. The council's argumentation is based on the certainty that, although creation groans and travails in pain until God's justice dwells in the new heavens and the new earth, the final age that the world awaits has already come in Jesus Christ's resurrection. He is the one who constantly and irrevocably renovates all things in accordance to the Father's will through the Holy Spirit within the mission of the Church.⁶¹ It is from this conviction of Jesus Christ's victory and lordship over the whole of creation that the council frames its theology concerning human beings' role within God's plan for creation: the eschatological hope which exceeds any earthly progress does not excuse human beings from earthly activities, but rather it prompts them to become involved in the building of the expected kingdom of God. Through the duality continuity/discontinuity, the council states that the discontinuity between human history and history of salvation does not abolish the continuity of human activities in view of the coming kingdom of God.⁶²

This argument that both encourages human beings' participation in God's future and distinguishes their temporal progress from the growing of God's kingdom is particularly illustrated in GS 39. This final number of the chapter entitled "Man's activity throughout the world"⁶³ is divided into three paragraphs. In the first paragraph, the conciliar text states at once the certitude that God is preparing a new earth and the incertitude of when and how this

⁶¹ LG 48.

⁶² GS 21,3; 34,3; 43,1; 57,1.

⁶³ GS 33-39.

consummation will take place. The second paragraph underlines, as already mentioned, that hope in the new earth does not entail disregard for present time, but rather a concern for cultivating the earth. The progress of human societies contributes to the kingdom of God, even though the earthly progress and the growth of God's kingdom cannot be confused. The concluding paragraph especially highlights this link between human beings' action and the future of creation. In fact, this last paragraph affirms that human beings' good actions and efforts will be transfigured as the whole of creation. Thus GS 39 maintains, along with the discontinuity between this era and the one to come, the continuity, and therefore the value of human beings' actions for God's plan for the whole of creation. Against accusations of disembodied spiritualism, the council stresses that human actions are important inasmuch as they will be the material of the celestial realm.⁶⁴

Rahner explicitly addressed this conciliar rationale of continuity/discontinuity concerning the relationship between God's fulfillment and human progress.⁶⁵ As mentioned before, Rahner maintained that God is the origin, source, and absolute future of creation. In this sense, eschatological fulfillment depends only on God. This fulfillment, however, does not remain external to creatures. According to Rahner, the notion of "consummation" is not a synonym of "end," but applies to what has been worked out in freedom.⁶⁶ Thus, God's consummation is the fulfillment of free decisions that irreversibly involve the person's total self-disposal for or against God's self-communication. Because God's transcendent consummation entails the immanent consummation of personal freedom, human actions have eschatological meaning.

⁶⁴ GS 38. This influence of human actions in the new creation is depicted by Ruiz de la Peña as the direct influence of these actions for preparing and disposing creation for its fulfillment by God. He based this interpretation on the doctrine of justification of Trent (DH 1825; 1854): just as human beings must actively participate in the reception of grace, creation is prepared for its consummation by God through human beings' actions. See Juan L. Ruiz de la Peña, *La Pascua de La Creación* (Madrid: Biblioteca Autores Cristianos, 2000), 191–92.

⁶⁵ See Rahner, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of 'New Earth.'"

⁶⁶ See Rahner, "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," 274–75.

They shape their eternity from time, and therefore there is hope that the present earthly works of love will endure in God.⁶⁷

Rahner also underlines this continuity of human beings' action in the discontinuity of God's fulfillment of creation through the notion of "love of neighbor." Although Rahner stated that God must be loved in and for himself,⁶⁸ he affirmed that love of neighbor is the primary act of love of God. Love of neighbor never simply dissolves into love of God, nor are the two completely independent of each other. Love of God and love of neighbor form an intrinsic unity.⁶⁹ Thus, when Christians assist others, they do so not merely as philanthropy, good will, or as a remote consequence of their love of God, but as participation in the ongoing salvation of Christ.⁷⁰ Eschatological hope, therefore, has concrete consequences for earthly commitment, especially in the transformation of socially and politically unjust structures that keep "the neighbor" in poverty.⁷¹

Metz stands out for highlighting this duality continuity/discontinuity of eschatological hope and human actions. According to him, history and responsibility appear only in the eschatological horizon of God's coming to fulfill creation.⁷² Against an evolutionary unbounded idea of time, Metz affirms that history is only possible inasmuch as God limits time.⁷³ Thus God

⁶⁷ See Rahner, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of 'New Earth,'" 269–70. This same rationale applies for Rahner's understanding of Christian dying. As already stated, human freedom takes place through each particular action, and death is the radical concretion of this freedom. Yet, death is not only the possibility for human beings to experience the final self-determination, but also their irrevocable disposability. This is why human beings are responsible for their actions, but they cannot reach their fulfillment by themselves. As with the entire creation, God will fulfill the fruit of human activities. See Karl Rahner, "Christian Dying," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVIII (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 226–56.

⁶⁸ See Karl Rahner, "The Inexhaustible Transcendence of God and Our Concern for the Future," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XX (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 179, 182.

⁶⁹ See Rahner, 176; "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God."

⁷⁰ See Karl Rahner, "Theological Justification of the Church's Development Work," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XX (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 67–68.

⁷¹ See Rahner, 69; "The Unreadiness of the Church's Members to Accept Poverty," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 271–72.

⁷² See Metz, "Theology versus Polymysticism," 82.

⁷³ See Metz, "Time without Finale," 83.

as the future of creation uncovers the bounded essence of both time and individual lives, transforming them in history and in human life respectively.⁷⁴ Only because time will have an end that cannot be extrapolated nor anticipated from time itself, history and human responsibility have content and relevance. God's action of discontinuity grants humans' actions the value of continuity.⁷⁵

On this basis, Metz affirms that faith and hope in God's promise entail an active collaboration with God's work. Christian belief — i.e. orthodoxy — is intrinsically linked to concrete actions on behalf of this faith — i.e. orthopraxis.⁷⁶ Thus Metz sustains that Christian faith in God's promise cannot be reduced to either a private, transcendental, personalistic, and existentialistic relationship with God or the proclamation of God's coming kingdom. Rather, faith involves the transformation of the world in accordance with the hoped-for future. Christian eschatology, therefore, entails a productive and militant theology involved in both the emerging and the criticism of the political and the social order. Eschatological theology, in Metz's view, is political theology.⁷⁷

Finally, liberation theologians hold a similar view *vis-à-vis* the continuity/discontinuity of God's fulfillment and human actions. Although these theologians find inspiration in the conciliar notion of "signs of the times" for their reflection concerning God's salvific actions within reality,⁷⁸ they clearly interpret this notion through the lens of the mentioned eschatological relationship between the growth of the God's kingdom and temporal praxis.⁷⁹ God's actions

⁷⁴ See Metz, "Theology versus Polymysticism," 82–83.

⁷⁵ See Metz, 89.

⁷⁶ See Metz, *Theology of the World*, 95.

⁷⁷ See Metz, "Creative Hope," 177; *Theology of the World*, 137.

⁷⁸ GS 4, 11.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Segundo, "Revelation, Faith, Signs of the Times"; Jon Sobrino, "Los 'Signos de Los Tiempos' En La Teología de La Liberación," *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 64, no. 248–249 (1989): 249–69; Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 99.

show the eschatological-soteriological meaning of human history, within which Jesus' resurrection is the paradigm of all of them. Faith in Jesus' resurrection is the source of both Christian hope and charity insofar as it is hope for those who wait in God's love and faithfulness and invitation for Christians to act in accordance with their hope and believe.⁸⁰ Jesus' resurrection from the dead is, therefore, the fulfillment of God's liberating actions within history, the historical presence of God's salvific future, and the rationale to understand Christians' participation in God's salvific plan for the whole of humanity.

By placing the poor and liberating praxis in the center of the theological reflection, liberation theologians underline the continuity between the hoped-for future and present praxis. The eschatological promise calls Christians to understand faith in Christ as actively working on behalf of the kingdom of God anticipated in Jesus' praxis, and therefore in the reality of justice in the world. This is why eschatological hope is not merely the justification and salvation of the sinner, but the transformation of political systems and social structures that contradict God's kingdom and compromise human well-being.⁸¹ Thus, hope in God's fulfillment does not only affirm the collective aspect of salvation against an individualistic vision of it, but also entails the unity between salvation and ethical consequences for living as people of faith.

2.2. The Eschatological Value of Matter.

The aforementioned duality continuity/discontinuity used for interpreting the value of human beings' actions within God's future fulfillment, is also taken by other theological stances

⁸⁰ According to Sobrino, Jesus' resurrection is hope for the victims. See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 84. Moreover, Sobrino affirms that Jesus' resurrection entails a real possibility for human beings to live already as risen in the present history. See Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 106.

⁸¹ See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 100–105; Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 39; Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 621.

in the attempt to address the fulfillment of the material, physical aspect of creation. Mostly inspired by recent scientific discoveries, these theologies base their argumentation on the link between the treatises of creation and eschatology.

Teilhard and Rahner, for instance, agree in their theologically positive interpretation of the evolutionary process of the whole of creation. As already pointed out, Teilhard affirmed that the cosmos is an evolutionary process in which the different spheres of reality are evolving deliberately toward their focal point. Within this ongoing evolutionary process ruled by the law of increasing complexity, it is possible to identify qualitative leaps of increasing complexity and consciousness. Two main recognizable leaps of this cosmic process involve the appearance of life — the transition from the inanimate to the animate world — and the outbreak of consciousness — the transition from the animate to the humanized world. According to Teilhard, the third and decisive leap within this evolutionary process toward its omega point is Jesus Christ. He is the conclusive leap that, in continuity with the other prior leaps, both discontinues and fulfills them.⁸² Thus Teilhard maintained that evolution cannot be seen simply as a material process, but as the complex dynamism of the whole of reality in its unification and convergence toward its Omega Point which is Jesus Christ himself. The cosmos, therefore, is an evolving process in which human beings are the self-consciousness of this process on the part of creation itself that has Christ as its Alpha and Omega.⁸³ On this principle, Teilhard sustained the value of human beings' actions as part of the evolutionary process of convergence in Christ.⁸⁴

⁸² For Teilhard's description of the evolutionary process from primordial particles to Christ as the Omega Point, see Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959); Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Cosmic Life," in *Writings in Time of War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 13–71.

⁸³ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 34–35.

⁸⁴ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Divinisation of Our Activities," in *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper, 1960), 17–44.

Rahner also assumed this theological interpretation of evolution as a process of discontinuity within continuity. For him, matter undergoes a process of “becoming” in the direction of the spirit by subsequent steps of “active self-transcendence” or “self-surpassing”: first, matter transcends itself into life; then life transcends itself into human beings as the self-consciousness of this evolutionary process on the part of creation itself; finally, the whole evolutionary process transcends itself into God through Incarnation.⁸⁵ This autonomous process of self-transcendence in which matter itself is oriented toward the spirit as its intrinsic goal is grounded, supported, and guaranteed by God’s immanent presence within creation. It is God who implants in matter a graced, immanent, self-transcending impetus toward God as its goal. God is, therefore, both the goal of the evolutionary autonomous process and the source of its motion.⁸⁶ On this basis, Rahner sustained that the immanent consummation is its transcendent consummation. In virtue of the fundamental unity of creation from its origin to its goal in God, the whole of creation is a single continuous process of active self-transcendence that points to its consummation by God’s action. At the end, God will transform what has being worked out in freedom during this process. This is why human actions are important for the whole of creation: as climax of creation becoming conscious of itself, human beings’ freedom fashions what will endure in God.⁸⁷

From a different perspective, Moltmann also reflects on the continuity/discontinuity of the material aspect of creation. Particularly in his work *The Coming of God*, Moltmann maintains that eschatology should not merely be the interpretation of nature as a the category of human

⁸⁵ For Rahner’s understanding of “active self-transcendence” or the “self-surpassing” of matter, see Karl Rahner, “Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 157–92; “The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith”; “Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World”; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 178–203.

⁸⁶ See Rahner, “Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World,” 287.

⁸⁷ See Rahner, “The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of ‘New Earth,’” 270.

history, but rather the all-embracing interaction of human beings with and within creation.⁸⁸ Because God leads the whole of creation toward its fulfillment, God's action giving individuals eternal life and establishing the kingdom among human beings must be interpreted through the lens of God transforming the cosmos into new heavens and a new earth. Moltmann justifies this approach from three intertwined perspectives. First, the fulfillment of the whole of creation is based on God's present action within creation and God's promise of future mutual indwelling of the world in God and God in the world — ideas illustrated by the notions of Sabbath and Shekinah.⁸⁹ Secondly, this fulfillment entails the unification and integration of all the interconnected elements of creation by God; the whole of creation will be gathered, healed, and fulfilled by God.⁹⁰ Finally, the paradigm of this fulfillment is Jesus Christ's resurrection as the way in which God will be all in all.⁹¹ In fact, the bodily form of Jesus Christ's resurrection shows the discontinuity within continuity of the material aspect of creation inasmuch as God's renewing act upon creation and subsequent entry into God's eternal life presupposes that creation has previously reached its real end. In Moltmann's view, therefore, God creates in order to fulfill the whole of creation, a process that is revealed in Jesus Christ's resurrection as the divine indwelling within creation.

This interpretation of anthropology within the framework of a broader interconnected community of life is widely shared by ecotheologians, ecofeminists, and theologians who work on the relationship between faith and science. Contemporary scientific discoveries have shown that human beings form part of an unfinished dynamic universe which is bigger, older, and more interconnected than was previously depicted. This new understanding of reality has entailed the

⁸⁸ See Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, xvi, 132, 160, 269–70.

⁸⁹ See Moltmann, 265–67, 304–8.

⁹⁰ See Moltmann, 69–71, 131–32, 260, 272.

⁹¹ See Moltmann, 28–29, 69–70, 92–93.

renewed theological appreciation of matter and its intrinsic value within God's creation as a sacrament of the glory of God. Concerns about the ecosystem's long-term sustainability, the impact of the ecological crisis on the poor, the consequences of a patriarchal view that justifies both the exploitation of nature and violence against women, and the necessary drawing of a more coherent theological description of the cosmic evolutionary process, are just some of the topics that this positive outlook of the material, physical reality of creation as the place of God's presence have highlighted. Although this renewed discussion on creation and God's presence within it has not necessarily resulted in an equally important eschatological reflection within these mentioned theological stances, it was already pointed out that some theologians explicitly link the new scientific discoveries with the questions concerning the end of creation and the way God will fulfill it. For most of them, Jesus Christ's resurrection is the suitable way for understanding the eventual futility of the universe and the hope for its continuity within this discontinuity.

2.3. Reduction of the Notion of Creation to a Human Scope

These two ways of addressing the material, physical reality of the *eschaton* — the role of human beings within creation and the value of the material aspect of it — have somewhat balanced a lopsided concentration on time in eschatological thought. Theological notions such as “new creation” and “new heavens and new earth” are increasingly present in theological debate, as well as the importance of the cosmological perspective for the whole theological enterprise. History is not the only perspective for understanding God's fulfillment.

The problem, however, lies in the way of understanding human beings' participation in God's fulfillment of the whole of creation and in the theological comprehension of the cosmic scope. Because the terms “cosmos” and “creation” tend to be matched with the terms “earth” and

“world,” eschatological reflection on the whole of creation is reduced to what happens on this planet and the impact of human beings within it.⁹²

The tendency to delimit the whole of creation to human beings’ perspective is more evident when comparing the theological statements with the discoveries in biology and cosmology. Scientists maintain that the solar system is a small cosmic structure of the minor galaxy in a universe in constant expansion. Moreover, they have demonstrated that *homo sapiens* made its appearance on earth between 200,000 to 100,000 years ago within an evolutionary process which had a beginning about 14 billion years ago. Human beings, therefore, are a minuscule part of a process that had been running millions and millions of years without them. And this process will continue without them. Scientists present reliable descriptions of events that could make life on earth completely disappear. And although events such as the impact of an asteroid, the collapse of the sun, or the extinction of human beings and other species during evolution will occur on a time-scale in the order of more than 5 billion years, these singular events indicate that human beings certainly will not participate in the main event, which will happen on a time-scale of trillions of years and of which these singular events are only moments, namely, the eventual collapse of the universe itself.⁹³ Thus, the depiction of the universe offered

⁹² David Wilkinson argues, for instance, that even if Moltmann claims an all-embracing eschatology which includes the cosmic perspective in *The Coming of God*, he constantly confuses the terms “world,” “creation,” and “cosmos” using them interchangeably. See David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 30. A similar problem can be seen in some works of the following authors: Hans Schwartz, “Eschatological Dimension of Ecology,” *Zygon*, 1974, 323–38; Carol Dempsey and Russell Butkus, eds., *All Creation Is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision for Life in a Sacred Universe* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 282; Celia Deane-Drummond, “The End of Creation,” in *Creation Through Wisdom: Theology and the New Biology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 153–93; Kathryn Tanner, “Eschatology and Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41–57; David Griffin, “Process Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 295–307; Elizabeth Johnson, “Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology,” in *Turning to the Heavens and the Earth: Theological Reflections on a Cosmological Conversion*, ed. Julia Brumbaugh and Natalia Imperatori-Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), xxix–xlvi.

⁹³ For the illustration of this cosmic process and its possible ends, see William Stoeger, “Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and*

by biology and cosmology shows that what theology calls “creation” is almost unimaginably large and almost incomprehensibly old, as well as perplexingly organic and dynamic.

This is why recent cosmological theories seem to broaden what theology calls creation to one encompassing the entire universe. Although both the biblical and the theological traditions have always affirmed the cosmic dimension of God’s creation and fulfillment, the way in which the sciences measure the unfolding of the universe from a spatial-temporal point of view surpasses theologies that affirm the eschatological fulfillment of creation only within social or ecological frameworks.

Cosmological and biological discoveries challenge the eschatological statements in at least three complementary ways. First, the dimensions of the universe and the extension of the evolutionary process call into question the overly preponderant role of the anthropological perspective within both the treatise of creation and eschatology. In the first case, ecotheologians and ecofeminists have underlined the anthropocentric bias in the relationship with nature and with other creatures, offering a new way of understanding the role of human beings within the ecosystem and among themselves. In the case of eschatology, it seems necessary to rethink the status of human beings in creation’s fulfillment, especially *vis-à-vis* theological stances that affirm that the whole of creation reaches its consummation in and through human beings.⁹⁴

Theology on Eschatology, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 19–28.

⁹⁴ Rahner, for instance, stated that the cosmos as a whole will find its real consummation “despite, in, and through” human beings’ freedom. See Rahner, “Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World,” 168; “Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World,” 278–79. Vatican II also maintains that creation reaches its end through human beings’ liberty in LG 48 and GS 14. This notion, however, has been challenged during recent decades because of its exclusive anthropological orientation. In fact, some theologians affirm that nature as such will be redeemed by God because it is an image of God’s glory. See, for instance, Catherine Keller, “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. R.S. Chopp and M.L. Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 326–45; Scott Peter, “The Future of Creation: Ecology and Eschatology,” in *The Future as God’s Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology*, ed. David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 89–114. It is interesting to note that Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* shares, in a certain sense, these two visions. On the one hand, he states the destiny of the world depends on human beings (LS 83). But,

Second, cosmological projections maintain that the future of the universe is neither static nor harmonic, and its current process of increasing expansion will reach some kind of end - the universe either will collapse under its own weight or will continue expanding itself indefinitely. The future of the cosmos depicted in these terms, therefore, challenges the idea of an orderly creation that is increasingly progressing toward its inner goal. Finally, the temporal and spatial dimensions of the universe give a more accurate content to the theological notion of “creation” and the hope of its fulfillment. According to this, faith in God as origin, sustainer, and goal of all things entails that God created the whole universe, not only planet earth and its ecosystem, sustains the whole evolutionary process, not only the part of this process that reached consciousness in human beings, and will fulfill the whole of the cosmos, not only the part of the universe which human history has reached. Even though theological reflection does not draw its conclusion from scientific discoveries, the latter give extremely valuable information to theology for clarifying what revelation is referring to.

Although the beginning of the evolutionary process is a distant event as well as the end of it, the latter has not received the same theological treatment and attention as the former. Among all the reasons for the insufficient theological reflection on the physical future of the universe, some theologians affirm that the future of the universe is, in a certain sense, irrelevant.⁹⁵ Other theologians maintain that the problem lies in the lack of scientifically updated knowledge on the

on the other hand, he also affirms that “each creature reflects something of God (...) and Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being” (LS 221).

⁹⁵ Keith Ward, for instance, affirms that the goal of creation is only to have personal agents who live in full awareness and love of God. See Keith Ward, “Cosmology and Religious Ideas About the End of the World,” in *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology From a Cosmic Perspective*, ed. George Ellis (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 244. Kathryn Tanner also affirms the irrelevance of the reflection on the future of the universe. For her, Christian faith presupposes hope in God as the future of the world whether it ends or not, and no matter the process by which it will be done. See Tanner, “Eschatology and Ethics,” 48.

part of systematic theologians.⁹⁶ Regardless of the reasons for this insufficient theological reflection on the end of the universe, it is important to note that the future of the universe is not completely unknown, and the remoteness of this event does not excuse the lack of theological reflection. In the effort to convey the fulfillment of the universe in God, some theologians use Jesus' resurrection as a theological notion of illustrating the way physical reality will reach its fulfillment by God.⁹⁷

This cosmological approach does not mean, however, that the cosmic dimensions of creation blur human beings' responsibility within God's plan. In fact, eschatological hope entails a commitment to reality inasmuch as it is an invitation to live within the present in accordance with the hoped-for future. The goal of this cosmological perspective, therefore, is to situate human responsibility precisely in the larger context of both God's action within creation and human beings' knowledge of it. Thus these statements about the universe, instead of jeopardizing the eschatological role of human beings, challenge eschatology to reinterpret its basic notions about the end of creation and its fulfillment in the light of what human beings currently know about it.

3. The "Iconoclasm" of Eschatology

The third bias in contemporary eschatology refers to the use of the eschatological imaginary and narrative. Theological reflection concerning the future has always been

⁹⁶ See, for instance, Daniel Hardy, "Creation and Eschatology," in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 122; Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, 28–33.

⁹⁷ For an illustration of the theological understanding of the possible ends of the cosmos, see Robert Russell, "Cosmology and Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 566–71. For the resurrection as a theological notion for the end of creation, see Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*; Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation"; Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*; Russell, "Bodily Resurrection."

accompanied with both an imaginary and a narrative. In fact, the Scriptures and Christian written tradition have used a variety of images and plots for describing the eschatological goal of creation.⁹⁸ This resort to imagination or to symbolic language is important for theology in order to “say” something that cannot be “said” in a direct way because of the nature of the topic. Confronted by realities which purely rational discourse cannot reach, symbolic language provides theological discourse a distance from the object as well as it enables a closer engagement with it. In the specific case of eschatology, symbolic language is not only necessary, but the only one possible. The ambiguous and plural semantics of images allows eschatology to approach realities in which the clarity of a definition is not possible.

In spite of the importance of images for eschatology, the eschatological imaginary that shaped theological notions and catechesis in past centuries progressively tended to fade away without being necessarily replaced by a new one. And although theological notions such as “heaven,” “hell,” or “encounter with God” remain important categories for eschatology, they

⁹⁸ The Scriptures are traced by a narrative that goes from creation (Gn 1:1) to eschatology (Rev 22:20). Within this big narrative, the Exodus is its paradigm inasmuch as it includes God’s promise of creating, sustaining, and fulfilling creation. This narrative, which will lead, for instance, to the apocalyptic genre, begins with a promise of fulfillment to one person (Gn 12:1) and finishes in a promise of fulfillment to a people, salvation also available to all nations and opened to the whole of creation. This restoration of all things will reach its accomplishment in Jesus Christ (Mt 19:28; Act 3:21; Col 1:20; Eph 1:10). Because this narrative of fulfillment of all things refers to God’s creative act, and, therefore, to all things in heaven and on earth, the end of God’s story of salvation – God being all in all (1 Co 15:28) – entails the “new heavens and the new earth” (Is 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1). Within this eschatological narrative, there are many images that illustrate this hope in God’s action: the dry bones (Ez 37), the banquet of all peoples (Is 25: 6-9), the son of man (Dn 7:13), the judgment of the nations (Mt 25:31-46), the groaning of creation (Rm 8:19-22), the New Jerusalem (Rev 3:12; 21:2), the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9). Among all the images, there are three that concentrate particular meaning, namely the Kingdom of God (Mt 10:7; Lk 4: 14-19), Jesus’ resurrection (Mt 28:18; Lk 24:6; 1 Co 15:4), and Jesus Christ’s return (Acts 1:11; 1 Co 15: 23-24; Rev 1: 7-8). Christian written tradition assumed all these narratives and images, highlighting them differently throughout the years. The Fathers of the Church, for instance, developed their imaginary for describing the destiny of the martyrs as participation in Jesus Christ’s cross and resurrection. They also underline the whole narrative of salvation from creation to eschatology, especially against Gnostic stances. Most of the images were linked to Jesus Christ as the one who will come to universally judge the living and the dead. This biblical narrative and the consequent imaginary progressively changed, however, through the similarly biblical notions of “particular judgment” and “contemplation of God” dogmatically initiated in Lyon II (DH 856-858), and reaffirmed in *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1000-1002), Florence (DH 1304-1306), and Trent (DH 1820). Vatican II balanced these notions through the collective aspect of salvation within a narrative that retrieved the trinitarian design of the whole history of salvation (LG 2-4)

have lost their representative force. The Christian imaginary of the future shifted from being too concrete to being too abstract.⁹⁹ Regardless of the positive effects of this change — especially in regard to images extremely concrete or intimidating — the result is the inability of the eschatological discourse to design and illustrate the hoped-for future, and, therefore, to effectively inspire the present time.

Among the reasons for this loss of the evocative power of eschatological imaginary and narrative because of their abstraction, two main factors will be underlined as examples of this process: on the one hand, Kant's criticism of knowledge and Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives; on the other hand, Bultmann's project of demythologization and Rahner's delimitation of eschatological imagination.

3.1. Contemporary Criticism of Images and Narratives.

According to Immanuel Kant's (+1804) theory of knowledge, human beings have knowledge only of things of which they have sense experience. This knowledge, however, is not knowledge of the thing itself. Because the objects of knowledge are mediated by the subject's *a priori* faculties of representation, knowledge of reality is mediated by the experience and the consequent representation that human beings have of it.¹⁰⁰ Thus Kant criticized the metaphysics of his time, especially in its claim of being the source of knowledge.

⁹⁹ For the changes in the idea of "heaven" and its associated images from Antiquity to our days, see Bernhard Lang and Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); A. J. Conyers, *The Eclipse of Heaven: The Loss of Transcendence and Its Effect on Modern Life* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999); Jean Delumeau, *Que Reste-t-Il Du Paradis?* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death : A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). And for the changes in the notion of "hell," see Jean Elluin, *Quel Enfer?* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1994).

¹⁰⁰ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 59-73.

One of the direct consequences of Kant's theory is that objects which are out of direct experience — for instance, the notions of “world,” “soul,” and “God” — are not subjects of human knowledge; if these notions are taken as objects of knowledge, they are empty ideas.¹⁰¹ This does not mean, however, that these notions are needless since they are not objects of sense experience. These notions are present in human reason as transcendent ideas, and they have an ethical value. In fact, they are transcendental ideas that perform a regulative function for knowledge.¹⁰²

This theory of knowledge had direct consequences for eschatological thought based primarily on a metaphysical epistemology. Because human beings do not have sense experience of “the last things,” it is not possible to either affirm what they are in themselves or obtain some knowledge about them. In other words, eschatological statements lack epistemological significance, and therefore have no relevance for the knowledge of the sensible world. Thus the *eschata* were defined as eternal, transcendental, and supersensible realities that must be seen through the lens of their ethical value, and their practical consequences for personal experience. Since Kant's theory affirms that nothing can be known about eschatological subjects, eschatological reflection progressively abandoned the former discussion concerning the metaphysical reality of the *eschata* — metaphysical eschatology — in order to become transcendental reflection of the ethical consequences of the personal encounter of God with human beings — transcendental eschatology.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ See Immanuel Kant, “The End of All Things,” in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 69–84.

¹⁰² See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 350–368.

¹⁰³ For Kant's understanding of imagination, see Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Jean-Francois Lyotard (+1998) and his critique of metanarratives also meant a criticism of eschatological imagination, in particular its capacity of having a discourse that embraces the whole eschatological narrative. Lyotard's thought formed part of the criticism that from different but complementary directions call into question the modern epistemology of consciousness.¹⁰⁴ Based on the criticism of the correlation between meaning, reference, and language, Lyotard affirmed the necessary replacement of consciousness by language, the order of representation by speech-acts, and denotation by performance. Because all narratives derive from a specific context and promote a particular way of understanding reality, no discourse can legitimate itself with reference to a metadiscourse that intends to encompass every dimension of reality. In fact, any narrative that claims universal validity immediately falls under a pall of suspicion because of its presumption of totalitarianism. This is why Lyotard held that the end of the modern episteme — i.e. the epistemology of representation — entails the end of any kind of universalism and, therefore, of the grand narratives that justify it.¹⁰⁵

This critique that modernity has received from so-called postmodern thought has also opened challenges and new questions for eschatology. According to Lyotard, the critique of modernity explicitly denies the notion of history as a unique, unitary, and all-embracing process

¹⁰⁴ The criticisms made against modern epistemology based on the subject's consciousness can be summed up in three stances. First, the critique of the subject. Hegel, Marx, and Freud showed that the subject is not a self-transparent entity, and therefore the necessity of being aware of the unconscious forces that influence the subject such as history, society, and the psyche. Secondly, the critique of the epistemic object. Nietzsche and Heidegger underlined the rapport of domination that the modern subject has with reality – either the Platonic view of reality in which the subject has the right to dominate the realm of appearance, or the conception of being in terms of presence and, therefore, as something available to be used. Finally, the critique of the notion of the sign. Peirce, de Saussure, and Wittgenstein hold that the presupposition on which modern epistemology is based – the representation of reality by consciousness, the subsequent designation of this representation through words, and the final correlation of the word and what is designated – are not real. Language is mediated by the one who uses it, and the context of usage.

¹⁰⁵ Lyotard criticized the modern rationale based on a metadiscourse. In this way, he calls into question several of the most important philosophies that have provided most of the meta-narratives used to explain social life: dialectics of the Spirit (Hegelianism), hermeneutics of meaning (phenomenology), the emancipation of the rational or working subject (liberalism and Marxism), and the creation of wealth (capitalism). Although the religious meta-narrative does not appear explicitly in his list, Lyotard includes it since he denies any reference to a narrative that arrogates an omni-comprehension of reality. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii–xxiv.

that moves and progresses in a linear way toward a goal. This dissolution of the notion of history even brings into question the very possibility of eschatology as a narrative that does not fall into suspicion of totalitarianism. Moreover, Lyotard's critique of the denotative reality of language questions the epistemological value of both eschatological notions and images. If the meaning and value of an image are mediated only by the way a particular group performs this image, the eschatological notions and images concerning the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God have no value beyond Christians and the linguistic rules that this group has given itself.

3.2. Demythologization and Delimitation of the Eschatological Imaginary.

Besides these criticisms, it is possible to recognize some stances that illustrate the loss of eschatological imaginary and narrative within the theological reflection. Although the following examples are mostly associated with this criticism of the epistemological value of images and narratives coming from Modern rationale, they show the impact of these ideas in the way theologians "illustrate" the eschatological thought.

Bultmann, for instance, was explicitly critical of the mythological imaginary of the New Testament, in general, and of eschatology, in particular. Motivated by exegetical discoveries and by pastoral concerns, he affirmed that the kerygma is expressed in a mythological language that impedes modern man from believing in this proclamation.¹⁰⁶ According to Bultmann, the world-picture of the New Testament conceives reality as a three-stage structure — heaven, earth, and underworld — in which history is controlled by supernatural forces. This is why redemption is told through a mythical narrative in which a preexistent divine being comes on earth, dies for the

¹⁰⁶ See Rudolf Bultmann, "The Case for Demythologizing: A Reply," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, vol. II (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 182–83.

sins of all, and rises to destroy the demonic forces which threaten the world.¹⁰⁷ This way of expressing the kerygma, however, does not mean that the latter is a myth. Stripped of its mythological language, the kerygma as eschatological invitation appears as the ever-present invitation to end this inauthentic existence in order to begin the authentic life that Jesus reveals.¹⁰⁸ Thus Bultmann both demythologized and existentialized eschatology.

Even though Bultmann's project put in evidence that the New Testament has both a particular background and cultural imaginary that is not shared anymore, and therefore could be an obstacle to receiving God's invitation, Bultmann's demythologization of the kerygma entailed, in one way or another, linking myth, symbolic representation, and unreality. The proper criticism of myth as explanation of reality was tied to the necessary dissolution of the symbolic imaginary and the consequent existential interpretation of it. And although Bultmann's interpretation of the mythical narrative of the New Testament has been balanced — especially concerning the reality of Jesus Christ's resurrection — the negative suspicion of the eschatological imaginary continues to accompany most of the eschatological reflection. Rather than the afterlife, eschatology focuses on God's encounter with humanity in immanent terms.

Rahner was explicitly against any demythologization that reduces eschatology to the personal decision for or against God here and now.¹⁰⁹ However, he participated in the process of losing the eschatological imaginary by stating epistemological limits to it. As mentioned before, Rahner maintained that human beings have experience of God as the present and future goal of their existences. In this sense, the eschatological hope is not completely unknown inasmuch as it

¹⁰⁷ See Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 1–8.

¹⁰⁸ See Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 51; "History and Eschatology in the New Testament"; *History and Eschatology*, 155.

¹⁰⁹ See Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," 326.

is the aeteological projection into the future of what human beings experience now in grace. This same experience, however, limits what theology can say about the eschatological future.

Eschatological assertions are not accounts of future events.¹¹⁰ Because the future of human beings is God's self, the absolute future remains a mystery, and therefore it is not possible to say more than what has been revealed in Jesus Christ.¹¹¹ While Jesus Christ is the content and cause of a Christian's hope, the eschatological future is non-representable because of both epistemological and ontological reasons – eschatological realities remain out of human knowledge for they are the indefinable mystery of God.

This sobriety about the use of eschatological imaginary and the tendency to interpret it in existential categories can be underscored through two major instances, namely the eschatological statements of Vatican II, and the renewal of the funeral ritual that the same council inspired.

On the one hand, the conciliar documents acknowledge the limitations of eschatological statements. The Gospel clearly affirms that nobody knows the hour or the way God will fulfill creation;¹¹² *Gaudium et Spes* also confirms this statement.¹¹³ However, the sobriety of eschatological statements is evident not simply in what the documents specifically say, but rather in what they do not say. Most of the images once used for depicting eschatology — namely, heaven, hell, and purgatory — are barely mentioned. In fact, hell and purgatory do not appear in the documents. Even though all the theological notions clearly refer to Christ, most of the images used for depicting “heaven” are linked with the Church as both the heavenly city¹¹⁴ and the final banquet.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ See Rahner, 328.

¹¹¹ See Rahner, 332; “The Life of the Dead,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 352.

¹¹² Mt 24: 36, 25:13; Mk 13:32; cf. 1 Thes 5:1.

¹¹³ GS 39.

¹¹⁴ LG 40, 59; GS 51.

¹¹⁵ LG 38.

On the other hand, the Christian funeral ritual also uses this rationale for the eschatological imagination.¹¹⁶ Unlike the former ritual that dated from the seventeenth century, the new ritual recovers the paschal reality of this celebration, linking this ritual with the whole mystery of salvation in general, and with the sacrament of baptism in particular. This is why most of the symbols and prayers refer to the participation of the deceased in Jesus Christ's death in order to participate in his resurrection — for instance, the sprinkling of holy water over his or her body. As the conciliar statements do, the funeral ritual highlights the collective aspect of death and the relationship between the pilgrim church and the heavenly church through the use of several images — for instance, the saints and martyrs who lead the deceased into heaven, and the departed who are in God's kingdom. Despite these images, most of the imaginary of the former ritual disappears, as in the council's statements. Hell and purgatory are not even named. Heaven as the place where the departed already are is difficult to imagine. Even if images of heaven are still present such as “the house that God is preparing,” “the city of heaven,” and “the eternal banquet,” most of the visual references are linked to God's self. Thus, most of the images were replaced by “relationships” — being with God — and by “sensations” — joy, well-being, and peace. No matter how much liturgical theology insists on the eschatological reality of the ritual or the sacraments, it is precisely in the instance in which imagination and symbols are more necessary that the soberness of eschatological imagination is even more evident.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ The liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council replaced in 1969 the ritual of Paul V dating from 1614. The *Ordo Exsequiarum* was translated into English and ecclesiastically approved in 1970 with the name *Rite of Funerals*. After this, the ritual was adapted in 1983 (*Rites for the Sick*) and in 1988 (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*). The final revision was canonically approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1985, and confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship two year later.

¹¹⁷ For an illustration of the shift of both the theology and imaginary of the ritual during the last centuries, see Marie-Jesée Poiré, “Le Rituel Des Funérailles: De Trente à Vatican II,” *Christus* 184 (1999): 415–24.

3.3. Retrieval of Eschatological Imagination

The modern criticism of the human capacity of knowledge, and the post-modern criticism of the representative value of language have produced an important reduction of eschatological imaginary. Even if these criticisms call into question the representation of the hoped-for future, it is important to recognize their positive contribution. In fact, these criticisms not only entailed an increased consciousness for theological thought of the real capacities of human knowledge, but also the awareness of how this knowledge is strongly influenced and even determined by the subject. These considerations have contributed to theology's own work of criticism and adjustment of its statements. In a certain sense, the theology that led to the conciliar eschatological statements was the result of a critical questioning of the precedent scholastic theology through the lens of modern epistemology and the recovery of both the biblical tradition and the first Christian teaching.¹¹⁸

Without diminishing the importance of this deconstruction of eschatological imaginary and narrative — especially as regards the punitive and overly concrete images — it is necessary to affirm the invaluable role of imagination and narrative for eschatology. Different contemporary theologians have underlined this loss of eschatological imaginary, its consequences within theological reflection, and the importance of its retrieval.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Aside from the influences already mentioned, there is an ever-present concern in eschatological imaginary, namely the danger of idolatry. While the Scriptures and Christian written tradition firmly state the goodness of creation as the image of God, the importance of the Incarnation as a total manifestation of God within creation, and the value of sacraments as God's presence for human beings, they also affirm the ontological differentiation between God and the creaturely. See John Thiel, "For What May We Hope?: Thoughts on the Eschatological Imagination," *Theological Studies* 67, no. 3 (2006): 525–29.

¹¹⁹ For the influence of Kant's theory of knowledge for eschatological imagination, see Kevin Vanhoozer, "Hope Within the Limits of Kant Alone?," in *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38–55; John Thiel, *Icons of Hope: The "Last Things" in Catholic Imagination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). For the importance of imagination for eschatological thought, see Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Langdon Gilkey, "The Universal and Immediate Presence of God," in *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, ed. Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); Trevor A. Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God:

According to these theologians, eschatological imaginary and narrative face the two following challenges. First, theology must recognize the real function of eschatological imaginary and narrative. There is general agreement within contemporary theology that biblical eschatological language does not seek the description of future events. Because its language is not literal but analogical, eschatology is not a prognostication of something that will happen but the representation of a future expectation — God fulfilling creation. Moreover, there is consensus that biblical imagination entails the human representation of something that exceeds the human scope through elements of human experience. In the case of eschatology, imaginary is shaped by the language and context of those who describe their experiences. This is why most of the images refer to the new version of some reality — for instance, “new creation” and “new Jerusalem” — or its hyperbolic representation — for instance, Jesus’ parables of the kingdom. This does not mean, however, that eschatology *uses* images for depicting realities that human beings either cannot understand yet or that exceed their comprehension. Rather, eschatology *is* these images that convey God’s expectation, and therefore they embody Christian hope in God’s future. It is not possible to detach the symbolic representation from some kind of original meaning. This is why the fundamental role of theology is not the explanation of eschatological imaginary or even its replacement for a more rational explanation, but its interpretation.

Secondly, theology must take seriously the incredulity of metanarratives and how this criticism calls into question the universalistic claim of Christian eschatology. While eschatological stances must be aware of this tendency, it is also important to note, however, that

Hope, Promise, and the Transformative Power of an Imagined Future,” in *God Will Be All in All*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 49–76; Carl Braaten, “The Recovery of Apocalyptic Imagination,” in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 14–32; John Shields, “An Eschatological Imagination: A Revisionist Christian Eschatology in the Light of David Tracy’s Theological Project,” in *An Eschatological Imagination: A Revisionist Christian Eschatology in the Light of David Tracy’s Theological Project* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 159–79.

the biblical narrative is neither static nor closed. In other words, the biblical narrative that describes reality from its beginning to its fulfillment is not a closed tale in which human beings already know its denouement. Rather, Scriptures tell a dynamic story always open to God's actions, which even in its fulfillment — Jesus' resurrection — remains open — Jesus' second coming. This is why eschatological narrative, instead of describing how reality will be in the future, interprets reality as a whole, providing a narrative context that orientates human beings' narratives both as individuals and as collectivity. And against the criticism of particularism of all narratives, Christianity must underline that its all-embracing narrative is full aware of this particularity. In fact, the Christian eschatology is based on an historical existence — the life of Jesus Christ — and the way others experienced it — the disciples.

Eschatology cannot exist without either images or an all-embracing plot that organizes them coherently. As mentioned, the recourse of narrative imagination, however, does not aim to visually exemplify some theological truths that are difficult to explain, to make concrete something that was already abstractly grasped. This was exactly what the cited criticisms called into question. Contemporary eschatologies, then, must use images and a narrative for representing the hoped-for future, recognizing their limitations but also their irreplaceable role. Without images and narrative for representing the future in a polysemous way, eschatological thought becomes just either an abstract idea or an unsuccessful attempt to describe God's mystery. The same applies to the role of sacraments and the funeral rite. It is true that Christian rites theologically convey most of the elements concerning the future here criticized. However, the inspirational influence of the future is its capacity to imaginatively illustrate — and not only to affirm — what is expected and to place the present as a moment of this narrative.

4. Parousia as a Suitable Symbol for a Renewed Eschatological Narrative.

The first chapter has established how the renewal of eschatological reflection during the last century entailed two major shifts. Through an overview of the renovation in exegetical hermeneutics and in systematic theology, the first part showed the shift in eschatology from the reflection on “the last things” to God as the goal of the whole of creation, moving eschatology to the center of contemporary theological debate. In addition, the second part depicted another major shift in eschatological thought, namely the progressive incorporation of collective, social, and cosmic concern to the reflection on individual’s final destiny. The richness and variety of the current eschatological debate is mostly due to the theological, eschatological synthesis of the Second Vatican Council and the reflection that followed it. Without any claim to be exhaustive, the first two parts of this first chapter presented the evolution of eschatology through the lens of these two main shifts.

Accordingly, this second chapter pointed out three biases in the interpretation of some eschatological tensions, namely the tendency to depict eschatological fulfillment exclusively through temporal categories, the reduction of the reflection on the material, physical reality of God’s fulfillment to human beings and the ecosystem, and the diminution of the eschatological imaginary and narrative. Along with showing the way these three biases run through some theological stances, the criticisms that they receive and the importance of counterpointing them were also underlined.

Two general conclusions can be drawn from this previous part. First, recent cosmological theories seem to broaden what theology calls creation to one encompassing the entire universe. Although both biblical and theological traditions have always affirmed the cosmic dimension of God’s creation, there has been a tendency in contemporary eschatology to address this notion exclusively on a human scale which therefore either restricts God’s eschatological fulfillment

only to what will happen to human beings and the earth or gives human beings a role that, seen in a cosmic perspective, seems to be at least disproportionate. Because contemporary sciences describe the universe in terms of increasing expansion, with human beings only part of it, science renders obsolete both any rigid framework and any exclusively anthropocentric understanding of creation and its fulfillment. This is why, from a spatial-temporal point of view, the way in which science measures the unfolding of the universe surpasses what eschatological reflection affirms about the fulfillment of creation.

This change of perspective offered by science to theology does not mean, however, that eschatology must deny the individual and the social aspects of God's fulfillment. As already mentioned, contemporary theologians have alerted theology, and particularly eschatology, to the trend toward mere abstraction and irrelevance. Through a more accurate notion of what the universe is, science can contribute to theology a better understanding of the revelation of God as creator and goal of a dynamic reality. Because the Scriptures and Christian written tradition have always held this cosmic framework for depicting God's action upon God's creation, eschatology is challenged again to reinterpret its basic notions about the end of creation and its fulfillment in the light of what human beings currently know about it.

The second conclusion refers to the necessary rewording of the eschatological narrative and its consequent imaginary. As mentioned, images have always been important for theology. In fact, the analogical character of images enables believers to portray realities that, despite the fact that they lie outside the scope of direct experience or exceed human understanding, are essential elements of God's revelation. Notions such as creation or Incarnation, for example, cannot be even conceived without the use of images. The latter become even more important when theology refers to the future. Without a narrative and images that depict God's future action upon creation, it is not possible for imagination to contrast the current time with God's

future consummation.

Despite the importance of imagination for depicting God's future, most of contemporary eschatology lacks an inspiring narrative about the future. In fact, contemporary eschatology sets aside the old and threatening imaginary that referred to the dichotomy reward-punishment, but without replacing those images by other images — or recovering some images of the Christian traditions — in order to build a new narrative. The result of this lack of visual illustration of the Christian future carries several problems, for instance, the loss of Christian temporality because the future fades out, the emptying of the content of hope because there is nothing clear to wait for, the diminishing of the inspiring dimension of the *eschaton* for the responsibility of believers, and even the increase of fear because there is no explanation for the place in which the departed ones are and where the living will go after death. Once again, it is important to highlight that contemporary Christian theology does not lack of these mentioned elements. The aim, therefore, is not to “recover” eschatological statements but to show that they risk remaining simply enunciations without a consistent visual imaginary.

In order to reinterpret its narrative and imaginary, eschatology must face a double challenge: on the one hand, theology must confirm the importance of images in the illustration of the eschatological narrative. However, this emphasis on images cannot turn into what has been correctly criticized — i.e. the literal depiction of a divine realm of the future of creation — but in their inspiring, indicative role for human action now in the light of a future that is none other than God. On the other hand, theology must reaffirm its grand narrative but recognize that this narrative receives its real, full meaning from a particular event in a specific time and space, namely the experience the first community had of Jesus' resurrection as revelation of the origin and goal of the whole of creation.

For all these reasons, the reinterpretation of eschatology in terms of cosmic fulfillment

goes hand in hand with the renewal of the eschatological narrative. The theological discourse about the future of creation presupposes a narrative that places the present on a timeline between an immemorial past and an eschatological future. Without a narrative that describes how temporality can be conceived, it is very difficult to perceive the present time and what human responsibility means as part of the history of salvation in which God is its beginning and goal. And this requirement about time also applies to space. Because eschatology entails fulfillment of the whole of creation, theological discourse about the future must recognize the continuity of what God has created and of what God will fulfill. Therefore, eschatology cannot illustrate God's actions in time and space without a narrative, and this narrative cannot be coherent without a direct reference to what cosmology holds about the past, the present, and the future of the entirety of space.

4.1. Parousia as an Inspiring and Pertinent Eschatological Symbol.

In this context, it is necessary to return to the point in which the whole eschatological renovation started, namely the discussion about Jesus' second coming. In doing so, the claim is not to retrieve the debate concerning the mythical or realist aspect of the parousia. On the contrary, this theological symbol appears as an inspiring eschatological notion where all the mentioned elements convene. In a context where the loss of figurative language negatively affects the ability to conceive the future and to be really inspired by it in the present, this theological symbol grounds all eschatological statements about Jesus Christ, broadens the interpretation of God's fulfillment to a fully transformed cosmos, offers an illustrative and dynamic image of God's future action upon creation, and can inspire believers to recognize and embrace their role in God's fulfillment.

Without denying the importance of other eschatological notions and images present both in Christian written tradition or in contemporary theology, it is necessary to maintain that parousia is an inspiring and pertinent symbol because it combines and renders intelligible at least seven aspects of eschatology. First, Jesus Christ is the ground of all eschatological statements. He is God's self-revelation and the revelation of creation's inner dynamism and goal. Jesus' resurrection grounds Christian hope for a fully resurrected and transformed creation. Second, the notion of parousia highlights that creation is open to a future that is God's own self. Put bluntly, the goal of creation is God, and, therefore, God is what will happen to creation. Third, Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, the Alpha and Omega of creation. This is why this symbol is understood in this project as the second, final coming of the Word into what is his own, namely the coming of Jesus Christ into the cosmos created through and with him. Fourth, Jesus' second coming refers to the current state of the risen Lord, and his current presence within reality. That is why this dissertation interprets parousia not just as an event that will take place at the end of time, but also as an ongoing dynamic process currently taking place. Jesus Christ is not waiting, so to speak, for the fulfillment of creation at the end of time, but he is rather bringing the future to the present. The risen Christ as the new creation is already the reality creation is waiting for. Fifth, given the coming of Jesus, this interpretation awakes in believers their sense of waiting for Jesus and their commitment to reality. Sixth, understanding the parousia as Jesus Christ's coming to what is his own offers a Christological vision of cosmic fulfillment, and a common ground for the dialogue between eschatology and the natural sciences. Finally, this symbol is not just one notion among others. The longing for Jesus Christ's coming is a reality frequently attested in the New Testament, confessed by the early Church in the Creed, and always celebrated by the believing community in the Eucharistic celebration. Thus, the last words in the Scriptures are "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Having said that, and before exploring the way the parousia will fulfill the material, physical aspect of creation, it is necessary to understand the meaning of this theological expression, its characteristics and its element in tension. This is the goal of this next chapter.

Chapter III

Meaning, Roots, Characteristics, Signs, and Elements in Tension of the Parousia

The second chapter has suggested the theological symbol of the parousia as an eschatological notion that, widely present in Scripture and Christian tradition, allows an eschatological reflection grounded in Jesus Christ, offers an illustrative and dynamic image of God's future action upon a fully transformed cosmos, and can inspire believers to imagine and embrace their role in God's plan for the whole of creation.

This claim was based on two main ideas. First, the transformation of eschatology, thanks to the collective, social, and cosmic approach during recent decades, has produced a broader reflection on eschatological statements, in particular their connection to the material, physical aspect of creation and the well-being of all human beings. However, these remarks are mostly confined to human beings' actions, society, and the ecosystem. In other words, although the temporal bias of the eschatological statements has been underlined from different theological perspectives, these reflections tends to focus on the continuity/discontinuity duality of human actions and their eschatological consequences. This tendency to confine the whole of creation to human beings' scale is even more evident when comparing the eschatological statements with the understanding that biology and cosmology have concerning God's creation.

The preceding chapter also holds that contemporary reflections on eschatology include an explicit or implicit criticism of both eschatological imaginary and narrative, and therefore a loss of their evocative power. Along with the recognition of the real function and scope of eschatological imagination, it is important to recover images that embody Christian hope and a narrative that organizes them in a coherent way. In fact, eschatological statements concerning

time and space remain abstract without images that convey Christian's expectations and without a narrative that depicts God's intention for reality as a whole.

Accordingly, this third chapter will turn to the interpretation of the parousia in order to explore how this theological symbol is a suitable image for a cosmic and visual eschatological illustration of God's fulfillment. This chapter begins by an overview of the parousia as an eschatological notion, the ways Scriptures depict it, the link with the eschatological role of the Holy Spirit, and the roots that this Christian symbol has in Jewish apocalyptic. The main goal of this first part is to show what content the first Christian communities gave to this notion, how they echoed the Old Testament's expectations — especially concerning the “son of man,” and the “day of the Lord,” — and therefore how this Christian symbol is in continuity and discontinuity with Jewish apocalyptic. Building on these ideas, the second section of this chapter will point out the polarities within the notion of the parousia. Defined then by its elements in tension, Christ's return and the link of this notion with the eschatological role of the Spirit will be explored from two paradoxical dualities: on the one hand, the relationship between the imminence of God's coming and its delay; on the other hand, the parousia as a source of both revelation and fulfillment.

1. Meaning of the Parousia in the New Testament.

Despite the fact the parousia is affirmed in the Christian Creed and proclaimed in the eucharistic celebration as a Christological truth, it is important to highlight, however, that this notion is in dispute because of its seemingly archaic or even mythological reality. While other Christological statements have been the subject of numerous theological investigations and most contemporary theologians base their reflections on these truths — for instance, Incarnation or the

Resurrection — the parousia is mostly challenged or even contested. For this reason then, and before exploring this theological symbol as a pertinent image for illustrating God's fulfillment of the whole of creation, it is necessary to understand the meaning and function that the first Christian communities gave to the parousia, as well as its characteristics, background, and relationship with other theological symbols within Scripture.

Like all theological notions of the New Testament, the parousia is the result of multiple sources, the outcome of the interplay of overlapping ideas and expectations. The meaning and function of this notion depend on its cultural and theological background, as well as on its role within Christian eschatology as a whole. The parousia and its denotation, therefore, cannot be isolated from its context, the theological referential system of which it is part, and the other elements to which this notion is related.¹

The original meaning of the parousia depends directly on the sources in which it is rooted, namely the reinterpretation of Jewish expectation concerning God's definitive coming through the lens of Jesus Christ's resurrection, and the reception of Hellenistic tradition on the part of the first Christian communities. While Jewish tradition is the main theological framework for depicting the expectations of the accomplishment of Jesus Christ's mission after his departure, the Hellenistic tradition is one of the first conceptual tools that Christians used to illustrate their hope in his coming and the arrival of God's kingdom. Although in different ways, these two traditions shape the first Christian eschatological thought and, consequently, the original meaning and use of the parousia. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the following

¹ The main purpose of the large number of biblical references in the following pages is to highlight this particular point. The parousia is a symbol that refers to many theological and visual elements of the biblical tradition. Moreover, all this biblical references will be also useful for showing how this notion both organizes the eschatological narrative of the first Christian communities and gives them an inspiring symbol for understanding their role in God's fulfillment.

considerations will survey the influence of this original background and context on the development of the parousia as eschatological symbol.²

1.1. Meaning of the Parousia in the New Testament

The very word “parousia” — παρουσία — is a Greek term expressing the idea of “presence” or “the state of being present.” Rooted in the verb “παρειαμι,” this term is a technical word used in the Hellenistic context for conveying two ideas: on the one hand, this noun is an official term for the visit of someone of important rank to a place in which this visit has power; on the other hand, it is a cultic term for the coming of a deity to the place in which that deity can be worshiped.³

It is important to note that, in the context of the New Testament, the word “παρουσία” is used mostly to name Jesus Christ’s return in the last days. In fact, the term predominantly refers to Jesus Christ’s eschatological coming.⁴ However, this word also applies to other kinds of

² For an overview of the notion of parousia in the New Testament, see Arthur Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); Harold Mare, “A Study of the New Testament Concept of the Parousia,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 336–45; Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999); Osvaldo Vena, *The Parousia and Its Rereadings: The Development of the Eschatological Consciousness in the Writings of the New Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001). For an approach of this notion from the Pauline literature, see Joseph Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997); Angelo Schettini, “The Concepts of Parousia and Hope in the Pauline Tradition” (2009). And for several systematic approaches to this notion, see Joseph Fison, *The Christian Hope: The Presence and the Parousia* (London: Longmans, 1954); Christian Duquoc, “Parousie,” in *Christologie, Essai Dogmatique*, vol. 2: Le Messie (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972), 281–317; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Charles Perrot, *Le Retour du Christ* (Bruxelles: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1983); Walter Kasper, “Hope in the Final Coming of Jesus Christ in Glory,” *Communio* 12 (1985): 368–84; Jürgen Moltmann, “The Parousia of Christ,” in *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 313–41; Joseph Moingt, *L’Homme Qui Venait de Dieu* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993); Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Anthony Thiselton, “The Parousia and Modern Theology: Some Questions and Comments,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976): 27–53; “The Return of Christ,” in *Life After Death: A New Approach to the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 89–110.

³ See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Wilbur Gingrich, William Arndt, and Frederick Denker, 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 630; Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, 7–10.

⁴ 1 Co 15:23; 2 Co 7:7; 1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:14; 5:23; 2 Thes 2:1, 8; Jas 5:7, 8; 2 Pt 1:16; 1 Jn 2:28.

comings. On the one side, “parousia” is used with a clear eschatological connotation to illustrate the coming of the “son of man,”⁵ the coming of the “day of the Lord,”⁶ and the coming of the Anti-Christ.⁷ On the other side, this word refers broadly to the coming of some biblical characters from one place to another, namely the coming of Paul,⁸ the arrival of Titus,⁹ and the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus.¹⁰ This broad use of the word parousia allows inferring that Jesus Christ’s coming was expected as his concrete advent, and not simply as a symbolic representation of the hope in God’s final lordship over all. This idea is supported by some synonyms that the New Testament applies for Jesus Christ’s coming. Among the synonyms of “parousia”, it is possible to point out four words: “ἐπιφάνεια” (appearing), “ἀποκάλυψις” (revelation), “ἐρχόμενον” (coming), and “φανερῶ” (public manifestation).¹¹

The first synonym of the parousia — the noun “ἐπιφάνεια” — is used to name Jesus Christ’s *appearing*.¹² This word also refers to the manifestation of his kingdom.¹³ The second synonym — the noun “ἀποκαλύψει” — conveys Jesus Christ’s *revelation* as the Lord when he will come again.¹⁴ This same word is also applied to the revelation of God’s judgment,¹⁵ the manifestation of the children of God,¹⁶ and the revelation of the lawless one.¹⁷ It is important to note that the use of the cognate verb — ἀποκαλύπτω — also alludes to *revelation*, but mostly in

⁵ Mt 24:27, 37, 39.

⁶ 2 Pt 3:12.

⁷ 2 Thes 2:9.

⁸ Phil 1:26; 2:12.

⁹ 2 Co 7:6.

¹⁰ 1 Co 16:17.

¹¹ For the meaning of these words and their eschatological significance, see Anthony Thiselton, *Life After Death: A New Approach to the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 89–99.

¹² 2 Thes 2:8; 1 Tm 6:14; 2 Tm 1:10; 4:1, 8; Ti 2:13.

¹³ 2 Tm 4:1.

¹⁴ 1 Co 1:7; 2 Thes 1:7; 1 Pt 1:7, 13; 4:13; Rev 1:1.

¹⁵ Rm 1:18; 2:5.

¹⁶ Rm 8:18–19.

¹⁷ 2 Thes 2:3, 6, 8.

terms of the disclosure of some truth in the end time,¹⁸ as well as things that human beings cannot reach by their own efforts, but only by the free will of God.¹⁹

Though these two words do not explicitly assert the concrete return of Christ, this expectation can be affirmed through two other synonyms of the parousia. First, the noun “ἐρχόμενον” is used for depicting Jesus Christ’s and the son of man’s future *coming*.²⁰ Alongside this use, the word is utilized in two other ways in the New Testament: on the one hand, the word “ἐρχόμενον” refers to the coming of persons from one place to another;²¹ on the other hand, this word is used for depicting the Incarnation, and therefore the real, concrete coming of God in the flesh.²² Because these two references imply the concrete, physical meaning of the “coming,” the application of this word to Jesus Christ’s coming suggests, therefore, that his “ἐρχόμενον” was expected as a real, physical return.

The fourth synonym for the parousia - the verb “φανερώω” - expresses Jesus Christ’s *public manifestation* as the Lord.²³ Along with this meaning, the word is used to indicate the disclosure of people’s intentions,²⁴ and the full manifestation of Jesus Christ in believers.²⁵ It is important to highlight that the New Testament uses this word to refer to the manifestation of Jesus Christ after his resurrection,²⁶ the explicit affirmation concerning his bodily appearance,²⁷ and the manifestation of his life in the bodies of believers.²⁸ The verb “φανερώω” has, therefore,

¹⁸ Mt 10:26; Lk 2:35; 12:2; Phil 3:15; 1 Pt 1:5.

¹⁹ Mt 11:25, 27; 16:17; Lk 10:21, 22; Rm 1:17.

²⁰ Mt 16:28; 24:30; 26:64; Mk 13:26; 14:62; Lk 21:27. The term “ὀφθήσεται” is also used with this same meaning in Heb 9:28.

²¹ Mk 15:21; Lk 23:26; Jn 1:29, 47.

²² Jn 1:9; 2 Jn 1:7.

²³ Col 3:4; 1 Pt 5:4; 1 Jn 2:28.

²⁴ 1 Co 4:5; Eph 5:13-14; cf. 2 Co 5:10.

²⁵ 2 Co 4:10-11; Col 3:4; 1 Jn 3:2.

²⁶ Mk 16:12, 14; Jn 21:1, 14.

²⁷ 1 Ti 3:16.

²⁸ 2 Co 4:10-11.

explicit physical connotations. This idea is confirmed by the use of “φανερόω” to illustrate what has been already made public through Christ, and therefore through Incarnation.²⁹ Like the word “ἐρχόμενον,” the use of “φανερόω” in physical terms allows us to affirm that the future *public manifestation* of Jesus Christ was conceived in physical terms as well.

Although most of these expressions and theological meanings will be elaborated further, it is possible at present to affirm two main things: first, even though there is a technical term for Jesus Christ’s coming — *parousia* — this event is illustrated by, at least, four other different complementary expressions. In fact, each of these notions suggests an aspect of this eschatological event. Second, most of the vocabulary used for depicting the expectation of Christ’s coming on the part of the first Christian communities conveys his concrete, physical return. It is important to point out that this idea does not appear only in the New Testament’s earliest texts, as if the physical expectation of Christ would be an idea supported only during the time immediately after his resurrection. As will be discussed, even some later biblical writings referring to an alleged crisis within the community because the *parousia* had not occurred, reinforces the idea of the expectation of a concrete coming of Christ.³⁰ Thus the physical aspect of the synonyms named above points out the concrete imaginary in the New Testament of an actual physical event associated with his coming (Acts 1:11).³¹

1.2. Roots of the Parousia in the Old Testament: Continuity and Discontinuity.

As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, the meaning of the *parousia* is primarily rooted in the Jewish tradition and its expectations concerning God’s definitive coming. This

²⁹ Col 1:26; 2 Ti 1:10; Heb 9:26; 1 Pt 1:20; 1 Jn 1:2; 3:5, 8.

³⁰ For instance, 2 Pt 3:4.

³¹ See Mare, “A Study of the New Testament Concept of the Parousia,” 337–38.

tradition is its theological background and the setting of all its images. Thus most of early Christian eschatology must be interpreted through the lens of the theological presupposition that runs through Jewish eschatological expectations, namely God's final intervention, the gathering of the people of God, and the victory of God's truth and justice on earth over the present evil age.³²

The latter does not mean, however, that the New Testament does not have its own understanding of the fulfillment of creation in God. Although Christian eschatology's conceptual background depends on Jewish expectations concerning the future, this continuity acquired a specific meaning after Christ's resurrection. All Christian eschatological statements are an interpretation of God's actions in the light of this event. This is why the very notion of the parousia is the result of a relationship of continuity and discontinuity between the disciples' experience of Jesus and the religious tradition through which they depict this experience. Any interpretation concerning this theological notion or its characteristics must take into account this duality continuity/discontinuity between the Jewish tradition and its reinterpretation in Christ.

In order to illustrate this relationship of the parousia with its Jewish roots, we will use two important Old Testament theological symbols clearly associated with Christ's return: the "son of man," and the "day of the Lord."

In general terms, the expression "son of..." is used in the Old Testament in the non-literal sense to illustrate the possession of a certain characteristic. Used in the singular or the plural, this expression refers, for instance, to a profession³³, a condition³⁴, or a characteristic.³⁵ In the case of

³² See Claudia Setzer, "The Parousia of Jesus and Jewish Messianic Hopes," in *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*, ed. John Carroll (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 169–84; Nicholas Taylor, "Early Christian Expectation Concerning the Return of Jesus," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 104 (1999): 33.

³³ Am 7:14.

³⁴ Ezr 4:1; Prv 31:5.

³⁵ 1 Sm 14:52; 2 Kgs 6:32.

“son of man,” this expression conveys two characteristics. On the one hand, it refers to a nature, namely human reality as something fragile in relation to God.³⁶ On the other hand, this expression is a synonym of “inhabitants of the earth”; while God lives in heaven, the earth has been given to “the sons of men.”³⁷

Concerning the use of this expression in the New Testament, it is important to highlight that “son of man” in the singular refers to two kinds of people in the Old Testament: the prophet who is about to receive a revelation from God, and the one who presents himself before God to receive dominion and glory. Although this expression is mainly used in the first way — the prophet Ezekiel is called “son of man” almost one hundred times, and the prophet Daniel once³⁸ — it is the second meaning of this expression and its eschatological overtone which played a major role in the New Testament’s reception of the Old Testament’s eschatological imaginary.³⁹ According to Daniel 7:13-14, “one like a human being” comes with clouds for receiving everlasting glory and power.⁴⁰ These images and theological presuppositions of Daniel’s vision will play an important role in the New Testament’s references to the “son of man.”⁴¹

The New Testament’s use of Daniel’s image of the “son of man” — υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου — is mostly present in the Synoptic Gospels.⁴² The imaginary of the one coming on the clouds

³⁶ Jb 25:6; Ps 8:4.

³⁷ Ps 33:13-14; 107:8; 115:16; Mi 5:7.

³⁸ For the “son of man” referred to Ezekiel see, for instance, Ezek 2:1f; 4:1f; 5:1; 6:2; 8:5f; 11:2f; 12:2f; 21:2f; 37:3f, *et parr.* For the “son of man” applied to Daniel, see Dn 8:17.

³⁹ Dn 7:13-14.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright holds that “the coming of the son of man” in Daniel is a metaphorical language for affirming two linked ideas: first, the victory of God’s people over its enemies, and the vindication of the people itself. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 362.

⁴¹ For the debate concerning the meaning of “the son of man” as individual and collective image, as well as its influence both in the New Testament and Christian written tradition, see Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael Shepherd, “Daniel 7:13 and the New Testament Son of Man,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (2006): 99–111; Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the “Son of Man” Problem*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

⁴² Besides the Synoptics, the “son of man” appears in three New Testament books: Acts 7:56; Heb 2:6; Rev 1:13; 14:14. While Acts and Revelation refer to the one who comes in glory, Hebrews alludes to Ps 8:4 and, therefore to the fragility of human beings.

receiving dominion, glory, and kingship from the Ancient One is reinterpreted and explicitly applied to Jesus. According to the Synoptics, Jesus is “the son of man” who will come again⁴³ on the clouds⁴⁴ seated in his throne⁴⁵ and will gather all people. This link between Daniel’s vision and Jesus’ identity, however, is importantly expanded by the Synoptics. In fact, and in addition to the mentioned apocalyptic imaginary, these biblical texts define the “son of man” as an individual redeemer figure — at the expense of a more collective interpretation — giving him characteristics that Daniel’s vision does not have. For instance, the “son of man” is not only someone who will come on the clouds in the future. He is already present among the disciples⁴⁶ for gathering all people.⁴⁷ The latter qualifies Jesus in a completely different way inasmuch as it is always God who gathers the people.⁴⁸ This same principle is illustrated when the texts hold that the “son of man” has power to forgive sins⁴⁹ because he is Lord of the Sabbath.⁵⁰ Moreover, the evangelists not only use characteristics that are not associated with Daniel’s original image, but also even contradict it. The Gospels affirm that the “son of man” is called drunk and greedy,⁵¹ with no place to stay.⁵² The apocalyptic image of the “son of man” is, therefore, explicitly applied to Jesus as a present sign for his generation,⁵³ but enlarging the meaning of this image with characteristics that it did not originally have. Within the continuity in the use of Daniel’s “son of man,” there is a clear discontinuity with it.⁵⁴

⁴³ Mt 16:28; 24:27, 37, 39, 44; Lk 12:40; 17:24, 30.

⁴⁴ Mt 24:30; 26:64; Mk 8:38; 13:26; 14:62; Lk 21:27.

⁴⁵ Mt 13:41; 16:27; Lk 22:69.

⁴⁶ Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Lk 19:10.

⁴⁷ Mt 19:28; 25:31.

⁴⁸ Cf. Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 51–66.

⁴⁹ Mt 9:6; Mk 2:10; Lk 5:24.

⁵⁰ Mt 12:8; Mk 2:28; Lk 6:5.

⁵¹ Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34.

⁵² Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58.

⁵³ Lk 11:30.

⁵⁴ See Shepherd, “Daniel 7:13 and the New Testament Son of Man.”

This discontinuity in the interpretation of Jesus as the “son of man” is even more evident in the events that precede his glorious coming. The Synoptics affirm that the identity of the “son of man” and his glory is related to suffering,⁵⁵ deliverance into the hands of wicked men,⁵⁶ death, and resurrection.⁵⁷ Here again, Daniel’s image is surpassed regarding its original setting: the “son of man” applied to Jesus Christ gathers characteristics that, even though present in the Old Testament, do not refer to Daniel’s image – for instance, the suffering servant of Isaiah’s prophecy. Finally, the very coming of the “son of man” illustrated in Daniel receives, reinterpreted in the Christological context, a specific feature that it did not firstly have: because Jesus Christ is the Lord, the gathering of all people will entail something that only God will do, namely their judgment.⁵⁸

The identification of the “son of man” with Jesus Christ, therefore, not only shows the apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus as the one who will come, but also expands the meaning of this theological notion to characteristics that it did not have originally. It is very interesting to note, however, that even if this notion is widely employed to illustrate Jesus Christ’s identity in the New Testament, it did not play a fundamental role in the consequent development of Christology and eschatology.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Mt 17:12; Mk 8:31; 9:12.

⁵⁶ Mt 17:22; 20:18; 26:2, 24, 45; Mk 10:33; 14:21, 41; Lk 9:22, 44; 22:22, 48.

⁵⁷ Mt 12:40; 17:9; Mk 9:9, 31; Lk 24:7.

⁵⁸ Mt 25:31. The way the image of the “son of man” is reinterpreted in the New Testament is debatable among the scholars. For instance, N.T. Wright holds that the allusions to Daniel 7 must be understood as mostly describing the enthronement of Jesus after his death in heaven. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 291–97; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 512–15. On the contrary, Edward Adams affirms that the “son of man” is not used in terms of Jesus’ heavenly ascension. In fact, the coming of the “son of man,” in particular in the gospel of Mark, is not from earth to heaven, but the other way around. He is coming in judgment, rather than ascending in enthronement. See Edward Adams, “The Coming of the Son of Man in Mark’s Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (2005): 44–48.

⁵⁹ See Thomas Kazen, “The Coming Son of Man Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5, no. 2 (2007): 172.

The other theological image in a relationship of continuity and discontinuity between the New Testament and the Jewish tradition is “the day of the Lord.” In the Old Testament, this expression and variations refer to Israel’s expectation of God’s approaching final action against either the nations who oppressed Israel, or Israel who needs conversion.⁶⁰ More specifically the term “day of the Lord” depicts God’s imminent coming with anger⁶¹ against the nations⁶² and even against Israel.⁶³ This is why, although the expression “that day” tends to be considered as a synonym of the “day of the Lord,” and therefore of joyful prophecies, the coming of God’s day is mainly illustrated as darkness,⁶⁴ bitterness,⁶⁵ and collapse of creation because of God’s presence.⁶⁶ It is important to notice, however, that God’s final presence does not aim to destroy either human beings or creation. Even if “day of the Lord” denotes the mentioned characteristics, this expression forms part of a broader expectation within the Old Testament, namely that God will come bringing peace and order to the whole of creation.⁶⁷ On that “day,” God will come to destroy sinfulness in order to fulfill God’s creation, for God wants to dwell within it among God’s people.

Just as “son of man” provides the parousia its imaginary, the expression “day of the Lord” provides the parousia its theological roots.⁶⁸ The reference of this expression — ἡμέρα Κυρίου — appears five times in the New Testament, and it is explicitly applied to Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ For the expression “day of the Lord,” and its appearances and interpretations in the Old Testament, see Daniella Ishai-Rosenboim, “Is יוֹם ה' (the Day of the Lord) a Term in Biblical Language?,” *Biblica* 87, no. 3 (2006): 395–401.

⁶¹ Is 34:8; Ez 7:19; Zeph 2:2-3; Lam 1:12; 2:21-22.

⁶² Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:7; Ez 30:3; Zech 14:1.

⁶³ Ez 13:5; Am 5:18, 20; Lam 2:1.

⁶⁴ Joel 2:1; Am 5:18, 20.

⁶⁵ Zeph 1:4.

⁶⁶ Is 13:6, 9, 13; Joel 1:15; 2:11; 3:14; Zeph 1:18.

⁶⁷ Is 2:4; Mi 4:3; Zech 9:9.

⁶⁸ See Thomas Glasson, “Theophany and Parousia,” *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 2 (1988): 259–70; Mark Vander Hart, “The Transition of the Old Testament Day of the Lord into the New Testament Day of the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (1993): 3–25.

⁶⁹ Acts 2:20; 1 Co 5:5; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Thes 2:2; 2 Pt 3:10.

Because he is the Lord, the “day of the Lord” is reinterpreted as the day of Christ. In fact, and besides the five mentioned references, there are verses that add Jesus — Ἰησοῦ — to the expression “day of the Lord,”⁷⁰ or directly replace “Κορίου” by “Jesus Christ.”⁷¹ But the New Testament not only reinterprets the “day of the Lord” as the day of Jesus Christ’s coming, but also echoes the Old Testament imaginary associated with it. According to the New Testament, the “day of the Lord” is at hand,⁷² bringing darkness⁷³ and cosmic collapse to present time.⁷⁴ This is why the coming of Christ is somehow visually linked with earthquakes,⁷⁵ the breakdown of the heavens⁷⁶ and destruction of material reality.⁷⁷ Jesus Christ’s return is depicted with direct references to the “day of the Lord” imaginary. There is, therefore, a clear continuity between this Old Testament’ symbol and Christ’s return.

This reinterpretation of the “day of the Lord” through the lens of Christ also shows the discontinuity between the Jewish tradition and the Christian understanding of it. Among all the differences, the most important one refers to God’s anger. Is it true that the Old Testament prophecies mix images of divine anger and destruction with images of reconciliation and peace. And it is also true that this same rationale applies to the New Testament, in particular in the book of Revelation and its apocalyptic understanding of history as the dramatic tension between present history and the coming of God’s kingdom. But while the coming of God on “that day” is

⁷⁰ 1 Co 1:8; 2 Co 1:14.

⁷¹ Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16.

⁷² 1 Thes 5:2.

⁷³ Acts 2:20.

⁷⁴ 2 Pt 3:10.

⁷⁵ Mt 24:7; Lk 21:10-11.

⁷⁶ Mt 24:29; Lk 21:25-28.

⁷⁷ 2 Thes 1:1-7; 2 Pe 3:10; Rev 6:12-17; 8:5. This imaginary, however, is not only used for Jesus Christ’s coming. If this imaginary refers to the “day of the Lord,” the Gospel of Matthew affirms that Jesus’s death is “that day” inasmuch as it is illustrated as a moment of total darkness (Mt 27:45) followed by earthquakes (v. 51). For the “day of the Lord” in 2 Pe 3:10, see Craig Blaising, “The Day of the Lord Will Come: An Exposition of 2 Peter 3:1-18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169, no. 676 (2012): 387–401.

mostly associated with cosmic chaos, persecution, and rage in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ's return is coupled with fulfillment. Both sets of images are still there, but Jesus Christ is the one who gives these images their peaceful and hopeful character even in the midst of the catastrophic imaginary. And the New Testament is explicit on this idea: instead of anger, Christ's day entails salvation.⁷⁸ Perhaps because "day of the Lord" evoked images of God's violent action upon either human beings or creation, it is necessary for the biblical writers to explain that Christ's return should not be a cause of concern and alarm but quite the opposite.⁷⁹ This same rationale of clarification appears with reference to the "son of man," inasmuch as the Gospel of Luke explicitly affirms that the terrible signs do not show the end of creation, but the coming of the imminent redemption.⁸⁰

2. Characteristics and Signs of the Parousia.

The vocabulary used for depicting the hope in Christ's return expresses the way the first Christians reflected on the parousia and how they put these ideas into images and concepts in their writings. As already mentioned, the very notion of the parousia is the reinterpretation of Jewish expectations through the lens of Jesus Christ. This is its background, and therefore the "quarry" of its words and images. Even the link between the eschatological role of Christ and the Holy Spirit must be understood in light of this theological background. In order to illustrate how the New Testaments uses these images and ideas for depicting Christ's return, they will be

⁷⁸ 1 Co 5:5.

⁷⁹ 2 Thes 2:2.

⁸⁰ Lk 21:28.

grouped in four main characteristics, namely the parousia as a *visible, sudden, glorious, and cosmic* event.⁸¹

2.1. Characteristics of the Parousia

The New Testament conveys that Jesus Christ's return will be *visible*. Leaving aside the discussion concerning whether or not the biblical texts suggest the existence of an invisible coming of Jesus Christ before the visible one,⁸² the New Testament affirms that Jesus Christ's return is a visible, public manifestation of his lordship over all.⁸³ It was already stated that the words “appearing” — ἐπιφάνεια — and “manifestation” — φανερόω — describe that Jesus Christ will be publically recognized as the Lord. To these two expressions, it must be added that the New Testament states that he will be seen again — ἐθεάσασθε — in the same way he was seen ascending into heaven,⁸⁴ and that every eye will see — ὅψεται — his manifestation as the first-born from the dead.⁸⁵ Jesus Christ's identity as Lord already accessible to believers through faith will be publically revealed to and seen by the whole of creation.⁸⁶

This idea of Jesus Christ's return as a visible event is reinforced by the link that some biblical texts make between this public manifestation of Jesus Christ and the Incarnation. The letter to the Colossians, for instance, uses the same word — φανερόω — to convey the present manifestation of God's hidden mystery in Christ,⁸⁷ and the future public revelation of Christ as

⁸¹ The distinction of the parousia in these four characteristics is taken from Adrio König. See Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ-Centered Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 202–9.

⁸² While the first coming of Jesus Christ would be invisible, and *for the sake of* Christ's holy ones (1 Thes 4:13), his second coming would be visible, and *with* the holy ones (1 Thes 3:13). See König, 203–5.

⁸³ Col 3:4; 1 Tm 6:14; 1 Jn 3:2.

⁸⁴ Acts 1:11.

⁸⁵ Rev 1:5–8.

⁸⁶ Phil 2:11.

⁸⁷ Col 1:26.

the life and glory of believers.⁸⁸ The first letter of Peter also uses this word to depict what has been already revealed by God in Christ,⁸⁹ and the future public manifestation of Christ as the chief shepherd.⁹⁰ It is possible to claim, therefore, that the use of the same word or of synonyms for naming both public manifestations not only implies that the first Christian communities linked these two events, but also that they probably expected to see Jesus Christ's return in the same way he had already been seen by them before his ascension. This first characteristic of the parousia stresses, therefore, an idea already stated, namely the expectation of a physical event associated with Christ's coming.

The visible aspect of Jesus Christ's return is combined with a second characteristic, namely that he will come *suddenly*. Here, the imaginary of the Gospels is rich and varied. In fact, the word “αἰφνίδιος” describes the sudden, unexpected, and abrupt reality of Christ's return through the images of a trap,⁹¹ and the labour pains of a pregnant woman.⁹² This same idea is implicit in the image of Jesus' return as lightning in the sky,⁹³ the sound of God's trumpet,⁹⁴ and the twinkling of an eye.⁹⁵

As already stated, Christ's unexpected coming is explicitly linked with the Old Testament theological notions of the “son of man,” and “the day of the Lord.” Christ's return as a sudden event is associated with the unexpected coming of the “son of man,”⁹⁶ and the sudden coming of

⁸⁸ Col 3:4.

⁸⁹ 1 Pt 1:20.

⁹⁰ 1 Pt 5:4.

⁹¹ Lk 21:34-35.

⁹² 1 Thes 5:3.

⁹³ Mt 24:27.

⁹⁴ Mt 24:31; 1 Thes 4:16.

⁹⁵ 1 Co 15:52.

⁹⁶ Mt 24:27, 44; Lk 12:40.

“that day.”⁹⁷ The sudden character of this coming is determined by the radical unpredictability of its day and hour; only the Father knows the moment of this coming.⁹⁸

Alongside the images already singled out, the sudden return of Jesus Christ has other metaphorical variations. The image of Christ as a thief coming during the night is widely present in the New Testament.⁹⁹ This same rationale of an unpredictable return is illustrated through the image of the master of a house who, after giving authority to his employees, is taking a long time coming back from his trip,¹⁰⁰ and through the image of the bridegroom who unexpectedly arrives at his wedding, leaving some attendants locked out of it.¹⁰¹ Unlike the gradual character of other New Testament images such as the growth of God’s kingdom,¹⁰² Christ’s return entails a breaking-in appearance. It is important to say, however, that the function of these images is not to bring fear. Because Jesus Christ’s coming is still ahead, these images are a call to be aware and ready for he can return at any moment. This last idea concerning the function of the “warning signs” associated to the parousia will be revisited further on.

A third characteristic of the parousia is that Jesus Christ will come publicly in *glory* — an attribute of God that the New Testament describes through the word “δόξα.” First of all, it is important to note that Christ’s return in glory cannot be dissociated from the glory he had already revealed inasmuch as he is the revelation of God’s glory in the flesh.¹⁰³ This glory shared with God from eternity¹⁰⁴ is already visible through some signs during Jesus’ historical life,¹⁰⁵ and

⁹⁷ Lk 21:34; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Pt 3:10, 12.

⁹⁸ Mt 24:36; 25:13; Mk 13:32; cf. Acts 1:7; 1 Thes 5:1.

⁹⁹ Mt 24:43; Lk 12:39; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Pt 3:10; Rev 3:1-3.

¹⁰⁰ Mt 24:48, 25:19; Mk 13:36; Lk 12:36, 45.

¹⁰¹ Mt 25:1-13.

¹⁰² Mk 4:26-29; 30-32; Lk 13:20-21.

¹⁰³ Jn 1:14.

¹⁰⁴ Jn 1:1.

¹⁰⁵ Lk 9:32; Jn 2:11; 11:40.

openly manifested in Jesus Christ's resurrection. He is the Lord of glory¹⁰⁶ who shares this majesty with the Father,¹⁰⁷ from whom he receives the glory and to whom he gives it back.¹⁰⁸ When Jesus Christ returns, he will reveal his "δόξα" to all.¹⁰⁹ The same glory revealed, then, in the flesh is the glory in which the risen Christ will return.¹¹⁰

As mentioned, the biblical texts associate the manifestation of God's glory in both the Incarnation and the parousia as intrinsically linked events. In fact, they affirm that God's glory has been seen in Jesus,¹¹¹ and his glory will be seen when Christ will come again as Lord.¹¹² This coherence in depicting these events as a unit is also pointed out in the way the New Testament interprets Jesus' cross¹¹³ and resurrection¹¹⁴ as visible manifestations of God's glory. Christ's return in glory, therefore, is explicitly linked with the glory he had already revealed to his disciples, and which he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit from and to eternity.¹¹⁵

According to the New Testament, the manifestation of Christ's glory in his return will have three main distinctive elements. The first aspect is related to the scope of Christ's revelation. Paul stated that believers will see clearly what they see in riddles now.¹¹⁶ This clarity is related to the public, universal character of Jesus Christ's manifestation.¹¹⁷ The parousia entails, therefore, that not only will the disciples recognize the glory of Jesus Christ, but also every tongue¹¹⁸ as well as the whole of creation¹¹⁹ will proclaim his glory as the Lord. The two other aspects of

¹⁰⁶ Acts 9:3; 1 Cor 2:8; Heb 1:3.

¹⁰⁷ Eph 1:20; Heb 3:3; 8:1.

¹⁰⁸ Jn 12:28; 17:5.

¹⁰⁹ Mt 24:30.

¹¹⁰ 1 Tm 3:16.

¹¹¹ Jn 1:14.

¹¹² 1 Pt 1:7.

¹¹³ Jn 17:1; Heb 2:9.

¹¹⁴ cf. 2 Co 4:6; 2 Pt 1:17.

¹¹⁵ DS 150.

¹¹⁶ 1 Co 13:12.

¹¹⁷ Mt 24:30; Rev 1:7.

¹¹⁸ Phil 2:10-11.

¹¹⁹ Rev 5:13.

Christ's manifestation in glory refer to its purposes: while the parousia will finally abolish all dominions,¹²⁰ the power of evil,¹²¹ suffering,¹²² and death,¹²³ the return of Christ will also reveal the glory of the children of God,¹²⁴ glory which is associated with the glorification of the whole of creation.¹²⁵ Thus, the public, universal manifestation of Christ in glory will abolish all powers and will reveal the glory that human beings share in him.

All these images associated with the manifestation of Christ's glory in his return only reinforced the idea of the expectation of his actual physical coming on the part of the New Testament writers. According to them, the difference between the Incarnation and the parousia concerning the manifestation of Christ's glory is the public, universal character of it.

The fourth and last characteristic of Jesus Christ's coming is its *cosmic* significance for both human beings in particular and the whole of creation in general. Regarding human beings, the parousia mainly entails the universal resurrection of the dead.¹²⁶ In the light of the Old Testament's prophecies of the final retribution of the righteous in personal¹²⁷ and collective terms,¹²⁸ the first Christian communities affirmed that all human beings must appear before Christ in their bodies¹²⁹ in order to be judged by him on the last day.¹³⁰ The New Testament interprets this universal resurrection for judgment through the lens of Jesus Christ's resurrection, and therefore as a hopeful event.¹³¹ Christ is the foundation of hope in the resurrection of all

¹²⁰ 1 Co 15:24; cf. Rev 19:11-16.

¹²¹ 2 Thes 2:8; Rev 20:10.

¹²² Rev 21:4.

¹²³ 1 Co 15:26.

¹²⁴ Rm 8:18-19; Col 3:4; Heb 2:10; 1 Pt 5:1.

¹²⁵ Rm 8:21.

¹²⁶ 1 Co 15:52.

¹²⁷ Is 52:13; 53:10.

¹²⁸ Is 26:19; Ez 37:1-14; Dn 12:2-3; Hos 6:1-3.

¹²⁹ 2 Co 5:10; 1 Pt 4:4-5.

¹³⁰ Mt 25:31-46; Rm 2:16; Rev 11:8; 20:12-13.

¹³¹ 1 Thes 1:10.

inasmuch as he is the first-born from the dead,¹³² the first fruit of those who will be raised up from death.¹³³ If Jesus Christ's resurrection is the way that human beings will be raised up by God,¹³⁴ human beings' resurrection entails the transformation of their bodies in accordance with Jesus Christ's.¹³⁵ This is why Paul illustrates the parousia as an event that links the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers in terms of stages of the same reality: first, Christ's resurrection; second, the resurrection of those who belong to him at his return; finally, the abolition of all powers, and the new creation in which God is all in all.¹³⁶ It is important to note that, although this new life is already inaugurated in Christ's resurrection and believers can participate in it through baptism,¹³⁷ the universal resurrection is an event that will take place only when Christ will return on the last day. And one of the reasons for this "not yet" of the universal resurrection lies in its physical, material reality. Human beings' universal, bodily resurrection for judgment will occur, therefore, when Christ comes again.

Besides the consequences for human beings, the cosmic aspect of Christ's return entails significance for the whole of creation. Although this theme will be object of an entire section of the following chapter, it is possible to state the following concerning the fulfillment of creation. First of all, the effects of Christ's return for the whole of creation are illustrated through two different imaginaries. On the one hand, the New Testament affirms that the parousia will be preceded and accompanied by cosmic catastrophic phenomena: earthquakes,¹³⁸ the collapse of heaven,¹³⁹ and the disintegration of these material realities in flames.¹⁴⁰ Most of this imaginary

¹³² Col 1:18; Rev 1:5.

¹³³ 1 Co 15:20.

¹³⁴ Rm 6:5; 1 Thes 4:14.

¹³⁵ Rm 8:11, 23; 1 Co 15: 35f.

¹³⁶ 1 Co 15:23-28.

¹³⁷ 1 Co 6:14; 15:22.

¹³⁸ Mt 24:7.

¹³⁹ Mt 24:29.

¹⁴⁰ 2 Pt 3:10; Rev 6:12-17; 8:5.

linked to Christ's return comes from the Old Testament's illustration of the "day of the Lord" as the breakdown of heaven and earth.¹⁴¹ On the other hand, however, the New Testament states that Christ's return will entail the fulfillment of the whole of creation. In fact, the "day of the Lord" also depicts the Old Testament's hope in terms of the fulfillment of creation, an idea summed up in the image of "new heavens and new earth."¹⁴² This hope in God's coming as the fulfillment of creation is reinterpreted by the first Christian communities in the light of Jesus Christ as the one who will bring "the new heavens and new earth"¹⁴³ since he is the fulfillment of all things.¹⁴⁴ Just as Christ's return entails hope in human beings' resurrection as the fulfillment of the whole person — including, therefore, the physical reality — his coming is also the basis for hope in the fulfillment of the whole of creation in all its aspects.¹⁴⁵

2.2. Signs of the Parousia.

In addition to these four main characteristics of Christ's return — visible, sudden, glorious, and cosmic — the New Testament affirms that the parousia will be accompanied by certain types of signs that will precede its coming. Mostly inspired by the apocalyptic literature, these signs do not intend to predict the end, but to illustrate events that the first Christians communities associated with their hope in Christ's imminent return. These signs can be summarized as four:

¹⁴¹ Is 13:6, 10; 24:18-23; Jl 2:10f.

¹⁴² Is 65:17; 66:22.

¹⁴³ 2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1.

¹⁴⁴ Acts 3:20-21; 1 Co 15:28; Eph 1:22; Col 1:19-20; Heb 1:2.

¹⁴⁵ For the return of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, see also Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*; Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*; Mare, "A Study of the New Testament Concept of the Parousia"; N. T. Wright, "The Return of the King," in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 612–62; Russell, *The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*.

first, the loss of faith; second, the arrival of the anti-Christ; third, the conversion of the Jews; finally, the conversion of the pagans.¹⁴⁶

According to the New Testament, a sign that will precede the parousia is loss of faith on the part of some believers. Concerning the signs of the end of the present age,¹⁴⁷ Matthew's gospel states, for instance, that believers will stumble¹⁴⁸ and their love will grow cold.¹⁴⁹ Other New Testament passages reflect this idea through the question about the existence of faith when the "son of man" comes,¹⁵⁰ and the fact that some believers will renounce their faith in the last days.¹⁵¹ This loss of faith as a sign of Christ's return, however, must be interpreted in the context in which this sign is described by the mentioned texts: persecutions,¹⁵² and false teachings,¹⁵³ both main concerns for the first Christian generations. Rather than an illustration of the end, this sign indicates the need to stay firm despite the persecutions,¹⁵⁴ to remain faithful to Christ's teachings,¹⁵⁵ and not to lose hope in God's action even if God delays in making justice.¹⁵⁶ This sign, therefore, does not aim to depict the closeness of the end of creation, but to bring hope and strength to those who are in difficulties in order that they might remain faithful until Jesus Christ returns.

¹⁴⁶ These four characteristics are summarized, in a certain sense, in the eschatological signs depicted by Mk 13:5-37 and Mt 24:4-14. According to Matthew, for instance, the signs of the end times are nine: false prophets (v. 5, 11), wars (v. 6), fights among nations (v. 7), famines (v. 7), earthquakes (v. 7), persecutions (v. 9), loss of faith (v. 10, 12), endurance (v. 13), and proclamation of the Gospel to all nations (v. 14). For an overview of Mark's text, see George Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005). For Matthew's text, see John Walvoord, "Christ's Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age: Signs of the End of the Age," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128, no. 512 (1971): 316–26.

Matthew's text,

¹⁴⁷ Mt 24:3.

¹⁴⁸ Mt 24:10.

¹⁴⁹ Mt 24:12.

¹⁵⁰ Lk 18:8.

¹⁵¹ 1 Tm 4:1-2.

¹⁵² Mt 24:9.

¹⁵³ 1 Tm 4:2.

¹⁵⁴ Mt 24:13.

¹⁵⁵ 1 Co 15:58; 16:13.

¹⁵⁶ Lk 18:1, 7.

This same principle applies in the case of the arrival of the anti-Christ as a sign that precedes Christ's return. In fact, the anti-Christ and its related images are theological responses to a context of persecution and false teaching that the first Christians faced. Inspired by the Old Testament's imaginary of forces that oppose God,¹⁵⁷ nations who fight God's people,¹⁵⁸ and kings who resist God's will,¹⁵⁹ the New Testament uses the image of the four beasts¹⁶⁰ and the anti-Christ¹⁶¹ to describe both the anxieties concerning the current situation and the hope in God's imminent action. While the beasts of the book of Revelation refer to political and religious forces of the Roman Empire that persecute Christians, the anti-Christ mostly represents the one who misleads people concerning the true faith in Jesus Christ. Particularly for the anti-Christ, the very meaning of its image is explicitly linked to Christ's coming:¹⁶² because the anti-Christ represents both the ultimate expression of resistance to God's plan and the one who distorts the truth revealed in Christ, God's justice will not be long in coming. God cannot tolerate this damaging situation, and therefore God will come soon to act in favor of God's people.

The third and fourth signs that precede Christ's return — the conversion of both the Jews and the pagans — are both based on the same fundamental principle, namely the restoration of the original unity of all human beings in Christ through the acceptance of his Gospel. In a certain sense, these two signs are the flip side of the first two ones: while the loss of faith and the coming of the Anti-Christ convey the distancing of believers from faith in Christ, the conversion of both the Jews and the pagans shows the progressive fulfillment of God's plan for human beings inasmuch as they accept Christ. This call to conversion of these two groups to Christ¹⁶³ is

¹⁵⁷ Is 51:9-10; Ps 74:13-14.

¹⁵⁸ Ex 3; Is 13; *et parr.*

¹⁵⁹ Is 24-27; Ez 38-39, Dn 11:36; *et parr.*

¹⁶⁰ Rev 13:1-18.

¹⁶¹ 2 Thes 2:1-11; 1 Jn 2:22; 4:2-3; 2 Jn 1:7.

¹⁶² 2 Thes 2:1; 1 Jn 2:18.

¹⁶³ Rm 1:16.

done within the background of the Old Testament's hope in God as the one who gathers all peoples and nations. This hope — summed up in the sentence “they shall be my people, and I will be their God” — expresses the conviction that the dispersed people of God will be rescued from other nations to be gathered as one house on the final day.¹⁶⁴ This eschatological expectation present in Jewish tradition is the theological context of the New Testament's universal call to become one body in Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁵ Even though all human beings will be gathered into one when Christ returns, this reality is already present among those who have both received and accepted the Gospel. The latter must be preached, therefore among the nations,¹⁶⁶ and its universal proclamation¹⁶⁷ must reach the very ends of the earth¹⁶⁸ up to the end of time.¹⁶⁹ For all these reasons, and recognizing the historical baggage of the expression “conversion of the Jews,” the conversion of these two named groups cannot be understood as a specific negative bias against those groups of people on the part of the biblical writers. Rather, conversion of both the Jews and pagans is a symbol of the restoration of human beings' original unity in God through the acceptance of the Gospel, and therefore a sign of the imminent return of Christ.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ Is 11:11-12; Jer 3:6-18; Hos 3:4-5; Am 9:8-10. The expression “they shall be my people, and I will be their God” and its variants make reference to God's covenant with Abram in Gn 17:7. Thus one of the main elements of this covenant is the mutual relationship that God establishes with the people. Always referring to the covenant and the renewal of it, the cited expression can be found in the context of the liberation of Israel and the manifestation of God's identity (Ex 6:7), the possession of the land (Lv 26:12), the internalization of the Torah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Jer 31:33); the exile and the reconstitution of Israel as God's people (Ez 37:27), and God's dwelling in Jerusalem (Zec 8:8).

¹⁶⁵ Rm 12:4-5; 1 Co 12:27; Col 3:15.

¹⁶⁶ Rm 11:25; Col 1:27.

¹⁶⁷ Mk 16:15.

¹⁶⁸ Acts 1:8; 13:47.

¹⁶⁹ Mt 28:19-20.

¹⁷⁰ Mt 24:14. For an explanation of the judgment that Jesus Christ will bring to believers and nonbelievers at his coming, see Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, 221–43.

3. The Parousia and its Elements in Tension.

As exemplified through the notions of “son of man” and “day of the Lord,” the depiction of Christ’s return is shaped by the reinterpretation of several Old Testament hopes, each of which has different meanings and scopes. This gathering of various expectations, together with the relationship of continuity and discontinuity between the New Testament and its primary theological background, explains the inner tensions of the parousia as theological symbol. On the basis of many elements already discussed, this section will focus on two specific tensions that will serve for a better understanding not only of the discussions concerning the parousia in general, but also specifically of the expected consequences of Jesus Christ’s return for the whole of creation. These tensions will be illustrated through two dualities: first, the imminence/delay duality of Christ’s return, and the invitation for perseverance that this tension involves; second, the revelation/fulfillment duality which the parousia entails.

3.1. Duality “Imminence and Delay” of Christ’s Return.

The relationship between imminence and delay is a core element in the illustration of God’s coming in Scripture. The expectation of the imminent fulfillment of God’s promise and the apparent delay of its accomplishment is a theological idea that configured the Old Testament’s hopes, and shaped the way early Christians depicted Jesus Christ’s imminent return in glory.

In order to depict the way these elements interact with each other within the New Testament writings, the following paragraphs will show two things: on the one hand, how the New Testament affirms the imminence of Christ’s return and his delay; on the other hand, how this tension was not a source of conflict for the first Christian generation, but rather a way to illustrate the importance of expecting Christ’s return.

According to the New Testament Christ's return is imminent. Both its earliest and latest texts sustain the same idea. The Lord is near,¹⁷¹ at hand,¹⁷² and he will not delay.¹⁷³ The time of waiting is over¹⁷⁴ for the Lord is already at the door¹⁷⁵ ready for the harvest.¹⁷⁶ The expectation of the imminent return of Christ leads Paul to affirm that he will be alive when Jesus Christ returns,¹⁷⁷ and those who have longed for Jesus Christ's appearance will receive the crown of uprightness.¹⁷⁸ The community must ask, therefore, for Christ's coming¹⁷⁹ and be patient¹⁸⁰ because present suffering and persecution will endure for just a little while.¹⁸¹ The parousia will happen soon¹⁸² and believers must awake from sleep; the night is gone and the day is near.¹⁸³

The imminence of Christ's coming is directly associated with the end of history. The parousia entails the passing away of the old, and the coming of the new.¹⁸⁴ The evil forces will be soon overcome by the glorious presence of Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁵ All things will end soon,¹⁸⁶ and Jesus' generation will witness this event.¹⁸⁷ The New Testament affirms, therefore, that the end is near¹⁸⁸ and it will happen soon.¹⁸⁹ Christ's return is imminent.

These expectations concerning the imminence of Jesus Christ's return coexist, however, with statements regarding its delay. There are some texts that even affirm both things in the same

¹⁷¹ Rm 13:11; 2 Co 1:14.

¹⁷² Phil 4:5; 1 Thes 5:2.

¹⁷³ Heb 9:28; 10:37.

¹⁷⁴ Rev 10:6-7.

¹⁷⁵ Mt 24:33; Mk 13:29; Jas 5:9.

¹⁷⁶ Mt 3:12; 9:37-38; 13:39.

¹⁷⁷ 1 Thes 2:19; 4:17; 1 Co 15:51.

¹⁷⁸ 2 Tm 4:8.

¹⁷⁹ 1 Co 16:22.

¹⁸⁰ Jas 5:8.

¹⁸¹ 1 Pt 1:6; 5:10.

¹⁸² Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6-7, 12, 20.

¹⁸³ Rm 13:11-12.

¹⁸⁴ 1 Co 7:31; 2 Co 5:17.

¹⁸⁵ Rm 16:20; Rev 12:12; 17:8, 10.

¹⁸⁶ 1 Pt 4:7.

¹⁸⁷ Mt 10:23; 16:27-28; 24:34; Mk 9:1; 13:30; Lk 21:31.

¹⁸⁸ Mt 13:26.

¹⁸⁹ Mt 10:23; Mk 9:1.

verses. For instance, Christ will come soon but believers should be neither alarmed nor confused since Christ's day is still not here;¹⁹⁰ although the time is near, it will not come immediately.¹⁹¹ This tension between Christ's coming and its delay is illustrated by a variety of images: the master of the house who went on a long journey¹⁹² and took too much time coming back,¹⁹³ the bridegroom who delays his coming,¹⁹⁴ and the wheat and weeds that must still grow together, and therefore must wait their time of harvest.¹⁹⁵ This is why, even if some people announce the end saying that it is at hand,¹⁹⁶ the community must refuse them for they are false prophets.¹⁹⁷ Nobody can predict the end; only God knows the time of that day.¹⁹⁸ In fact, confronted by the promise of God's coming and the apparent breach of God's promise since the beginning of creation,¹⁹⁹ Peter affirms that God's time is different than human's, and the main cause of God's delay is that not everyone has yet repented.²⁰⁰ Together with the imminent return of Jesus Christ, the New Testament sustains, therefore, a period of expectation between the present time and the future realization of this promise. Although Christ is expected soon, his coming is delayed.

It is important to state, however, that Christ's delay did not change the first Christian's expectations as the exegetical discussion concerning the early twentieth century's reception of Jesus' preaching directly claimed. As mentioned in the first chapter, this imminence/delay duality of Jesus Christ's return was the core of the exegetical debate. According to Weiss and Schweitzer, the expectation of Christ's imminent coming and the disappointment of his delay

¹⁹⁰ 2 Thes 2:1-2.

¹⁹¹ Lk 21:8-9.

¹⁹² Lk 19:12; 20:19.

¹⁹³ Mt 24:48; 25:19; Mk 13:35; Lk 12:44-46.

¹⁹⁴ Mt 25:10.

¹⁹⁵ Mt 13:24-30.

¹⁹⁶ Lk 21:8.

¹⁹⁷ Mt 24:4, 11, 23-25.

¹⁹⁸ Mt 24:36, 42; 25:13; Mk 13:32; cf. Lk 12:40; Acts 1:7; 1 Thes 5:1.

¹⁹⁹ 2 Pt 3:4.

²⁰⁰ 2 Pt 3:8-9.

should have been the cause of a major crisis within the early Christian community. The non-occurrence of Jesus Christ's return implied the abandonment of the original expectations on the part of early Christianity, its "de-eschatologization," and its subsequent restructuring into a sacramental, organized religion. For these two biblical scholars, therefore, the delay of the parousia understood as the non-return of Christ was the cause of a major transformation within the first Christian communities.²⁰¹

Against this interpretation, C. H. Dodd, Bultmann, and Cullmann affirmed that the delay of Christ's return did not modify the original expectations of the Christian community. As was already pointed out, C.H. Dodd maintained that God's kingdom is fully present in Jesus, and therefore his return represents only the confirmation of something that is already available for all.²⁰² The notion of the parousia is a post-Easter statement, and therefore its imminence or delay is not part of the core of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. Bultmann also agreed about the low impact of this delay for early Christians. In his case, however, the reason of this minor influence lays in the existential reality of Christian eschatology. Because the parousia is not "temporal" but existential, this event is only the expression, in a collective sense, of the permanent vigilance that each person must have in the ever-present call to personal conversion to God's kingdom.²⁰³ Finally, Cullmann also affirmed that the delay of the parousia did not produce crisis within Christians. According to him, the non-occurrence of the parousia is not yet a problem inasmuch as it is the fulfillment of the whole history of salvation already realized in Jesus Christ.²⁰⁴ Moreover, the work of the Spirit in the church fills the gap between the already

²⁰¹ The biblical scholar Martin Werner, for instance, adopted this thesis concerning the delay of the parousia, and how its non-occurrence produced a crisis in early Christianity and an important change in its original structure. See Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma: An Historical Study of Its Problem* (New York: Harper, 1957), 40–55.

²⁰² See Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 165.

²⁰³ See Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155.

²⁰⁴ See Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 38.

and not yet of salvation, without denying the expectation of Christ's return for the church and the importance of Christian vigilance.²⁰⁵ Albeit for different reasons, these three biblical scholars sustained that the delay of the parousia is somewhat pointless since there is nothing to expect: it is either a permanent existential possibility of a new life in Christ or the accomplishment of an event already fulfilled in Jesus Christ and fully available to all.

Regardless of the evident difference between these two theological stances — the transformation of the original Christian message because of the delay of the parousia, and the continuity of this original message because of the existential meaning of the parousia — both of them assume that the first communities could not believe in Jesus Christ's physical return because of his delay. In other words, the first Christians had to face two transformations in their original faith: on the one hand, they had to choose between expecting Christ's imminent return and believing in Christ despite his delay; on the other hand, they had to replace their first expectations by a new understanding of Christ's presence inasmuch as the two expectations cannot coexist. In both mentioned theological stances, the actual return of Christ is a notion that must be dismissed because its concrete reality had not already occurred.

This presupposition can be challenged from two perspectives that share the same basic principle, namely the imminence/delay duality in reference to Christ's return did not seem problematic for the Christian communities.

The first perspective derives from the interpretation of the Old Testament's eschatological hopes, in which the imminence and delay of God's coming are linked elements. The notion of the parousia is not the only expectation confronted with this duality. In fact, the theological background of this notion — the Jewish eschatological expectations concerning God's coming

²⁰⁵ See Cullmann, 125.

— faces the same tension between imminence and expectation. On the one hand, the Old Testament clearly affirms that Israel expected God’s coming as a near event.²⁰⁶ Israel hopes in God’s coming because God does not forget God’s people; God is always near to those who trust in God.²⁰⁷ God will show God’s power in the near future in the same way God acted in favor of the people before.²⁰⁸ Although this event will be difficult to endure or even to withstand,²⁰⁹ God’s day will come soon both to save God’s people from the hand of its enemies and set up God’s rule among God’s people. This is why, against people who say that God’s promises will be delayed and be fulfilled only in a distant future,²¹⁰ God affirms that God’s words will be fulfilled soon because God will be faithful to what he said.²¹¹ In the same way God has kept God’s promise before, God will fulfill God’s words. God’s promises are trustworthy.

This hope in God’s imminent coming, on the other hand, is coupled with the idea of God’s delay. The plea for God’s coming on the part of believers entails that God is taking a long time to act in favor of God’s people.²¹² Some texts affirm that God’s coming will take a little while longer.²¹³ It is important to note that the question concerning God’s delay in the Old Testament — “how long, God?”²¹⁴ — does not refer directly either to doubt about God’s coming or to God’s sovereignty over all; the apparent delay belongs to the purpose of God, and therefore believers must confidently wait.²¹⁵ Rather than the problem of the nonfulfillment of the promise, the delay

²⁰⁶ Is 13:6; Ez 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Ob 15; Zeph 1:14

²⁰⁷ Ps 144:7; Jos 4:24.

²⁰⁸ Dt 6:21; 7:19; 1 Kgs 8:57; Ps 27:9, cf. Is 51:9.

²⁰⁹ Ps 76:7; Mal 3:1.

²¹⁰ Ez 12:22, 27.

²¹¹ Ez 12:25, 28.

²¹² Ps 74:9-11; Dn 9:19.

²¹³ Is 26:20; Hg 2:6.

²¹⁴ Jb 7:19; Ps 35:17; 89:46; 90:13; Jr 47:6; Hab 1:2; Dn 12:6; *et parr.*

²¹⁵ Hab 2:3.

of God's coming raises the question of the persistence of evil.²¹⁶ The request to God is made because the delay in God's coming further endangers the believer.²¹⁷ The call to God not to abandon the work of God's hands,²¹⁸ or to wake up because God seems asleep²¹⁹ is the plea of a believer within a context of injustice and violence that contradicts God's righteousness. The call for God's coming is the call for God's justice.²²⁰ It is possible to affirm, therefore, that the structural tensions within the notion of the parousia derive from the assimilation of tensions coming from the Old Testament notions themselves, in which the imminence/delay duality is constitutive rather than an option to make to the detriment of one or other element.

The second perspective affirming that the delay of the parousia was not a causal factor in the evolution of the first Christians communities derives from the way they reacted to this event. At this point, the justifications are diverse. For instance, the delay of the parousia was not conceived as a problem for the whole Christian community, but for some gnostic tendencies within it. C. H. Talbert holds this idea by affirming, against those who use the second letter of Peter to justify a serious crisis within the first Christian communities, that the context of the letter shows that only the gnostic heretical trends within the community consider the delay of the parousia as a problem.²²¹ Other stances argue that there was a natural adjustment of the expectation concerning the parousia. According to David Flusser, for instance, Christians of the two first centuries awaited the return of Christ at a close, fixed date. As time passed, the expectation of this imminent day slowly gave way to the postponement of this event and subsequently the abolition of a fixed date. However, and despite these changes in the

²¹⁶ See Richard Bauckham, "The Delay of the Parousia," in *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 8.

²¹⁷ Ps 40:17; 70:5.

²¹⁸ Ps 138:8.

²¹⁹ Ps 44:23.

²²⁰ Mt 2:17.

²²¹ See Charles H. Talbert, "II Peter and the Delay of the Parousia," *Vigiliae Christianae* 20, no. 3 (1966): 142.

interpretation of Jesus Christ's coming, the adjustment of the expectation did not entail a major change either in the structure of the church or the expectations of Christians during the first centuries.²²² This idea is shared by Jeffrey Siker. He affirms that the imminence and delay of the parousia are notions that run together in a relationship of tension not only in the New Testament's expectation, but also in the way of understanding Christ's coming in eschatological thought during the second and third centuries. Although the interpretation of Christ's coming moved from an imminent event to a more spiritual expectation during the first centuries, the reason for these changes was not a crisis of expectations, but the reinterpretation of the same hope depending on the specific situation that believers were living during those years.²²³ N. T. Wright assumes a similar stance.²²⁴ Finally, other stances argue that the delay of the parousia did not affect the first Christian community in its way of living and thinking because Jesus Christ already brought God's fulfillment.²²⁵ According to David Aune, for instance, believers already have experience of the totality that the parousia will bring in the future. This experience is expressed through worship, inasmuch as Jesus Christ becomes present in the midst of the community that celebrates him.²²⁶ The decrease or intensification of the apocalyptic language was due to the context that the community was facing. In fact, the collective notion of the parousia began to integrate other ideas, such as the Hellenistic concern about personal immortality. For Aune, this idea was important, especially in the context of martyrdom.²²⁷

²²² See David Flusser, "Salvation Present and Future," in *Types of Redemption; Contributions to the Theme of the Study-Conference Held at Jerusalem 14th to 19th July 1968*, ed. C.J. Bleeker and R.J.Z. Werblowsky (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 58.

²²³ See Jeffrey Siker, "The Parousia of Jesus in Second and Third Century Christianity," in *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*, ed. John Carroll (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 167.

²²⁴ See Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:342–43.

²²⁵ See David Aune, "The Significance of the Delay of the Parousia for Early Christianity," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 87.

²²⁶ See Aune, 105.

²²⁷ See Aune, 108–9.

Even though all these cited stances have counterpoints and valid criticisms, they justify the affirmation that the duality imminence/delay was not necessarily problematic for the Christian communities. The coexistence without exclusion of the two elements in the first centuries of Christian life can be understood from either its roots - as assimilation of Jewish eschatological expectations confronted with the same difficulty between imminence and delay of God's coming – or its practical consequences for the faith and life of the first Christian communities. This can explain, as well, why the consequent theological reflection kept these two elements in tension – and not the option for one of them or even their complete disappearance. In fact, the coexistence of the immanence and delay of Christ's return in the Christian reflection remained in spite of either the still non-realization of the parousia or the full understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as absolute, final manifestation of God's identity within creation.²²⁸

Another important reason for affirming this imminence/delay motif as a core element of the New Testament's expectations concerning Jesus Christ's return is the result this tension produces. The immediate consequence of affirming imminence and delay as correlative elements is the "expectation" that this tension creates of God's coming. From this perspective, the delay of God's coming is not necessarily perceived as the non-fulfillment of the promise or something that led to a crisis of hope. Rather, the imminence of God's coming and the fact that this event remained unpredictable in both its time and manner, is a call to watchfulness on the part of believers. In fact, the statements concerning Jesus Christ's delay in the New Testament are mostly associated with these appeals.

²²⁸ For the return of Jesus Christ and its interpretation in early Christianity, see John Carroll, *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000).

In order to illustrate this claim from a biblical perspective, it is possible to show six major motifs related to Christ's coming in the New Testament, namely *waiting*, *watching*, *being prepared*, *repentance*, *pride or shame*, and *proclamation of Christ as the Lord*.²²⁹ In the context of these motifs, this section will end showing the link of the parousia with the eschatological role of the Holy Spirit.

First of all, Christ's return entails the necessity of *waiting*. Believers expect Jesus Christ to come from heaven, and they are waiting for him.²³⁰ They must wait in hope for the blessing that comes with Christ's manifestation in glory,²³¹ as well as the manifestation of the children of God,²³² and the transformation of creation into new heavens and new earth.²³³ It is important to note, however, that this "waiting for Christ" is not directly associated with the end of creation, but with perseverance in times of difficulties in order to receive justification. Believers must be patient because Christ will come soon,²³⁴ and those who patiently endure persecution will be blessed as a reward for their perseverance.²³⁵ The call to waiting does not directly refer, therefore, to the imminent arrival of the end of time. Rather, people must wait and persevere in order to receive God's justification that will be received at the end.²³⁶ The glorification is the final accomplishment that those who have been destined, called, and justified by God will receive in accordance with the pattern of the Jesus Christ.²³⁷ God gives strength to await this final moment,²³⁸ for Jesus Christ will give the "crown of uprightness" to those who have longed for his

²²⁹ The distinction of the characteristics related to the delay of the parousia is mainly taken from Graydon Snyder. See Graydon Snyder, "Sayings on the Delay of the End," *Biblical Research* 20 (1975): 29–35.

²³⁰ Phil 3:20; 1 Thes 1:10.

²³¹ Ti 2:13.

²³² Rm 8:19.

²³³ 2 Pt 3:12.

²³⁴ Jas 5:8.

²³⁵ Jas 5:10–11.

²³⁶ Heb 9:28; 10:35–36; cf. 2 Pt 3:14–15.

²³⁷ Rm 8:29–30.

²³⁸ 1 Co 1:7–8.

manifestation.²³⁹ This is why the expectancy in the future coming of Christ is a cause of joy,²⁴⁰ and perseverant waiting.

Along with the importance of waiting, Christ's return involves the necessity to stay *watching*. In a certain sense, the latter qualifies the former. The New Testament widely uses the image of the thief arriving unexpectedly during the night for depicting the importance of waiting alert, watching for God's coming.²⁴¹ It is interesting that, while the importance of *waiting* is linked to the idea of justification, the image of the thief and the invitation to be always *watching* refers to the idea of judgment. Although the threatening tone of the Lord coming at an unexpected moment²⁴² is balanced with the joyful fact that Christ himself will serve the one who is awake at his coming,²⁴³ the reason for watching is to be on guard.²⁴⁴ The act of staying on watch as a qualification of the way to be waiting for Christ's return implies that believers not only must have patience and confidence in the midst of struggles, but also must behave properly in accord with their faith because Christ can return at any moment.

The most evident consequence of staying on watch is the necessity of *being prepared*. The imminence of an incalculable, unpredictable event demands constant vigilance and preparation. Believers must be attentive by living decently.²⁴⁵ The time of delay, therefore, entails preparation inasmuch as the master of the house will return demanding an account for the goods entrusted to his servants.²⁴⁶ Because there is no escape in the day of the Lord,²⁴⁷ people should not

²³⁹ 2 Tim 4:8.

²⁴⁰ Phil 4:4-5.

²⁴¹ Mt 24:42-44; Lk 12:39-40; 1 Thes 5:2, 7; 2 Pt 3:10; Rev 3:3.

²⁴² Mt 25:1-13.

²⁴³ Lk 12:37.

²⁴⁴ Mk 13:23, 33-37; Lk 21:34-36.

²⁴⁵ Rm 13:11-13.

²⁴⁶ Lk 19:12-27.

²⁴⁷ 1 Thes 5:3.

live in the dark but as children of the light.²⁴⁸ All these warnings, however, do not point to Jesus Christ's return itself,²⁴⁹ but to being unprepared for it. In fact, the parousia entails "disaster" for those who are not prepared or constantly vigilant.²⁵⁰

The fourth characteristic of Christ's return is *repentance*. The announcement of Christ's imminent coming is an invitation to repent²⁵¹ in order to avoid judgment.²⁵² This idea of God coming for judgment, and therefore the call for conversion, is illustrated through the image of the axe laid to the tree,²⁵³ and the reference to the days of Noah and Lot²⁵⁴ which are direct allusions to the flood that inundated all, and to the devastation of the entire city of Sodom, respectively.²⁵⁵ In all these cases, the announcement of Jesus Christ's return is a call to repentance and conversion. In fact, the delay of his coming seeks to bring all people to repentance.²⁵⁶

Associated with the call for repentance, the parousia will be a cause of either *pride* or *shame*. Although believers will be raised up with Christ as a gift of God and not as the result of works,²⁵⁷ the New Testament also states that all people will answer for their own behavior before God,²⁵⁸ and God will repay everyone as their deeds deserve.²⁵⁹ While the one who has behaved toward everyone correctly can be proud when Christ comes,²⁶⁰ the wicked will be punished on that day.²⁶¹ It is important to note, however, that the time previous to Christ's return is an

²⁴⁸ 1 Thes 5:4-5.

²⁴⁹ 2 Thes 2:2.

²⁵⁰ Lk 17:37.

²⁵¹ Acts 4:19-21; Rev 3:3.

²⁵² Lk 12:57--13:5.

²⁵³ Lk 3:7-9, 17; 13:6-9.

²⁵⁴ Lk 17:26, 28.

²⁵⁵ Lk 17:27, 29.

²⁵⁶ 2 Pt 3:9.

²⁵⁷ Eph 2:6-9.

²⁵⁸ Rm 14:12; 1 Pt 4:5.

²⁵⁹ Mt 16:27; Rm 2:5-6; 2 Co 5:10; Rev 22:12.

²⁶⁰ 2 Co 1:12-14.

²⁶¹ 2 Pt 2:9.

invitation for all people to do everything with no faults or failures,²⁶² acting in an upright and religious way,²⁶³ thus being ready for living as Jesus Christ lived.²⁶⁴ The call to repentance, therefore, aims to produce believers who can be proud and free of guilt on the day of the Lord,²⁶⁵ fearless and without shame when Christ appears.²⁶⁶ And because God wants that all be saved, God self will complete the good work that he already began until the day of Jesus Christ's coming.²⁶⁷ In fact, Jesus Christ gives strength to those who wait for being "irreproachable" on the day of God.²⁶⁸

The last feature of the parousia refers to the *proclamation of Christ as the Lord*. Believers must proclaim the coming of both Jesus Christ and his kingdom.²⁶⁹ The ascension and future coming of Christ is directly associated with the present task entrusted to the apostle of being his witnesses.²⁷⁰ According the narrative ascension, the angels said to the apostles that neither the time nor the date of Christ's return should be a crucial concern for them, but the proclamation of the kingdom of God to "earth's remote ends."²⁷¹ Thus the delay of the parousia is filled with the mission of the Christian community inasmuch as the latter proclaims Christ's return through its preaching²⁷² and celebrates Christ's imminent coming through the sacraments and its way of living.²⁷³ This is why the church, although it is already filled with the presence of God, continues asking for Jesus Christ's return.

²⁶² 1 Tm 6:14.

²⁶³ Ti 2:12-13.

²⁶⁴ 1 Pt 1:14.

²⁶⁵ Phil 1:10; 2:16.

²⁶⁶ 1 Jn 2:28.

²⁶⁷ Phil 1:6.

²⁶⁸ 1 Co 1:8.

²⁶⁹ 2 Tm 4:2.

²⁷⁰ Acts 1:8.

²⁷¹ Acts 1:7-8.

²⁷² Acts 2:32-36, 42; 3:21.

²⁷³ Acts 2:44-47.

All these six characteristics associated with the parousia can be also linked with the eschatological role of the Holy Spirit.²⁷⁴ As Christ, the Spirit is the first-fruit of the new creation.²⁷⁵ The breath of the Spirit by the risen Lord upon the community has its direct parallel with the outpouring of the Spirit in Pentecost as sign of the arrival of the end times.²⁷⁶ The gift of the Spirit is the beginning of the process of salvation and configuration to Christ,²⁷⁷ and therefore allows believers to experience God's kingdom already at work within reality.²⁷⁸ Because the Spirit of the risen Christ started God's work of fulfillment of the whole of creation, the Spirit is called, among other names, as the giver of eternal life.²⁷⁹ Thus the Spirit is guarantee that God will finish the process already begun in the resurrection of Christ.²⁸⁰ It is possible to affirm then that the New Testament's eschatology is both Christological and pneumatological.²⁸¹

Regarding the expectation of Christ's return, the Spirit helps to wait for the Lord and prepares believers for his coming. For instance, the Spirit gives force to effectively proclaim the Gospel and to firmly endure persecutions until Christ comes again.²⁸² On this point, it is important to highlight that believers do not receive their apostolic zeal and their patience by their own personal efforts. Rather than the "apatheia" of the Stoics, the Christian "patience" is based

²⁷⁴ Rodman Williams, "The Holy Spirit and Eschatology," *Pneuma* 3, no. 2 (1981): 54–58; Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit*, Book, Whole (New York: Orbis Books, 2004); César Ávila, "El Espíritu Santo y La Esperanza En El Discurso Performativo de La Escatología Cristiana," *Teología y Cultura* 13, no. 18 (2016): 57–78.

²⁷⁵ Rm 8:23.

²⁷⁶ Jn 20:22 and Acts 2:17. In this case, the Acts of the Apostle make direct reference to the prophecy of Joel – Jl 2:28 – in which the outpouring of God's spirit "upon all flesh" is the eschatological sign of God's final and definitive presence in the midst of God's people.

²⁷⁷ 2 Co 3:18; 2 Thes 2:13.

²⁷⁸ Rm 14:17; 1 Co 6:9-11; Gal 5:16-24; Eph 1:13-14.

²⁷⁹ Rm 8:10-11; Gal 6:8. The expression "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life" is a phrase originated from the Council of Constantinople (DH 150).

²⁸⁰ 2 Co 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-15.

²⁸¹ For instance, Andrew Pitts argues that the Pauline eschatology has a rhetorical diversity within a structural unity. The diversity explains the different images and tensions, and the unity shows the inner coherence of the eschatological thought through the lens of the Christological and pneumatological approach. See Andrew Pitts, "Unity and Diversity in Pauline Eschatology," in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 65–92. See also James Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit: Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁸² Eph 3:16.

on the power of the Spirit.²⁸³ Only God's Spirit gives believers the power for facing difficulties precisely in the middle of their own weaknesses.²⁸⁴ This life of the Spirit is not received by believers from outside. In fact, the empowerment of believers by the Spirit acts from within because they are inhabited, through baptism, by the same Spirit that rose Christ from the dead.²⁸⁵ The same Spirit who transforms believers in "temple of the Holy Spirit,"²⁸⁶ and therefore is already at work in the present, is the one who creates all things in the past and fulfills the whole of creation in the future.²⁸⁷ For all these reasons, therefore, the six mentioned characteristics associated with the parousia can also receive a pneumatological perspective. The Spirit helps believers to wait for the Lord, prepares them for his coming, and acts empowering them toward the future.

Before continuing with the next section, it is important to summarize the following ideas. First of all, the delay of the imminent parousia does not necessarily mean the non-realization of God's plans, especially when Scripture is quite clear in affirming that the time of God has already fully come.²⁸⁸ Rather, the waiting for Christ's return and even his delay produce expectation, because what has been already realized in a hidden but concrete way will be fully revealed when he also concretely comes again. This is why Jesus Christ's coming could not be conceived by the first Christian communities merely as a symbolic expression of their hope in God's future action. If the parousia were only a symbol of a Christological truth that does not have a concrete basis in reality, there is no compelling reason for sustaining that they could also affirm the symbolic reality of other statements concerning Jesus Christ, for instance Incarnation.

²⁸³ 1 Thes 1:3; 2 Thes 1:4; 3:5; cf. Rm 5:3-5.

²⁸⁴ Lucien Cerfaux, *Le Chrétien Dans La Théologie Paulinienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 154.

²⁸⁵ Rm 8:11; 1 Co 15:44-49; 2 Co 5:1-5.

²⁸⁶ 1 Co 6:19.

²⁸⁷ Edwards, *Breath of Life : A Theology of the Creator Spirit*, 114.

²⁸⁸ Gal 4:4.

Given that the biblical writers are using the same kind of vocabulary for both events, they must be both either real or symbolic. And because the reality of Incarnation was clearly stated and defended not as a symbol but as a concrete event since the beginning of Christian reflection — as the reality of Christ’s resurrection — there is no reason for using a different criterion with the parousia, especially when the applied notions for depicting both events are quite similar.

Moreover, if their eschatological hope was not produced by the belief in a real event, their expectation would be nothing more than the “simulation” of waiting for an event that does not have any grounding in something concretely hoped for, and therefore does not have any practical consequence for present behavior. In the case of the first Christian communities, their behavior shows that they were really expecting Jesus Christ’s coming. Although this theme will be developed in the last chapter, it is possible to affirm for the moment that what is really expected from the future determines the real behavior within the present. Or to put it more precisely, somebody’s present behavior and options make clearer his or her real expectations concerning the future. This is why the tension between the imminence and delay of the parousia in the New Testament focuses less on “when” Christ will return or on “what” believers must await, and more on “how” they must be found waiting for the Lord, namely being awake and proclaiming his coming. The real proximity of Christ’s coming heightens the tensions of the present situation by forcing it to look forward.

3.2. Disclosure and Fulfillment of Christ’s Return.

The delay of the parousia points to the time between “what has already come” and “what is still to come.” The New Testament conveys this paradox inasmuch as it states that the

Incarnation is the revelation of God's glory²⁸⁹ even though there are things that will appear only "when Jesus Christ is revealed."²⁹⁰ In fact, Christ has made his appearance once and for all, but he will manifest himself again in order to bring salvation.²⁹¹ Christ's future coming does not have a different content from what has already been revealed through his Incarnation, life, passion, and resurrection. However, Christ's return will bring something that is not yet here, and therefore entails newness. Because of this double aspect of the parousia, the Christian future entails something new that cannot be separated from what has already been revealed in Jesus Christ. The parousia must be understood, therefore, through its double aspect, namely revelation as disclosure of what is already realized, and fulfillment as accomplishment of what is still to come.

According to the New Testament, there are three things that will be revealed when Jesus Christ returns, namely the public manifestation of *Christ's lordship over all*, the revelation of *the children of God*, and the manifestation of *God's judgment*.

First, the parousia will be the public manifestation of *Jesus Christ's lordship*. The New Testament clearly affirms that Jesus Christ is already the Lord.²⁹² He has been glorified by his Father, and he is already seated at his right hand. God has appointed Jesus as heir of all,²⁹³ and everything is already subjected to him.²⁹⁴ Yet, Christ's lordship over all was not something "acquired" by him after his resurrection. The Scriptures state that Jesus was already revealed as the Lord in his birth,²⁹⁵ his life,²⁹⁶ his death,²⁹⁷ and his resurrection.²⁹⁸ In fact, the Father has

²⁸⁹ Jn 1:14; Heb 1:3.

²⁹⁰ 1 Pt 1:7.

²⁹¹ Heb 9:26, 28.

²⁹² Acts 1:21, 33.

²⁹³ Heb 1:2.

²⁹⁴ Mt 28:18; Col 3:3-4.

²⁹⁵ Lk 2:11.

²⁹⁶ Jn 11:27.

²⁹⁷ Mt 27:54.

²⁹⁸ Rm 1:4.

revealed the lordship that his Son has had from eternity to eternity.²⁹⁹ What Christ's return will manifest, therefore, is not that he became Lord. Rather, his return will make public the identity that Jesus Christ has always had, namely, Lord of the whole of creation. The public reality of his identity is still necessary because Jesus Christ's lordship over all is evident, but only by faith.³⁰⁰ It is not yet visible that everything is under Christ's feet,³⁰¹ and he is the head of the Church.³⁰² When Christ returns, he will be glorified not only among his only ones,³⁰³ but also everybody will proclaim that he is the Lord.³⁰⁴ He will be revealed as king of all,³⁰⁵ and his dominion over all kinds of evil will be finally evident and public for all.³⁰⁶ Christ's return will transform the present hope in Christ's victory into public evidence.

The second feature that Jesus Christ's return will disclose is the identity of the *children of God*. New Testament passages affirm that believers are already God's children,³⁰⁷ and the Spirit bears witness to this reality.³⁰⁸ God chose them in Christ from eternity to become sons of God.³⁰⁹ Although believers are already children of God, their complete identification with Christ is something that has not yet been either revealed or realized.³¹⁰ The new life received in Christ is still hidden, and it will be revealed at his return.³¹¹ The new person that Christians already are by participating in Christ's baptism,³¹² will be completely visible only when Christ returns. This

²⁹⁹ 1 Co 8:6.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Heb 11:1.

³⁰¹ Heb 2:8.

³⁰² Col 1:18; Eph 1:22-23.

³⁰³ 2 Thes 1:10.

³⁰⁴ Phil 2:10-11; cf. Rev 5:13.

³⁰⁵ 1 Tm 6:15.

³⁰⁶ 1 Co 15:24-26; 2 Thes 2:8.

³⁰⁷ Gal 3:26; 4:6.

³⁰⁸ Rm 8:16.

³⁰⁹ Eph 1:4-5; cf. Jn 1:12.

³¹⁰ 1 Jn 3:1-2.

³¹¹ Col 3:3.

³¹² Rm 6:5-11; cf. Phil 3:10.

revelation of the children of God is joyfully expected³¹³ inasmuch as their freedom will be a sign of Jesus Christ's lordship over all.

Finally, the parousia will bring the disclosure of the *judgment of God*. The New Testament is clear in stating that everybody will stand before God's judgment,³¹⁴ and that this saving judgment is revealed in Jesus Christ.³¹⁵ All judgment has been entrusted to the Son,³¹⁶ the one by whom the Father offers salvation to all.³¹⁷ In this sense, judgment is a reality already realized inasmuch as Jesus' death is the cause of justification.³¹⁸ He has already saved humanity from judgment,³¹⁹ offering eternal life to those who both trust in his words³²⁰ and act on behalf of their neighbors.³²¹ This is why the future judgment is not something either obscure or unknown. Rather, the one who is the judge at the door³²² and by whom all judgment will be made³²³ is Jesus Christ who already brought salvation. Therefore, the judgment of God that will be made known on the final day³²⁴ does not refer to the revelation of God's saving intention which is already manifested in Jesus Christ, but the disclosure of the designs of all hearts.³²⁵ In other words, although Jesus Christ already saved humanity from judgment, human beings are individually and collectively responsible for their actions.³²⁶ The final judgment that comes with Christ's return will be not the revelation of the criteria of judgment, but the full disclosure of human beings' decisions and their subsequent eternal impact.

³¹³ Rm 8:19.

³¹⁴ Mt 25:32; Rm 14:10; 2 Co 5:10; 2 Tm 4:1; 1 Pt 4:5; cf. Heb 12:23.

³¹⁵ Rm 3:21-22.

³¹⁶ Jn 5:22, 27.

³¹⁷ Jn 3:16; 6:40; 9:39; 12:47.

³¹⁸ Rm 5:9; Col 1:21.

³¹⁹ 1 Thes 1:10.

³²⁰ Jn 3:18; 5:24; 11:25-26; Acts 13:39; Rm 10:9-10; Eph 2:8.

³²¹ Mt 25:31-46; Jas 2:14f.

³²² Jas 5:9.

³²³ Acts 17:31; Rm 2:16.

³²⁴ Rm 2:5.

³²⁵ 1 Co 3:13; 4:5; cf. Rm 2:16.

³²⁶ Cf. Jn 12:48.

While Christ's return will reveal these three mentioned realities, it will give fulfillment to others. In this sense, the parousia will bring into existence some things that are not yet realized, and therefore are still to come. These things can be gathered under two theological notions, namely the *transfiguration of human beings' bodies*,³²⁷ and the *transformation of the whole of creation* into "new heavens and new earth."³²⁸

The hope in the future *transfiguration of the bodies* when Christ will return is based on the resurrection of Jesus. When Christ will be revealed as he actually is — the risen Lord — believers will be "like him."³²⁹ And because Jesus' resurrection entails the whole person, and therefore his body, the participation of believers in a resurrection "like his"³³⁰ includes the transfiguration of their bodies. Without claiming to be exhaustive in a complex, technical subject, it is possible to state that the New Testament expectation of Jesus Christ's coming entails hope in the transfiguration of the body in accordance with his glorious one³³¹ inasmuch as he is the first-fruit of all who belong to him.³³² In fact, human beings can reach fulfillment in Christ only in the way he lives divinity in all its fullness, namely in bodily form.³³³ This transformation, however, will happen only when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. At that moment, not before, all human beings will receive eternal judgment in their bodies.³³⁴

Besides the transformation of bodies, Christ's return will transform *the whole of creation*, bringing it to fulfilment. As mentioned, the Old Testament affirms the goodness of creation,³³⁵

³²⁷ Cf. 1 Co 15:50-55.

³²⁸ 2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1.

³²⁹ 1 Jn 3:2.

³³⁰ Rm 6:5.

³³¹ Phil 3:20.

³³² 1 Co 15:23.

³³³ Col 2:9-10.

³³⁴ 1 Pt 4:5-6. For a clear explanation of the transformation of human beings' bodies at Christ's coming in Paul's theology, see Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, 145–69.

³³⁵ Cf. Gn 2:1-3

and its total origin in God.³³⁶ It is interesting to note that this single unity created by God is depicted in terms of “heaven and earth”³³⁷ as the two different aspects of the same created reality. This is why the Old Testament affirms that God is creator of everything by mostly using sentences that include these two elements,³³⁸ as well as the expectation of the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God, namely “new heavens and new earth.”³³⁹ Although the fulfillment of the whole of creation will be the subject of an entire section of this dissertation, it is possible to affirm now that the expression “new heavens and new earth” is quoted by the New Testament to illustrate this same expectation concerning God’s final fulfilling action upon creation but explicitly attributing this act to Jesus Christ’s return.³⁴⁰ Even though Christ has already received authority “in heaven and on earth,”³⁴¹ and creation is already groaning in labor pains,³⁴² the fulfillment of the whole of creation will occur at the end of time. Only when Christ returns, the elements linked to “new heavens and new earth” will be accomplished, namely that creation will be the home of justice³⁴³ and God finally will dwell among God’s people, fulfilling the promise of the Old Testament: “they will be my people, and I will be their God.”³⁴⁴

4. Implications

After this overview of the meaning, main characteristics, signs, and elements in tension of the parousia in the New Testament, it is possible to bring forward four main ideas.

³³⁶ Gn 1:1.

³³⁷ Idem.

³³⁸ Ps 121:2; 124:8; Prv 3:19; Is 42:5; 44:24; 45:18; Jer 10:12; 32:17; cf. Am 9:6.

³³⁹ Is 65: 17; 66:22.

³⁴⁰ 2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1.

³⁴¹ Mt 28:18.

³⁴² Rm 8:22.

³⁴³ 2 Pt 3:13.

³⁴⁴ Rev 21:3.

First, the meaning of this theological notion depends on the reinterpretation, through the lens of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, of the Jewish expectations placed upon God's eschatological action. This idea is evidenced by the way the theological notions of "son of man" and the "day of the Lord" were understood and subsequently "reshaped" by the first Christian communities with a Christological sense. Moreover, this perspective is reinforced by the use and reinterpretation of the Old Testament imageries associated with the coming of God on the part of the New Testament in its depiction of Jesus Christ's return. The notion of the parousia shows, therefore, a relation of continuity and discontinuity between the expectations of God's eschatological intervention on behalf of Israel and the hope of Christians in the eschatological and final coming of Christ.

Second, Jesus Christ's return was illustrated as his concrete, physical coming by the New Testament, and not simply as a symbolic representation of the hope in God's final lordship over all. In fact, the vocabulary and the imaginary that convey Jesus Christ's coming indicate that his future public, sudden, visible, and glorious manifestation was conceived in physical terms.³⁴⁵ Although this idea of the concrete return of Jesus Christ is challenged by some exegetical and theological stances, it is possible to affirm that the New Testament's writers expected it. This discussion concerning Christ's concrete, physical return will be treated in more detail in the final chapter, in particular from the point of view of the cosmological discoveries and the way they challenge this theological notion.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ K. Rahner interprets this idea from a theological perspective. According to him, the Lord who returns will be identical with the one who ascended. The risen Christ is the same who was with the disciples, and "it is 'so' that he will return." See Karl Rahner, "He Will Come Again," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VII (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), 178. Moreover, Rahner holds that Christ's resurrected and glorified present state – and, therefore, physical – is the future promised as a gift to all matter when he comes again. See Karl Rahner, "The Festival of the Future of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VII (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 183.

³⁴⁶ Even though the challenges that face the idea of a concrete, physical coming of Christ will be explored in the final chapter, it is possible to bring forward five examples which illustrate this point from a theological perspective. First, Rudolf Bultmann holds that the mythical eschatology, including therefore Jesus Christ's physical coming, is

Third, the meaning of the eschatological images and signs associated with the parousia do not intend to either predict the end or explain it. The New Testament is quite clear in affirming that only God knows the hour and the day of this coming. Rather than illustrate an event which is radically unpredictable, all the eschatological signs and images linked to Jesus Christ's return aim to provoke its expectation and consequent behavior on the part of believers. This idea will be discussed specially in the last chapter. At present, it is possible to state that the New Testament's eschatological imaginary seeks to bring hope to those in difficulties, thus inviting them to stay firm even despite the persecutions and God's delay in making justice. Because God will restore the original unity of all humankind in its relationship with God and creation, believers must continue living a life in accordance with what they were called to believe in Christ.

Finally, most of the discussions concerning the parousia have been focused on its delay, and the consequences of its "non-occurrence" in the way of thinking and living of the first Christian generations. Based on the ideas presented, it is possible to argue that the notion of the parousia is somehow structurally dependent on the tension between the imminence of God's coming and the delay of this event. Rather than the option between one of these elements, the very notion of parousia entails this duality. The origin of this inner characteristic of Christ's return possibly derives from tensions coming from the Old Testament's expectations in which

untenable for the reason that the parousia never took place as the New Testament expected. See Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," 5. Second, Albert Schweitzer states the whole history of Christianity can be interpreted as the process of "de-eschatologization" of religion because of the non-occurrence of the parousia, and the consequent disbelief of this notion. See Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 338. Third, J.A.T Robinson maintains that God's intervention was already fulfilled in Jesus Christ's resurrection and his going to the Father. The expectation of a second coming is not necessary inasmuch as everything was already both revealed and fulfilled by Christ. See John A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming. The Emergence of a Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1957), 40 f. Fourth, Hans Conzelmann sustains, in his work about Luke, that this biblical writer recognized the period of waiting before the parousia, replacing the imminent coming of Christ by a divine, planned period of history of salvation in which the church and the Spirit took the prominent role. See Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke* (London: Faber, 1960), 131 f. Finally, Paul Tillich affirms that the parousia is only a symbol expressing the conviction that history has an end and a goal. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (London: Nisbet, 1964), 421 f.

imminence and delay coexist without mutual exclusion and from which the parousia has its direct roots. The assimilation of this tension can be traced in the way the first Christian communities reacted to and dealt with Christ's delay. Thus one of the main consequences of keeping the imminence/delay duality as a key element for understanding the parousia is the expectation and subsequent behavior this tension produces. In fact, it is necessary to note that the six motifs related to the expectation of Christ's return make sense only if this event is waited and its delay is problematized. Put differently, there is no reason for being prepared or attentively watching when there is nothing to wait for; and there is no delay when there nothing is expected to happen.³⁴⁷ Besides this, the delay of the parousia highlights the aspects of God's fulfillment already present within creation but that will be revealed by Jesus Christ's return, as well as those that are still to come. The latter is particularly interesting since they refer to the physical aspect of creation, namely the body of human beings and the material reality. This aspect of the fulfillment of creation is the subject of the next chapter.

³⁴⁷ The expression "expectation," as Ludwig Wittgenstein has pointed out, is not a state of mind as an "attitude which is expressed in certain conduct." See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), sections 572-582.

Chapter IV

The Fulfillment of All Things at the Parousia

The present chapter continues to examine the notion of the parousia, this time specifically from the perspective which ended the second chapter, namely the fulfillment of the whole of creation, in particular from the point of view of its material aspect.

The previous chapter highlighted in broad terms four main points. First, the hope of Jesus Christ's return on the part of the first Christian generations reflected a reinterpretation of their Jewish background through the lens of Christ's resurrection. These are the theological roots for illustrating the hope in his public, sudden, visible, and glorious return.

Secondly, the expectation of Jesus Christ's coming as it is depicted by the New Testament entails his physical return. The vocabulary used to illustrate the parousia not only has physical connotations, but also explicitly links this expectation with the Incarnation. It seems, therefore, that to state, on the one hand that the Incarnation was depicted in real, concrete terms in the New Testament and strongly defended during the first Christian councils, but on the other hand that the parousia — which was also widely affirmed — had been conceived only as a symbolic representation of the hope in God's future action within creation, cannot be substantiated.

Thirdly, none of the New Testament eschatological images and signs intend to predict the end nor to explain it. The role of these images is to provoke expectation and consequent behavior on the part of believers. Indeed, the loss of faith, the arrival of the anti-Christ, and the conversion of Jews and pagans are all part of a set of the eschatological imagination that calls believers to stay firm despite the difficult context and to keep trusting in God's salvific promises. These images and signs aim, therefore, to increase the expectation and hope in Christ's return on the part of believers. They must behave, therefore, in accordance with this expectation.

Finally, the duality immanence/delay is a core tension of the parousia, rather than elements which reverse one another. As mentioned, the initial exegetical debate concerning the parousia focused on the apparent disappointment of the first Christian communities after realizing that Christ's physical and imminent return did not occur as he promised. However, it was stated that opting between imminence and delay is not a necessary condition to illustrate Jesus Christ's coming. With roots in the Old Testament's expectations and hopes, the very notion of the parousia and the expectations that it provokes are made up of this tension between imminent coming and delay in its fulfillment. If there is no realistic expectation, there is no reason to wait or be prepared.

The present chapter will explore the parousia from the point of view of the fulfillment of the whole of creation, in particular its material aspect. To that end, this chapter will follow two intertwined steps, each of them structured around a biblical reference that will serve to make explicit some problems and theological challenges. The first section begins with an overview of this aspect of God's fulfillment through the theological notion of "new heavens and new earth" as it is illustrated in Scriptures. This section aims to clarify the meaning of the biblical duality "heaven and earth" and the way Scripture uses the expression "new heavens and new earth" to illustrate the expectations of God's coming and the fulfillment of creation by God. Moreover, this section will explain the synonyms of "heaven and earth" in the New Testament and how these expressions for naming "creation" show different aspects of the transformation of all things when Jesus Christ comes.

The second section will explore the catastrophic imaginary associated with the transformation of the material aspect of creation in Scripture. The main goal of this section is to present the content given to this notion in the Scriptures, and the way they convey the effect of Christ's return for the whole of creation. This will help to respond to a problematic closely

associated with the parousia's imaginary: whether the material aspect of creation will be annihilated, replaced, or transformed. This section will focus on the biblical expression "the appearance of this world is passing away" in the first letter to the Corinthians to argue that the sinfulness within creation will be overcome. And this idea will be reinforced by an exploration of the biblical "two-aeons scheme" and the distinction between "body and soul."

1. New Creation as "New Heavens and New Earth"

The preceding chapter ended by affirming that the delay of Jesus Christ's return points to the time between "what has already been realized" and "what is still to come." The Christian future, therefore, entails the paradox of the expectation of something new in continuity with what has already been revealed by God in Christ. The parousia will disclose realities already realized and will fulfill things still to be accomplished.

Among those that are still to come, "the transformation of bodies" and "the renovation of the whole of creation" were highlighted as theological notions that fundamentally gather the eschatological expectations focused on the fulfillment of the material, physical aspect of reality. Given that this renovation of both the individual body and the whole of creation at the parousia has been mostly associated with the expression "the new heavens and the new earth," it is necessary to understand the meaning and function of this expression within Scripture, as well as the scope of the expectations linked to this idea.

Before exploring the biblical expression "new heaven and new earth," it seems necessary to point out that, although it is not possible to know precisely how the new creation will be, the uncertainty of the way this event will be realized by God ought not to isolate any reflection concerning the renovation of the whole of creation from other eschatological truths such as those associated with the future of human beings. In fact, it is necessary to bear in mind that the

fulfillment of human beings is just as unknown as the renovation of all things. The only knowledge — albeit the most decisive one — that humanity has about the way this event will be realized was revealed by the same person who will fulfill creation when he comes again: Jesus Christ. But despite the ignorance of when and how God will fulfill creation, the importance of thinking about eschatology as a unity that has Jesus Christ as its inner rationale makes necessary reflection on the future of all aspects of created reality, and therefore its material, physical aspect, in an integral and coherent way.

1.1. “New Heaven and New Earth” in the Old Testament.

The expression “new heaven and new earth” makes direct reference to God as the one who created all that exists, sustains it, and will bring it to fulfillment. This expression is a variation of the duality “heaven and earth” that, in Scripture, refers to God as the origin of all things. By affirming that God creates “heavens, earth and all that they contain,”¹ both the Old Testament and the New Testament profess that everything has a unity called into being and sustained in being by God. And by using the expression “new heaven and new earth,” they state that this unity, not another, different reality, will become something that is not yet by the action of God, its Creator.

Before exploring the meaning and scope of the expression “new heaven and new earth,” it is necessary to show how Scripture mainly understands the duality “heaven and earth.” First of all, since this duality refers to creation as a unity which has its origin and existence in God, the sovereignty of God cannot be restricted to any aspect of it — for instance, “heaven.” God’s

¹ Gn 1:1; 2:1; 14:22; Dt 10:14; Ps 89:11; 102:25; 115:15; 121:2; Is 37:16; 42:5; 48:13; Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Col 1:16; 2 Pt 3:5; Rev 10:6; 14:17.

lordship over creation includes all created things both in “heaven” and on “earth.” This is why the Old Testament affirms, using the duality “heaven and earth,” that the whole of creation testifies to God’s royal majesty over all.² This same idea is pointed out when “heaven and earth” obey God as witnesses of God’s promises,³ or praise God because God comes to judge the earth,⁴ in order to rebuild God’s people.⁵ And because God’s sovereignty reaches all things, even the unknown and chaotic forces of the underground, mostly illustrated through the images of the sea, are under God’s lordship.⁶ This is why some Old Testament texts add “the sea” to the duality “heaven and earth” as a distinctive element of God’s creation, and therefore of God’s sovereignty.⁷ Because God is the origin of all things, God’s lordship reaches not only “heaven,” but also “earth,” and “under the earth.”⁸ Creation as a whole is a unity under the lordship of God.⁹

It is important to note, however, that this same duality “heaven and earth” referring to creation as a unity conveys that creation is not homogeneous. Rather, it is a complex, diverse, and multifaceted whole. In fact, the first biblical account of creation already states that “heaven and earth” is not only a diverse unity from its origin, but also is full of different beings and

² 1 Chr 29:11-12; Ps 19:1-4; Sir 18:1; Jr 33:25.

³ Dt 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; *et parr.*

⁴ 1 Chr 16:31-34; Ps 96:11-13; 98:4-9.

⁵ Ps 69:34-36; 148:13.

⁶ Ps 65:7; 74:13; 89:9; 148:7; cf. Ex 14:15-31.

⁷ Ex 20:11; Ne 9:6; Ps 146:6; Jon 1:9; Hag 2:6; cf. Ps 135:6.

⁸ Jos 2:11; 1 Chr 29:11; cf. Ex 20:4; Dt 5:8.

⁹ For an overview of biblical cosmology, see Kyle Greenwood, *Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible between the Ancient World and Modern Science* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 71–102. For a presentation of the New Testament cosmology in general, see Jonathan Pennington and Sean MacDonough, *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008). For a presentation of the New Testament cosmology, in particular in Paul’s theology, see John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1971). And for the concept of “sea” in biblical cosmology, see Catherine Keller, “No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 183–98; Thomas Schmidt, “And the Sea Was No More: Water as People, Not Place,” in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, ed. Thomas Schmidt and Moisés Silva (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 233–49; Jonathan Moo, “The Sea That Is No More: Rev 21:1 and the Function of Sea Imagery in the Apocalypse of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (2009): 148–67.

things. This diversity within the duality “heaven and earth” becomes evident in the way the Old Testament illustrates the difference between the two elements. For instance, “heaven” is different from “earth” inasmuch as the former is the place where God dwells,¹⁰ and the latter is the place given by God which human beings inhabit.¹¹ This differentiation is reinforced through the use of “heaven and earth” to illustrate the distance between God’s thoughts and those of human beings,¹² and to show the immense love and mercy that God has for humanity.¹³ This is why the distinction within creation illustrated by the three-tiered biblical view of it - the heavens, the earth, and the underground – neither affirms reality in dualistic terms, nor claims that God prefers one aspect of it at the expense of the others.¹⁴ Because the whole of creation is one diverse, the differentiation within this single unity aims to illustrate that reality is both manifold and varied in its goodness, and that human beings do not have a full understanding of its complexity and even apparent contradictions. Perhaps the Old Testament texts that most clearly summarize all these above ideas are the final chapters of the book of Job: on the one hand, God states God’s lordship over all created things in “heaven,” on “earth,” and “the underworld.” The good and complex creation has its unity in its Creator. On the other hand, Job apologizes because he talked about things he did not know about or did not understand. Although the whole of creation is one, there are aspects of creation that human beings cannot necessarily see or understand. The one and diverse creation which is under God’s control exceeds human understanding and forces.¹⁵

¹⁰ 1 Kgs 8:30; Ps 33:13-14; Is 57:15; 66:1; Am 9:6.

¹¹ Ps 115:16.

¹² Is 55:9.

¹³ Ps 36:5; 57:10; 103:11.

¹⁴ For a simple illustration of the biblical three-tiered concept of reality, see Dan Liroy, *Evolutionary Creation in Biblical and Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 59–82.

¹⁵ Job 38:1–42:6. For an interesting illustration of biblical cosmology in the book of Job, see Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

This idea concerning the experience of creation on the part of human beings leads to another subject closely related to the way “heaven and earth” are conceived, namely the biblical distinction between creation and created human beings. As already stated, the duality “heaven and earth” refers to the whole of creation, and therefore it necessarily includes human beings. In fact, the first biblical account of creation conveys that the creation of human beings is part of the process that starts with God creating “heaven and earth” and ends with God resting after “heaven and earth” were completed.¹⁶ Human beings are, therefore, included within the unity of creation which is illustrated by Genesis as “heaven, earth, and all that they contain.”¹⁷ However, although human beings are a part of creation as are all the other creatures, Scripture also underlines that human beings have a particular position within reality, distinguishing between them and the rest of non-human creation.¹⁸ Without entering into the debate concerning the alleged authority of human beings over all other created realities, it seems clear that Scripture not only makes a clear distinction between them, but gives human beings a particular, distinctive position compared to the rest of created things.¹⁹ This double aspect of human beings — as part of creation with a particular, distinctive role within it — will appear later on when discussing Rm 8:19-23 in the fifth chapter. For the moment, it is important to specify that the duality “heaven and earth,” even though it applies also to human beings, alludes to the non-human aspect of creation. It indicates,

¹⁶ Creation of human beings (Gn 1:26-27) is part of God’s creation of “heaven and earth” (Gn 1:1--2:1).

¹⁷ Gn 2:1.

¹⁸ This distinction between human beings and the rest of creation can be understood, in the first chapter of Genesis, at least from two perspectives: first, human beings are created, unlike the other beings, in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26-28); second, human beings received a special task of caring for creation (Gn 1:28-30). For a critical overview, from an ecological perspective, of the traditional ways of arguing human beings’ uniqueness, see Ernst Conradie, “A Special Place for Humans in God’s Household?,” in *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

¹⁹ Besides the mentioned ways of establishing a distinction between human beings and the rest of creation, this idea also becomes evident, for instance, when God calls “heaven and earth” as a “third party” in the relationship between God and human beings. Cf. Dt 32:1; Ps 50:4.

for instance, the stars and the planets,²⁰ the earth and the material aspects of it,²¹ and the animals, birds, and other living creatures.²² The duality “heaven and earth” means, therefore, all created things, but specifically the dimension of creation which is not human, and is mostly associated with matter.²³

For this reason, the adjective “new” added to the expression “heavens and earth” is the way the Old Testament argues that the Creator will renew the whole of creation, but with a particular focus on the non-human aspect of all created things. It is important to note, however, that the two references to the expression “new heavens and new earth” appear in the last two chapters of the book of Isaiah,²⁴ in which the renovation of the whole of creation is directly associated with the judgment of God for gathering God’s people. In the first of these references, the expression “new heaven and new earth” ends a chapter consisting of three sections: God’s complaint and threats against God’s people,²⁵ the announcement of the fate of the just and the wicked,²⁶ and the renovation of the whole of creation.²⁷ In the context of this last section, the “new heaven and new earth” is linked to the joy at the renovation of Jerusalem,²⁸ an event that will bring forgetfulness of the past sorrow,²⁹ and the end of all suffering.³⁰ The imaginary

²⁰ Gn 1:1, 8; Jb 9:9; 38:31; Ps 8:3; 33:6; Is 40:25; Am 5:8; *et parr.*

²¹ Gn 1:1, 10; Jb 26:7; Ps 90:2; 102:25; Pr 8:27; Jr 33:2; *et parr.*

²² Gn 1:25; 9:9-10; Jb 12:7; Ps 36:6; 147:9; 148:6; 150:6; Is 43:20; Hos 2:18; *et parr.*

²³ Although not the subject of this dissertation, it is interesting to note that non-human living creatures tend to be classified under the label of “matter.” Unlike human beings, they had not received the breath of God (Gn 2:7), and therefore they are just “flesh.” Moreover, Paul states the difference between the flesh of human beings and other animals (1 Co 15:39). This claim concerning a clear distinction between human beings and animals has been strongly challenged in the last decades, in particular by the way evolutionary theories interpret the biblical narrative of creation and their implicit theological ideas.

²⁴ Is 65:17; 66:22. For a exegetical overview of these two verses, see R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 266–94; Marvin Sweeney, *Isaiah 40-66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 357–85.

²⁵ Is 65:1-7.

²⁶ Is 65:8-16a.

²⁷ Is 65:16b-25.

²⁸ Is 65:18.

²⁹ Is 65:17.

³⁰ Is 65:19.

associated here with the “new heaven and the new earth” mostly evokes the book of Genesis and its narrative: the offspring as a sign of God’s blessing,³¹ the call of God to work the earth,³² the dialogue between God and human beings,³³ and the relationship among the animals.³⁴ In a certain sense, this new creation represented by the new Jerusalem is an image of the way God wanted creation to operate since its beginning. As will be seen further on, the book of Revelation refers to the expression “new heaven and new earth” using this same image of the new Jerusalem, this time coming down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

The second reference to “new heaven and new earth” of Isaiah finishes a section that comprises two major units: the punishment of the wicked by God,³⁵ and the announcement of restoration in the new creation at Zion.³⁶ Here, “new heaven and the new earth” appears within the framework of God’s judgment to restore Israel from among the nations.³⁷ The new creation that will endure before God appears linked to Zion as the place in which all nations will gather to worship God.³⁸ As was shown concerning the signs of the parousia — in particular the conversion of both Jews and pagans — the book of Isaiah uses the notion of “new heaven and new earth” to sustain that the renovation of the whole of creation is directly associated with the gathering of all nations. Here again, the eschatological future of non-human creation appears tied to the future of human beings, in particular to their gathering.

Although these are the only two references to the expression “new heaven and new earth,” they collect all the other eschatological prophecies that illustrate the renewal of reality in

³¹ Is 65:20, 23.

³² Is 65: 21-22.

³³ Is 65:24.

³⁴ Is 65:25.

³⁵ Is 66:1-4.

³⁶ Is 66:5-24.

³⁷ Is 66:15-21.

³⁸ Is 66:22-23.

the Old Testament thus giving them their full scope. God's promises to remove suffering,³⁹ give an end to all kinds of contradictions,⁴⁰ and restore the reign of God over all nations permanently⁴¹ are prophecies that receive their right context in God's fulfillment of all created things. The hope of human beings in God's future action is directly associated with the renovation of non-human creation. According to the Old Testament expectations, therefore, when God comes to gather God's people, the whole of creation will be renewed thus becoming "new heavens and new earth."

1.2. "New Heaven and New Earth" in the New Testament.

The New Testament uses the expression "heaven and earth" — οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς — of the Old Testament, as well as its eschatological hope in "new heavens and new earth" — οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ νῆν.

First of all, the New Testament mostly uses the duality "heaven and earth" and its variations including "the sea," as in the Old Testament, to affirm that God is Creator and has sovereignty over all.⁴² However, the New Testament transforms the use of this duality in a radical way: God's lordship of "heaven, earth, and sea" is a trinitarian endeavor. Most of the attributes applied to God as Creator in the Old Testament are also used in describing the actions of both the Son and the Spirit. In the particular case of Jesus Christ, it was already stated that the

³⁹ Is 25:8; 29:18; 33:24; 35:5-7; cf. Jr 33:6.

⁴⁰ Is 11:6-9; 65:25; Hos 2:18.

⁴¹ Is 2:1-4; 51:4-6; 52:10; Dn 2:44; 7:14; Mi 4:3; Zep 2:11; Mal 1:11; *et parr.*

⁴² For the New Testament verses that use "heaven and earth" for God as Creator, see Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21; Acts 17:24; Col 1:16; Rev 10:6; cf. 1 Co 10:26; Eph 3:15. For verses that add "sea" to "heaven and earth," see Acts 4:24; 14:15; 2 Pt 3:5; Rev 5:13; 14:17; 21:1. For verses in which the expression "heaven and earth" appears in a certain way but in a different context, see Mt 16:19 (the forgiveness of sins), Mk 13:27 (the coming of the Son of man), Phil 2:10 (the full manifestation of Jesus Christ's lordship), and Rev 12:12 (the joy of heavens, and woe of earth and sea).

parousia will be the public manifestation of his lordship over creation, a title he has always had since the creation of all things. This is how the New Testament sustains, by using the three-tiered biblical view already mentioned, that Jesus has command of angels in “heaven,”⁴³ control over forces of nature on “earth,”⁴⁴ and dominion over the “sea”⁴⁵ and “the underground.”⁴⁶ Jesus’ miraculous activity clearly illustrates his lordship over creation and links those actions with the Creator of all things.⁴⁷ This is why they will confess “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father at the end of time.⁴⁸ The lordship of creation is, therefore, a divine title that the New Testament explicitly applies to Jesus Christ. He is the Lord of “heaven and earth.”⁴⁹

The expression “new heaven and new earth” is mentioned twice in the New Testament.⁵⁰ The first of these references appears in the second letter to Peter within the context of two main linked ideas: first, the encouragement against the preaching of false prophets who deny the parousia;⁵¹ second, the explanation of its delay inasmuch as that is the argument that those prophets use to deny Christ’s return.⁵² Affirming that Jesus Christ will come, the letter states that the reason for his delay is the difference between the time of God and the time of human beings, and the mercy and patience of God that gives time to all human beings for conversion.⁵³ This

⁴³ Mt 4:11; 26:53; Mk 1:13; Lk 22:43; cf. Heb 1:6.

⁴⁴ Mt 14:24f; Mk 4:39; 6:51.

⁴⁵ Mt 8:18-22; 14:22-33; Mk 4:35-40; Lk 8:22-25.

⁴⁶ Mt 16:18; Rev 1:18.

⁴⁷ Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20.

⁴⁸ Phil 2:10-11.

⁴⁹ See Richard Bauckham, “From Alpha to Omega,” in *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 143.

⁵⁰ 2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1. For an illustrative overview of the two references to “new heaven and new earth” in the New Testament and their interpretations, see Gale Heide, “What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 1 (1997): 37–56.

⁵¹ 2 Pt 2:1f; 3:17.

⁵² 2 Pt 2:8–10.

⁵³ 2 Pt 3:8–9.

“intentional” delay so that nobody will be lost, however, should not catch human beings unprepared. Even though the Lord takes time in coming, believers must be both awake, waiting for him and actively living in accordance with the Gospel because, as described in the preceding chapter concerning the parousia as a “sudden” event, Christ will come like a thief during the night to judge.⁵⁴ This is why the delay does not mean, in this context, the non-realization of God’s promise; quite the opposite, it allows preparation for God’s imminent judgment on the part of believers. Here again, the context of the eschatological fulfillment of “heaven and earth” is directly associated with the gathering of all peoples by God. Specifically regarding the expression “new earth and new heaven,” it appears in the letter linked to the Old Testament image of the flood.⁵⁵ As God judged the whole of creation in the past using water,⁵⁶ God will judge it in the future using fire⁵⁷ resulting thus in the “new heavens and the new earth.” Although this idea concerning the apparent destruction of creation will be explored below, two things could not be clearer: on the one hand, “new heavens and the new earth” are not the result of divine destruction of all things; on the other hand, the renewal of the whole of creation entails that uprightness will dwell within creation.⁵⁸ Rather than destruction of creation, God’s coming is the judgment of evil, and divine justice dwelling within creation.⁵⁹

The second reference to the expression “new heavens and new earth” is almost at the end of the book of Revelation. In a context of persecution and apostasy of some believers, the last

⁵⁴ 2 Pt 3:10.

⁵⁵ Gn 7:21.

⁵⁶ 2 Pt 3:5-6.

⁵⁷ 2 Pt 3:7, 12.

⁵⁸ 2 Pt 3:13.

⁵⁹ For exegetical interpretations of 2 Pt 3:13, see Edward Adams, “‘The Elements Will Melt with Fire’: 2 Peter 3:5-13,” in *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 200–235; Jonathan Moo, “Continuity, Discontinuity, and Hope: The Contribution of New Testament Eschatology to a Distinctively Christian Environmental Ethos,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 61 (2010): 30–38; Clifford Winters, “A Strange Death: Cosmic Conflagration as Conceptual Metaphor in 2 Peter 3:6-13,” *Conversations with the Biblical World* 33 (2013): 147–61.

two chapters of this book illustrate the eschatological vanquishing of evil and the coming of God's new order through three intertwined sections: the renewal of all things,⁶⁰ the portrayal of the new Jerusalem descended from heaven,⁶¹ and the depiction of the lordship of God, the Lamb, and the Spirit.⁶² In a certain sense, these two last chapters of the book of Revelation are already summarized in John's vision that initiates Rev 21: the "new heaven and a new earth" conveys the passing away of the first creation, the disappearance of evil symbolized in the image of the "sea," the coming down of the new Jerusalem, the passing away of the "first things" represented in death, mourning, crying, and pain, to finally give place to God's dwelling among God's people.⁶³ Without claiming to be exhaustive, three things can be affirmed from this text: first of all, these verses do not state the destruction of reality. By affirming the passing away of "the first creation,"⁶⁴ the book of Revelation refers to its renewal through the overthrow of evil. The consequences of sin within creation — death, sorrow, mourning, pain, and curse⁶⁵ — not creation itself, will be permanently removed by its renewal. Second, the new creation is illustrated by the image of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven.⁶⁶ Echoing the expression "new heaven and new earth" and its associated ideas of the book of Isaiah, the book of Revelation uses the image of the new Jerusalem to point out that the fulfillment of creation is the descending of "heaven" onto "earth" rather than the ascending of "earth" to "heaven." The new Jerusalem is like a bride adorned for her husband, representing the marriage of heaven and earth.⁶⁷ Finally, this idea concerning the descending of "heaven" onto "earth" is reinforced by the way this new

⁶⁰ Rev 21:1-8.

⁶¹ Rev 21: 9-27.

⁶² Rev 22:1-21.

⁶³ Rev 21:1-3.

⁶⁴ Rev 21:1.

⁶⁵ Rev 21:4; Rev 22:3.

⁶⁶ Rev 21:2.

⁶⁷ See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 104.

city is described. The new Jerusalem coming down from heaven is depicted as reflecting the shape of the temple, which means that the whole of creation becomes God's tabernacle.⁶⁸ The dwelling of God is not restricted to heaven nor to the concrete temple. In fact, this is why there is no need of a temple in this city;⁶⁹ the whole of creation has become the place in which God and the Lamb have their throne.⁷⁰ Rather than in "heaven," God will dwell in the midst of God's people. Once again the idea of the fulfillment of the whole of creation is theologically linked to the gathering of all nations around God dwelling among them.⁷¹

These two biblical references to the notion "new heaven and new earth" in the New Testament gather, as in the Old Testament, most of the other eschatological expectations. The cosmic framework of God's fulfillment gives them their full scope. However, it is important to highlight that the New Testament hopes and expectations have their absolute meaning and complete extension in Jesus Christ. As will be further explored in the last chapter, Christ is not only the one who brings creation its fulfillment at the parousia, but also the one who will show, in his own person, the way creation will fully participate in God's triune love. In a few words, Jesus Christ is the way "heaven and earth" will be renewed when he comes again.

⁶⁸ Rev 21:15-21.

⁶⁹ Rev 21:22.

⁷⁰ Rev 22:3.

⁷¹ For exegetical interpretations of Rev 21-22, see G. K. Beale, "Rev 21:1-22:5: The New Creation and the Church Perfected in God," in *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1039-1121; N. T. Wright, "New Heavens, New Earth," in *Called to One Hope: Perspectives on the Life to Come*, ed. John Colwell (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 31-51; Dan Liroy, "Interpretative Schemes of Theological Approaches," in *The Book of Revelation in Christological Focus* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 93-111; Moo, "Continuity, Discontinuity, and Hope: The Contribution of New Testament Eschatology to a Distinctively Christian Environmental Ethos," 39-42; G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, "Eden Completely Expanded: The New Heavens and New Earth in Revelation 21:1-4," in *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 135-46.

1.3. Synonyms of “Heaven and Earth” in the New Testament.

Along with the expression “new heaven and new earth,” the New Testament has other notions for depicting the accomplishment of God’s promises for creation. It is possible to find and differentiate at least three parallel synonyms of the duality “heaven and earth” in the New Testament, namely “τὰ πάντα” (all things), “κτίσις” (creation), and “κόσμος” (world). Although all these Greek terms are directly linked to the eschatological statements concerning creation, they do not have the same meaning, and therefore they show different aspects of the fulfillment of creation. These distinctions will be very useful, in particular for the further clarification concerning the aspects of creation that will “pass away” when Jesus Christ returns to judge it.⁷²

The first of these parallel terms — “τὰ πάντα” — is used in the New Testament mostly to refer to God as Creator of “all things.”⁷³ Basically, this Greek term has the same meaning as “heaven and earth.”⁷⁴ Besides the Creator, this notion is directly associated with Jesus Christ: “τὰ πάντα” have been created through and for him.⁷⁵ In fact, the New Testament sustains that “all things” have their origin in the Father, and they exist through and for the Son.⁷⁶ He has received everything from the Father,⁷⁷ the one who has put “τὰ πάντα” under his Son’s feet.⁷⁸ After all people repent and turn to God, the Father will send Christ in order to restore all things.⁷⁹ And even though the fulfillment of the whole of creation is a trinitarian endeavor, the eschatological hope mostly refers to the Father — the Creator — and to the Son — the Savior — as those who

⁷² For the different words for depicting “creation” in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s theology, see Edward Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul’s Cosmological Language* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

⁷³ Acts 4:24; 14:15; 1 Co 11:12; Eph 3:9; 1 Tm 6:13; Heb 2:10; 3:4; 8:5; Rev 4:11; 21:5; cf. Acts 7:50.

⁷⁴ See Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, trans. W. R. Poehlmann and R. J. Karris (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 59–61; Peter O’Brien, “Colossians, Philemon,” *World Biblical Commentary* 44 (1982): 55–57; Robert Peterson, “‘To Reconcile to Himself All Things’: Colossians 1:20,” *Presbyterion* 36, no. 1 (2010): 39–40.

⁷⁵ Jn 1:3; Rm 11:36; 1 Co 8:6; Eph 1:10–11; Phil 3:21; Col 1:16–17, 20; 3:11; Heb 1:3.

⁷⁶ 1 Co 8:6.

⁷⁷ Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22; Jn 3:35; 13:3.

⁷⁸ 1 Co 15:27; Eph 1:22.

⁷⁹ Acts 3:21.

will be all in all.⁸⁰ Both are seated on the divine throne which descended from heaven. From there, the Lamb, hearing the calls to come from the Spirit and the people of God,⁸¹ states that he will make “τὰ πάντα” new. And according to him, this is already happening.⁸²

The second parallel term — “κτίσις” — is used in the New Testament as a synonym of “creation.” Although the word has five other connotations, “κτίσις” is mostly associated with God as Creator of all in the same way the New Testament does with the terms “heaven and earth” and “all things.”⁸³ In fact, the biblical expression in which this word mainly appears — “from the beginning of creation”⁸⁴ — has a double referent: on the one hand, to God as Creator of all, and on the other hand, to creation as creature of God. This last idea concerning the whole of creation as “creature” is even reinforced by the way other texts use the term “κτίσις.”⁸⁵ For instance, the text that will be explored later on in the fifth chapter — Rm 8:19-23 — uses this word to refer to “nature” in the sense of the non-human creation in distinction from humanity.⁸⁶ In addition, this text holds that “κτίσις” was subjected to “futility and decay,” a situation that could not be equated with the perspective expressed through “κτίσις,” understood in terms of “reality that resists God.” For the moment, however, it is important to point out that the New

⁸⁰ 1 Co 15:28; Col 3:11.

⁸¹ Rev 22:17.

⁸² Rev 21:5-6. According to Richard Bauckham, the New Testament summarizes all the different aspects of creation extensively listed in the Old Testament in only one expression, namely “all things.” In this sense, therefore, the notion “all things” does not differ from the rich illustrations of creation within the Old Testament; rather, it presupposes them. See Bauckham, “From Alpha to Omega,” 142.

⁸³ Besides the meaning “all creation,” the word “κτίσις” is used for individual creatures (Rm 1:25; 8:39; Heb 4:13; cf. Rm 1:23), humankind in a collective sense (Mk 16:15; Col 1:23), non-human creation in distinction from believing humanity (Rm 8:19), the human being transformed by God (2 Co 5:17; Gal 6:15), the act of creation (Rm 1:20), and an institution created by human beings (1 Pt 2:13). For a general explanation of the different meanings of “κτίσις” in the New Testament, see Geoffrey Lampe, “New Testament Doctrine of Ktisis,” *Mid-Stream* 4, no. 2 (1964): 71–83.

⁸⁴ Mk 10:6; 13:19; Rm 1:20; 2 Pt 3:4; Rev 3:14.

⁸⁵ See Rm 8:19-22; Col 1:15; Heb 9:11.

⁸⁶ See Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 506; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 514; Adams, *Constructing the World*, 175–78; Harry A. Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 180; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 511.

Testament uses “κτίσις” linked to Jesus Christ only once,⁸⁷ unlike the explicit association that the notions “heaven and earth” and “all things” make between the whole of creation and Jesus Christ.

The third parallel term for “heaven and earth” in the New Testament — κόσμος — is generally translated as “world.” Even though the meaning of “κόσμος” is difficult to classify given the variety of ways this word is used, it is possible to make some general distinctions.⁸⁸ First, the term refers to God as Creator. Through the sentence “from the foundation of the world” and its variations, the New Testament affirms that “κόσμος” has its origin and existence in God.⁸⁹ In this regard, this word can then be interpreted to mean creation as an organized and harmonic whole.⁹⁰ Despite this use of “κόσμος,” the term primarily indicates, using the terminology of the three-tiered biblical view of creation, the part in between “heaven” and “the sea” in which, because of human beings’ responsibility, sin had become part of reality.⁹¹ In this sense, “κόσμος” is a notion that not only illustrates the reality created by God, but also reflects the opposition between “this world” and its Creator.⁹² Thus “κόσμος” depicts the aspect of creation that resists God’s will, and therefore stands in antagonism with God’s kingdom. In fact, the New Testament explicitly states that the world is ruled by the evil one, and is subjected to vanity.⁹³ It is this

⁸⁷ Col 1:15.

⁸⁸ The word “κόσμος” is used in a range of meanings that goes from “adorns” (1 Tim 2:9; Rev 21:2; cf. 1 Pt 3:5) to “the whole of things created by God” (Acts 17:24), and the aspect of reality that “will pass away” (1 Jn 2:17) because sin came into it (cf. Rm 5:12). For illustrative overviews of “κόσμος” in the New Testament, in particular in John’s Gospel, see N. H. Cassem, “Grammatical and Contextual Inventory of the Use of Kosmos in the Johannine Corpus with Some Implications for a Johannine Cosmic Theology,” *New Testament Studies* 19, no. 1 (1972): 81–91; Stanley Marrow, “Κόσμος in John,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2002): 90–102.

⁸⁹ Mt 13:35; 24:21; 25:34; Lk 11:20; Jn 17:24; Rm 1:20; Eph 1:4; Heb 4:3; 9:26; Rev 13:8; 17:8.

⁹⁰ This interpretation is valid, in particular in the light of Acts 17:24.

⁹¹ For the interpretation of “κόσμος” as “the earth” see, for instance, Mt 4:8; 13:38; 26:13; Mk 14:9; 16:15; Lk 12:30; 1 Co 1:27–28; 4:13; 7:33; Jas 1:27; Rev 11:15. And for the interpretation of “κόσμος” in terms of the subjected dimension of creation see, for instance, Rm 5:12.

⁹² Mt 18:7; Jn 13:1; Jn 15:19; 17:16; 1 Co 2:12; 2 Co 7:10; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:2; Jas 4:4; 2 Pt 1:4; 2:20; 1 Jn 2:15–16; 3:13; 4:4–5; 5:4.

⁹³ Cf. 1 Co 1:27; 3:19; Gal 4:3; Col 2:8, 20.

twofold aspect of the term “κόσμος” — although dependent on God, against God — that configures the relationship between “this world” and Jesus Christ. On the one hand, Jesus holds that the kingdom of God does not match with this “world” because it stands in contrast with God’s rule and God’s messiah.⁹⁴ John stresses this idea from the beginning of his Gospel: the Word by which all things were made is not accepted by the world.⁹⁵ In fact, this antagonism between the world and the one who sent him explains most of the conflicts that Jesus had during his life. But this enmity on the part of the world, on the other hand, does not change God’s love toward creation manifested in Christ. The New Testament holds that God loves the world so deeply that God sent the Son;⁹⁶ he is the bread coming down from heaven to give life to the world.⁹⁷ Because “κόσμος” is intrinsically good but under the influence of evil, he came from “heaven”⁹⁸ to take away the sins of this world⁹⁹ through the offering of his life.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, this twofold meaning of “κόσμος” — created by God, and exposed to sin — allows us to understand two things. First, the incompatibility of “the kingdom of this world” and “the kingdom of God” has to do with the participation of creation with sin, and not with creation itself. And the same difference can be made for the antagonistic relation between Jesus Christ and this world: he is against “the sons of this world” and by no means to humanity, and against the sinfulness within creation and not to its innermost good reality. Second, the link between creation and sin conveyed by this notion explains the almost non-existence of statements concerning the fulfillment of the “κόσμος.” Rather than transformation, the New Testament affirms that “this

⁹⁴ Jn 8:23; 15:19; 17:14; 18:36.

⁹⁵ Jn 1:10.

⁹⁶ Jn 3:16.

⁹⁷ Jn 6:33; cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47.

⁹⁸ Jn 6:33; 8:23; 17:14, 16.

⁹⁹ Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:14.

¹⁰⁰ Jn 3:16; 6:51; cf. Jn 4:4.

world” in its present form must pass away.¹⁰¹ Jesus Christ has come to “save the world” from all things that impede it to recognize him as both the origin and end of their existence.

This overview of the biblical expression “new heaven and new earth,” as well as the parallel terms of the duality on which this expression is based, does not intend to be a comprehensive explanation of their meaning and nuances. However, this general examination can shed some light on three points associated with the fulfillment of the whole of creation in Scripture. First, all the cited notions directly refer to God as Creator of all. God called into existence all things, and God sustains them in their diversity. This is why the adjective “new” associated with these notions reinforces this belief in God as Creator but gives them their eschatological connotation. Thus the Creator of all things will give fulfillment to all things. Second, the expression “new heaven and new earth” in the Old Testament alludes to the direct link between the fulfillment of the material aspect of creation and the gathering of God’s people. This same idea received its Christological interpretation in the book of Revelation in which the fulfillment of all things is illustrated as the descending of God’s “heavenly” sovereignty into the midst of all nations through the lordship of the Lamb. The fulfillment of creation is somehow associated with the salvation of human beings. This link between the eschatological end of both creation and human beings will appear again later on, when discussing the challenges raised by cosmological discoveries concerning the incommensurable temporal distance between the end of the universe and the end of the human species. Finally, the New Testament refers all the eschatological statements concerning the fulfillment of all things to Jesus Christ. He is not only the Savior of human beings, but the one through whom all things are made, and through whom the Father gives them their final and definitive unity. The nuance that the term “κόσμος” brings

¹⁰¹ 1 Co 7:31.

to the depiction of Jesus Christ's saving action over creation will be helpful to explain the existence of eschatological statements affirming both the renovation of creation and its overcoming. In fact, while the New Testament sustains that Jesus Christ's return will bring "the new heaven and new earth," will make all things new, and will restore the whole of creation, it also affirms the "disappearance of heaven and earth" and "the end of all things" when Jesus Christ comes to judge.¹⁰² This apparent contradiction among the eschatological biblical statements referring the future of creation to either its fulfillment or its renovation through replacement is the problematic that the next section will address.

2. Crisis in "Heaven and Earth" at the Coming of Christ.

As mentioned, Scripture states that God's coming will bring the fulfillment of the whole of creation. For this purpose, it uses different and complementary images to depict the restoration, reconciliation, or renewal of "heaven and earth." However, these images of fulfillment appear combined with an imaginary of cosmic crisis. In fact, Scripture also illustrates the coming of God's judgment and the consequences for creation through images of catastrophic disaster. The coexistence of these two sets of eschatological imageries raises the doubt about the future of the material aspect of creation. There are at least three possible scenarios: first, the complete annihilation of material reality because of the gap between it and God's kingdom; second, the destruction of creation and its replacement by a new one that fits better with the plan of God; third, the renovation of the present creation, with the exception of its sinfulness, because this reality has been always under God's lordship and care.

¹⁰² 1 Pt 4:7; 2 Pt 3:10; cf. Rev 6:12-14.

In order to explore these options, this section will start by showing the images and consequent ideas with which Scripture depicts the cosmic crisis at God's coming. The goal of this part is to clarify any misunderstanding about the eventual destruction or replacement of the material, physical aspect of creation at the parousia. The second part will illustrate this idea by using the expression "the appearance of this world will pass away" of 1 Co 7:31. Finally, this section will end by explaining the fulfilment of creation and the passing away of its present sinfulness by the two theological notions of "the two-aeons scheme" and the anthropological distinction between "body and soul."

2.1. Images of Cosmic Crisis in Scripture.

All the images of cosmic crisis in the Old Testament are, in a certain sense, summarized in God's coming to Mount Sinai. According to the book of Exodus, the appearance of God is followed by thunder, lightning, dark clouds, blast of trumpets, earthquakes, and fire.¹⁰³ These images feature also in many Old Testament theophanies: God manifests Godself as a storm that produces both darkness and light,¹⁰⁴ and from which God speaks as thunder that shakes everything.¹⁰⁵ The glorious coming of God causes earthquakes,¹⁰⁶ and the melting of mountains.¹⁰⁷ These events are sometimes accompanied by fire descending from heaven that not only causes destruction to the earth,¹⁰⁸ but also to human beings.¹⁰⁹ Some texts also use the image of water for conveying the coming of God's judgment, and the universal consequences of it.¹¹⁰ These two

¹⁰³ Ex 19:16-25.

¹⁰⁴ Ex 14:19-20; Ps 18:11-12; 97:2; cf. Joel 2:2.

¹⁰⁵ Ps 18:13-15; 29:3-9; 97:4.

¹⁰⁶ Judg 5:4; Ezek 38:19-20; Ha 3:6; Zech 14:3-5; cf. Ps 18:7; Nah 1:5-6.

¹⁰⁷ Judg 5:5; Ps 97:5; Mic 1:3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Is 29:6; 30:30; Ps 97:3.

¹⁰⁹ Is 34:1-6.

¹¹⁰ Ex 14:26-29.

images — fire and water — to depict the cosmic catastrophe of God's judgment are paradigmatically illustrated in the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah,¹¹¹ and the flood.¹¹² In fact, the New Testament will use both events and their images to describe God's judgment. For the moment, however, it is important to state that, along with the imaginary of fulfillment, the Old Testament affirms that the judgment of God entails terrible consequences for the earth and its inhabitants.

These cosmic effects of God's coming are not restricted to earth, but also include heaven. According to the Old Testament, the heavens tremble when God comes to judge.¹¹³ Like earth, heaven becomes dark: the sun and the moon do not give their light anymore, and the stars fall down.¹¹⁴ The judgment of God produces, therefore, crisis in the whole of creation, both in heaven and on earth. They shake before God.¹¹⁵ Both will pass away, because the only one who remains forever is God.¹¹⁶ Part of the Old Testament's imaginary illustrates, therefore, that when God comes to judge, all aspects of reality will face the possibility of their passing away.

In order to understand the meaning of these eschatological statements, it is necessary to draw attention to their theological framework. First of all, these images concerning the cosmic crisis have their roots in a teleological understanding of history. As distinct from a cyclical way of conceiving history, the Jewish worldview sustains that all things had their beginning and will have their end in God. This does not mean, however, that creation will return to its origin. Rather, creation will be transformed into something that, in continuity with the present, is in a radical discontinuity with the origin. The teleological character of history means that the origin

¹¹¹ Gn 19:24-25.

¹¹² Gn 7:17.

¹¹³ Is 13:9-10, 13; Jer 4:23-24, 28; Joel 3:16.

¹¹⁴ Is 24:23; Joel 3:15; Ezek 32:7-8; Am 8:9.

¹¹⁵ Is 34:4-5; Hag 2:6.

¹¹⁶ Is 51:6; Ps 46:2-3; 102:25-27; cf. Is 54:10.

and final goal of creation are linked in God as the Creator and the Redeemer; all things will reach an end in God who created them. Because this eschatological orientation of reality is already framed by God from the moment of creation, the future of all things cannot be separated from the goodness of their origin without questioning God's integrity: God did not call reality into existence to leave it on its own in the present nor to destroy it in the future. This is why the Old Testament is very far from sustaining that all things were created by God for self-destruction, much less for annihilation by their own Creator. The images associated with a cosmic catastrophe when God comes to judge cannot then have this meaning.

These eschatological statements and images concerning the end of creation appear in both the prophetic and the apocalyptic tradition of the Old Testament. The prophetic tradition affirms that God accomplishes God's promises within history, thereby giving it an end.¹¹⁷ But the historical situation of Israel, especially during the exile, changed the tone of this hope. In fact, the prophetic expectations gradually moved from the fulfillment of the promises within history to the apocalyptic rupture between the present time and the time of their fulfillment. Thus the initial proclamation of the "latter days" of the prophetic tradition progressively gave way to the apocalyptic tradition and the expectation of a certain break between the present reality and the new one to come.¹¹⁸ However, and despite their differences, neither of these two traditions uses the cosmic imaginary to sustain the destruction of creation. Because both traditions share the teleological conception of history in which God is the goal of creation, they coincide in the expectation of a different order based on God's faithfulness in which evil will be annihilated and

¹¹⁷ For the prophetic expectations in the Old Testament, see Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 35–51.

¹¹⁸ For the apocalyptic expectations in the Old Testament, see Edward Adams, "Jewish Apocalyptic and Related Literature," in *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 52–100.

God will dwell within creation. And the imaginary of cosmic crisis serves, therefore, to illustrate this purpose.¹¹⁹

The role of these images becomes clearer when they are seen in their context. In fact, almost all of them refer to God's judgment against the sinfulness of Israel and the non-observation of the covenant on the part of God's people. The judgment of God is not against creation itself, but it aims at the overcoming of evil on earth as a moment prior to the accomplishment of God's promise to dwell in the midst of God's people.¹²⁰ The catastrophic imaginary points to God who is at hand to redeem God's creation from everything that contradicts God's will for it, rather than to destroy the material, physical aspect of creation. The cosmic events are, therefore, like "warning signs" that precede God's final judgment of evil and oppression, after which the transformed creation will rejoin the heavenly realities and the just will receive the reward for their endurance.¹²¹ This idea is reinforced by the previously cited archetypal examples in the Old Testament that use these images of cosmic crisis: the flood and the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah did not entail the destruction of reality, but its purification for its sinfulness through water and fire. In these cases, as well as in the scattering of Babel or the Babylonian exile, God's intervention destabilizes the prevailing order not to destroy it, but to overcome evil.¹²²

¹¹⁹ According to Moltmann's terminology, the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions share two formal principles: the negation of the negative, and the fulfillment of anticipations. For Moltmann's explanation of the differences between prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, see Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 124–38.

¹²⁰ For the "judgment of God" and the historical progression of this term in the Old Testament, see Augustin George, "The Judgment of God," in *The Problem of Eschatology*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx and Boniface Willems (New York: Paulist Press, 1969), 9–17.

¹²¹ See Pierre Grelot, "Apocalyptic," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 48–51.

¹²² The image of God sending "fire from heaven" is a very good example of the purpose of this divine action. Rather than destruction, the goal of fire is the purification of reality from sin in order to prepare it for the coming of God. See, for instance, Is 1:25–27, 31; Zech 13:1–9; Mal 3:2–3.

Because this catastrophic imaginary refers primarily to God's coming to defeat evil and sin, the judgment of God and its destabilizing effects for the present state of things are generally followed by praises for God's lordship on earth.¹²³ Although the "day of the Lord" is feared because of all its consequences for both human beings and creation, God's people must stay confident because God is with them.¹²⁴ The cosmic crisis linked to God's judgment is a sign of redemption, and therefore a cause of joy for the whole of creation.¹²⁵ In a certain sense, this is why the Jewish tradition has no problem in using this imaginary in an inverted way. For instance, it was stated that the coming of God on Mount Sinai summarizes all the catastrophic images of God's judgment; but the Old Testament also lists all fulfillments using the image of God coming on a mountain, this time on Zion.¹²⁶ And it is also on a mountain, Horeb, where the images pointing to God's judgment — the storm, the earthquake, and the fire — become meaningless as signs of the terrible presence of God.¹²⁷

All these principles just cited apply also to the illustration of a cosmic crisis in the New Testament. In tune with the Old Testament prophecies of God's coming, the New Testament describes Jesus Christ's return in glory through the imaginary of catastrophic events. Jesus himself speaks of the consequences that the coming of the "Son of man" will have for the whole of creation.¹²⁸ As in the Jewish tradition, the most frequent images of the coming of God's judgment are darkness and crisis in heaven,¹²⁹ the falling of stars from heaven,¹³⁰ the shaking of

¹²³ Is 24:1-23; Ps 97:2-12; cf. Is 51:6; Ps 102:25-27; Hg 2:6-9.

¹²⁴ Hg 2:6.

¹²⁵ For the redemptive interpretation of the cosmic events in the Old Testament, see Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 109–28.

¹²⁶ Is 25:6-10.

¹²⁷ 1 Kgs 19:11-13.

¹²⁸ Mt 24:29-35; Mk 13:24-31; Lk 21:25-33.

¹²⁹ Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24; Lk 21:25.

¹³⁰ *Idem.*

heaven and earth,¹³¹ and the passing away of them all.¹³² Thus the same catastrophic imaginary employed for the illustration of God's judgment in the Old Testament is now applied to Jesus Christ and the judgment he brings into the world.

As with the Old Testament, however, this cosmic crisis does not aim to depict the imminent destruction of all things as a result of Jesus Christ's judgment. On the contrary, God's activity intends the universal restoration of creation, a plan that is cosmic in scope.¹³³ The subjection of all things to the judgment of Jesus Christ entails their fulfillment.¹³⁴ God's judgment shakes heaven and earth in order to reaffirm them.¹³⁵ when Christ returns, the earth will not be destroyed but found and exposed to divine judgment.¹³⁶ This interpretation is emphasized by the way the New Testament refers to the catastrophic imaginary. For instance, the events that follow Jesus' death — illustrated by the image of earthquakes and the splitting of rocks — did not convey the destruction of creation.¹³⁷ The image of fire, also present in the Old Testament, is used for depicting the divine test that purifies human beings' works not by destroying them, but by revealing them in their goodness;¹³⁸ through fire, their sinfulness will disappear, thus becoming "new creation."¹³⁹ The analogy between Jesus Christ's judgment and the flood highlights the salvific purpose of the cosmic crisis.¹⁴⁰ Interpreted, therefore, through the prophecies of the Jewish tradition, the imaginary of the New Testament concerning the destabilization of heaven and earth at Christ's return does not illustrate destruction of the

¹³¹ Mt 24:30; Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27; Heb 12:26-28; Rev 6:14.

¹³² Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33; cf. 2 Pt 3:10-12; Rev 6:12-13; 20:11; 21:1.

¹³³ See Acts 3:19-21; Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20.

¹³⁴ 1 Co 15:28; Eph 1:22; Phil 3:21; cf. Rm 11:36; 1 Pt 3:22.

¹³⁵ Heb 12:26-29.

¹³⁶ 2 Pt 3:10-12.

¹³⁷ Mt 27:51.

¹³⁸ 1 Co 3:13-15.

¹³⁹ 2 Co 5:17.

¹⁴⁰ Lk 17:22-37; 2 Pt 3:4-7.

materiality of reality, but the overthrow of evil, the renovation of the whole of creation, and, ultimately, its salvation.¹⁴¹

2.2. The Appearance of this World will Pass Away (1 Co 7:31).

The beginning of this chapter identified the duality “heaven and earth” as an expression that illustrates the whole of creation, and the divine plan for it. In fact, Scripture holds that “heaven and earth” were created in the beginning by God, are witnesses of God’s salvific action on behalf of God’s people, and will be fulfilled by God at the end of time. This process, however, is not an automatic transformation. Because reality as it is now does not fit with God’s reign, a radical change within creation is necessary through God’s judgment of it. This change refers to the overcoming of present evil, and must be then differentiated from the destruction of materiality or the appearance of a new creation in total discontinuity with the present. The fulfillment of all things entails, therefore, the breakdown of realities that resist God’s original plan within creation rather than either its destruction or replacement.¹⁴²

All the above ideas give elements for a more precise response concerning the aspect of reality that will pass away when Christ returns. Rather than the disappearance of materiality, the parousia entails its fulfillment by Christ’s judgment of it. In other words, the transformation of the whole of creation will happen by means of Christ’s judgment of the sinfulness associated

¹⁴¹ For the redemptive interpretation of the cosmic events in the New Testament, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 179–210; N. T. Wright, “The Hope of Israel,” in *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 280–338. For the way most of patristic, medieval and reformation theologies illustrate the “new heaven and new earth” as cosmic renovation rather than cosmic recreation ex-nihilo, see Michael Svigel, “Extreme Makeover: Heaven and Earth Edition- Will God Annihilate the World and Re-Creat It Ex-Nihilo?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171, no. 684 (2014): 401–17.

¹⁴² Against the idea that Scripture suggests either the destruction of the world or the existence of a new creation in complete discontinuity with the present one, see, for instance, Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven*, 13; Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 135.

with it. At the parousia, sin and its consequences within creation will pass away. Freed from its present state, creation will become the fitting context for redeemed human life in harmony with God.

These ideas concerning the elements that will pass away at the fulfillment of creation can be summarized by using the biblical expression “the appearance of this world.”¹⁴³ In fact, this statement taken from the first letter to the Corinthians is an image that allows the distinction between the aspect of creation that will be judge and the reality that Christ will fulfill when he comes again. The present situation of sin, and not materiality, is the appearance of creation that will pass away at the parousia.

Yet it is important to affirm that the original sense of the expression “appearance of the world” does not refer to the aspect of reality that will pass away when Jesus Christ returns. Indeed, this expression appears in the context of the parousia but within the framework of Paul’s view of marriage and celibacy.¹⁴⁴ According to most biblical scholars, the qualifier “appearance” — σχῆμα — applied to “this world” — κόσμου — does not refer to sin or any of its consequences, but to the social structure in its capacity to either improve or make earthly life possible.¹⁴⁵ By affirming, therefore, that the appearance of this world will pass away, the text holds that all human social creation, in this particular case marriage and virginity, will not remain after the parousia. Human beings must not therefore hold on to the present world and its social structure because it “is passing away” — παράγει. The only one who remains forever is God.

¹⁴³ 1 Co 7:31.

¹⁴⁴ 1 Co 7:1-40.

¹⁴⁵ For the interpretation of this verse, see Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 348–49; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 377; Bruce Longenecker and Timothy A. Brookins, *1 Corinthians 1-9: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 184.

Despite this specific meaning, the expression “the appearance of this world” has been used by some theologies over the years to convey the present situation of sin within creation that will pass away at Christ’s return. For instance, Irenaeus affirmed that neither the substance nor the essence of creation will be annihilated, but the “fashion of the world.”¹⁴⁶ Saint Bonaventure stated that the fire of judgment that will consume the earth will make the “fashion of this world” disappear.¹⁴⁷ And the contemporary official teaching of the Church also uses this verse in stating that the “appearance of the world” is a reality that must pass away.¹⁴⁸ This expression has been helpful, therefore, to differentiate the intrinsic goodness of God’s creation and the necessary judgment of this world by God.

The use of the biblical expression in the mentioned theological reflection sheds light on how this expression can bring together some ideas already highlighted concerning the future of creation; those ideas can be summarized in three points. The most evident idea is that the first letter to the Corinthians affirms that *present form*, and not the world itself, is “passing away.” This rationale can be found in other parts of the letter to the Corinthians by the use this text gives to the expression “reduced to nothing” — καταργέω. In fact, this word states that things with apparent value for this world will disappear because, before God, they are reduced to nothing.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, the first letter of John gives a similar meaning to “passing away” — παράγει — as the cited expression in Corinthians inasmuch as it illustrates the fading away of the present darkness of this world because of the light brought by Christ.¹⁵⁰ Second, the qualifier “the present form”

¹⁴⁶ See Irenaeus, “Adversus Haereses,” V, 32, 1.

¹⁴⁷ See Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. Erwin Nemmers (St Louis, MO: Herder, 1947), VII, IV, 2.

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, LG 42; GS 39; *Catechism*, 1619; “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,” 2004, 48, 264,

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_comp_endio-dott-soc_en.html.

¹⁴⁹ 1 Co 1:28; 2:6; 6:13; 13:8-11; 15:24-26.

¹⁵⁰ 1 Jn 2:8, 17.

linked to “this world” can refer to the distinction made between the different ways of depicting “creation” in the New Testament. As mentioned, “κόσμος” means mainly creation in its association with sin, and therefore the aspect of creation that is the antithesis of God’s will. Although, according to this rationale, what should pass away is “this world” and not only “its form,” it can be affirmed that God’s judgment of creation does not cause the destruction of reality but of its features linked to sin. It is true that the very expression “the present form” expands the meaning of “this world” to all things that, even though good, do not determine human beings in their ultimate realization. But the latter, interpreted in the context of the First letter to the Corinthians, cannot be detached from the sinful aspect of creation. And this interpretation is not only supported by the use of this expression by the Christian written tradition, but also by two observations of the letter itself. On the one hand, the letter uses also the word “τὰ πάντα” for “creation” and its fulfillment in Christ, which means that “κόσμος” is not used here as a general term but refers specifically to reality in its link with sin.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, “κόσμος” appears in this letter, in most cases, to allude to either its rejection or its judgment by God.¹⁵² Finally, the expression “the appearance of this world” alludes to the eschatological tension between “now” and “not yet” of the fulfillment of reality. The present form of the world “is passing away,” meaning that the process of God’s judgment on the present scheme of things will not only be a future reality, but it has already been initiated. This present world is already under God’s judgment, and therefore believers are already freed from it. In Christological terms, the passing away of this world is an ongoing process that was initiated by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and will be fulfilled by his return in glory.

¹⁵¹ 1 Co 8:6; 11:12; 15:27-28.

¹⁵² 1 Co 1:20, 21, 27, 28; 2:12; 3:19; 6:2; 11:32.

For all these reasons, and from many different perspectives, it is possible to firmly state then that Scripture by no means holds either the passing away or the destruction of the material aspect of created reality at God's judgment. Instead, the biblical tradition affirms that God will come to judge this world, which means that the sin associated with creation will pass away to bring about the fulfillment of the whole of created things. Jesus Christ's return will finish this ongoing process already started in, by, and through him.

2.3. The Passing Away of the Present Aeon, and the Distinction Between "Body and Soul"

It remains only to clarify two theological ideas that, in their dualistic interpretation, tend to contradict everything that has been said so far: the two-aeons biblical scheme, and the anthropological understanding of the duality "body and soul."

The scheme of the two-aeons can be interpreted through the lens of the duality "heaven and earth" already explored before. As mentioned, this duality refers to the whole of creation as a diverse unity whose origin and goal is its Creator. In this sense, therefore, "heaven and earth" does not aim to present the distinctions of reality in terms of what part of it is more valuable or better than the other, but to offer a comprehensive view of the complexity of creation. However, there are many cases in the history of the theological understanding of "heaven and earth" in which the dualistic interpretation of this reality has prevailed. The duality "heaven and earth," rather than expressing a unity under the sovereignty of God, becomes the opposition between two antithetical elements in which one must remain while the other must pass away. Even though Christian reflection has battled against this dualistic vision of creation from the Gnostics onwards, that has not prevented Christian eschatology from this tendency to equate "heaven and earth" with the dualities "above and below," "spirit and matter," and "good and evil" as if they

were antonyms that can be separated from each other. Thus while “heaven” must remain because it is above, spiritual, and good, “earth” must be overcome because it is below, material, and evil.

This same misunderstanding appears in the interpretation of the two-aeons biblical scheme. According to the older books of the Old Testament in which this notion appears, “aeon” is a temporal expression that signifies, in neutral terms, a period of time that is experienced by human beings as an “eternity.”¹⁵³ In the later writings of the Old Testament, “aeon” starts being used to differentiate the “everlasting” time of God and the “limited” time of creation.¹⁵⁴ It was only in the apocalyptic tradition that the two-aeons scheme became the opposition between the “aeon” of creation and the “aeon” of God in terms of “the present world” and the “world to come.”¹⁵⁵ According to this apocalyptic interpretation, the present aeon is delivered to the power of evil and the aeon to come will transfigure the present world by God’s judgment. These two uses of the term “aeon” in the Old Testament are also present in the New Testament: on the one hand, “aeon” has a more neutral meaning in some texts referring to “eternity” or “from the old.”¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, the apocalyptic two-aeons scheme is used in other texts for stating not only the difference between the “present aeon” and the one of God and the gospel,¹⁵⁷ but also their opposition.¹⁵⁸ This is why, at the end of time, the present aeon will be overcome by the

¹⁵³ Dt 15:17; Am 9:11. The word “αἰών” is the Greek translation of the word “ōlām” made by the LXX.

¹⁵⁴ Is 40:28.

¹⁵⁵ In the context of Daniel 2, for instance, the two “aeons” represent, on the one hand, the worldly kingdoms that follow one another, and, on the other hand, the kingdom of God which is everlasting and must replace them. In its broader sense, this two “aeons” illustrates the eternity of God that is not only qualitatively different from the present one, but also superior inasmuch as it exists both before and beyond creation. See Anton Vögtle, “Aeon,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 11–13.

¹⁵⁶ Lk 1:70; Jn 4:14; 6:51; Acts 3:21; Jude 13. One of the meanings of the term “αἰών” in the New Testament is, therefore, “for all eternity.” Used mostly in doxologies (1 Tm 1:17), this word stresses the idea that God is before all things, and therefore God’s superiority over creation (Jn 17:24; Eph 1:4).

¹⁵⁷ Rm 12:2; 1 Co 1:10; 2:6; Gal 1:4; 2 Tm 4:10; cf. 2 Co 4:4; 1 Tm 6:17; Tit 2:12.

¹⁵⁸ Mt 12:32; Mk 10:30; Lk 18:30; Rm 8:18; Eph 1:21; cf. 1 Co 10:11; Heb 2:5. As in the apocalyptic tradition, the “present aeon” appears in opposition to the “aeon to come.” John’s Gospel particularly highlights the opposition between these two realities inasmuch as this Gospel presents “this aeon” as an equivalent of “world,” and therefore as reality in opposition with God. See Vögtle, “Aeon.”

coming new age.¹⁵⁹ Although this second use of the term — the two-aeons scheme — does depict a conflictive relationship between the present old time and the coming new one in both the Old Testament apocalyptic tradition and in some New Testament texts, this opposition between the two aeons should not be interpreted in terms of their antithetical antagonism. As stated for the duality “heaven and earth,” only a dualistic interpretation of the two-aeons scheme matches the present aeon with the notions “earth, below, matter, and evil,” while the coming aeon with the notions “heaven, above, spirit, and good.” Rather than this dualistic antagonism, Scripture claims that the conflict between these two ages is produced by their overlap in the present, creating a contradiction between God and the present “state of affairs” within creation as result of sinfulness. What must pass away is the age of “sin on earth,” not the “earth.” In fact, the cited apocalyptic Old Testament texts state that the “aeon to come” will overthrow all the demonic forces and not God’s creation. And the New Testament texts that assumed this tradition also assert that the new age already brought by God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ was not the annihilation of creation, but the confrontation with and overcoming of all aspects of reality that contradict God’s salvific will for it. What appears, here again, is the biblical rationale of the overcoming of the “appearance of the world” and not the annihilation of creation. In the case of the two-aeons scheme, the parousia will not abolish the present time by bringing a new eternal one. Rather, when Christ comes again, the time of God will perfectly match with the time of creation. The conflict between them will end by the fulfillment of time by God.

Besides the duality “heaven and earth” and the two-aeons scheme, there is another biblical notion that tends to be interpreted with a dualistic rationale, namely the anthropological duality “body and soul.” According to biblical anthropology, human beings are not composed by

¹⁵⁹ 1 Jn 2:17; cf. 1 Jn 3:13-14.

different “elements.” Rather, human beings are a unity that, because of its complexity, shows different aspects. This is why Scripture describes every singular dimension of human beings through notions that depict the entire human experience. The Old Testament, for instance, uses four terms to refer to the whole human being from a particular point of view: the whole person is “*basar*” (flesh), “*nefesh*” (life), “*leb*” (heart), and “*ruah*” (spirit). The New Testament does likewise, but using the terms “σῶμα” (body), “ψυχή” (soul), and “σάρξ” (flesh understood in terms of sinfulness).¹⁶⁰ Without pretending to be exhaustive in this complicated issue, it is enough to argue that the assimilation of Greek philosophy — in particular Platonism — by the ancient Christian theologians led the nascent Christian reflection to move from a more unified anthropological vision to the depiction of human beings by using the Greek duality “body and soul.”¹⁶¹ In fact, the first Councils already show the conceptual coexistence of the biblical anthropologic unity with Greek anthropologic duality in the way they treated, for instance, the resurrection.¹⁶² As time passed, the duality “body and soul” within Christian theology came to mean the human aspects that can be distinguished from each other, but also be separated through death. Thus although the Christian written tradition has never denied the bodily resurrection, the question of the afterlife progressively moved from “the salvation of the human being” to the

¹⁶⁰ For an overview of the way Scripture uses all these notions, see Jörg Splett, “Body,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 157–61; Elmar Klinger, “Soul,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 1615–18. For an illustrative explanation of the influence of the Old Testament anthropological notions on the New Testament way of describing human beings’ nature, see Daniel Lys, “L’arrière-Plan et Les Connotations Vétérotestamentaires de Sarx et de Sōma: Étude Préliminaire,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 2 (1986): 163–204.

¹⁶¹ According to Splett, the Greek anthropology, in particular its way of understanding the concept of “soul,” is already present in the thoughts of Justinus, Irenaeus, Origin, and Tertulian. Cf. Splett, “Body,” 1616–17.

¹⁶² On the one hand, the first Councils strongly defended the intrinsic unity and identity of both Jesus Christ and human beings after the resurrection: as the whole human beings die at the moment of death, the whole human beings, and not only some aspects of them, will rise at the end of time. On the other hand, the use of the Greek duality “body and soul” for depicting this event led to clarify that the resurrection entails “one’s own body,” an idea that seemed not necessary to affirm on the “soul.” While the body decomposes after death, the soul survives this event. See Formula *Fides Damasi* (DH 72), Profession *Quicumque* (DH 76), Toledo VII (DH 540), Letter *Eius Exemplo* (DH 797), Lateran IV (DH 801), Lyon II (DH 859), *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1002).

“salvation of their souls.” The importance of the state of the soul after death is also highlighted when it is affirmed that the soul can “exist” without the body after death in the immediate beatific vision of God before the resurrection of the dead when Jesus Christ returns.¹⁶³ In fact, the possibility of an immediate retribution after death but before resurrection creates the theological distinction between the personal judgment after death and the universal judgment in the resurrection of the dead. In this context, it is not difficult to imagine the immortal, spiritual soul in “heaven” after death separated from the mortal, material body which was left behind on “earth” waiting for their reunion in order to live together in the place where the soul already is with God: heaven. This is why the materiality of creation is easily underestimated, and therefore the concrete, physical fulfillment of creation — including the physical return of Christ — doubted.

It is necessary to recall, here again, the complexity of this issue. Christian theology has never officially supported any dualistic anthropology by using the duality “body and soul.” Rahner, for instance, pointed out that the unity between “body and soul” is one of the important Catholic teachings on the body.¹⁶⁴ The difference of this Christian dualism of “body and soul” from Greek dualism, in which this duality has its roots, comes from the biblical understanding of human beings. As was argued in relation to “heaven and earth,” human beings are a unity and simultaneously diverse from their origin. This duality body/soul used for depicting human beings, therefore, refers to a differentiation within the unity which recognizes that human experience, as the whole of reality, is complex and entails multiple dimensions intertwined

¹⁶³ See Lyon II (DH 857), Florence (DH 1305), *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1001).

¹⁶⁴ According to Rahner, the human being is “a unity made up of body and soul.” This does not mean that human beings consist of these two elements. Rather, the Christian teaching obliges us “to maintain the real, true, radical, substantial, original unity of body and soul.” Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 79. For statements referring to the unity of body and soul in the Christian written tradition, see Lateran V (DH 1440); Council of Trent (DH 1512); Vatican I (DH 3002, 3022).

among them. Thus when the Old Testament affirms, for instance, that humans are “*basar*” (body), it implies the whole of human beings from a particular point of view, namely their inner fragility and complete dependency on God. Human beings were formed from the dust of the earth, became alive thanks to God’s breath of life, and will return to the earth when God takes this breath of life away.¹⁶⁵ This is why death is the end of human beings in all their aspects, rather than the separation of some kind of spiritual, autonomous reality of human beings from the material, superfluous one. Thus human beings, understood by the biblical tradition as a whole, “completely die” when they pass away.

The main focus of the biblical anthropological theology concerning human dying is not the separation of body and soul, but its relationship with sin. This theological interpretation of death in relation to sin is clearly sustained within Scripture and Christian written tradition.¹⁶⁶ This is why Paul frames his theology of the resurrection through the anthropological conflict between “*πνεῦμα*” and “*σάρξ*,” rather than the conflict between “*ψυχή*” and “*σῶμα*” — a duality that could be associated with the pair “body and soul.” Thus, while Paul affirms that Jesus’ resurrection is a response not only to death, but also to its ultimate consequence, namely sin,¹⁶⁷ he also states that the fundamental anthropological disagreement is between human *σάρξ* and divine *πνεῦμα*.¹⁶⁸ Like the term “world,” the Pauline notion of “*σάρξ*” designates the aspect of human beings effected by sin, and which therefore must pass away before God. “*Σάρξ*” is perishable,

¹⁶⁵ Gn 1:7; Job 10:9; 17:16; 34:14-15; Ps 30:9; 90:3; 104:39; Eccl 3:20; *et parr.*

¹⁶⁶ For the relationship between death and sin in the Christian written tradition, see Damasus I (DH 146); Carthage XV (DH 222); Orange II (DH 372); Trent (DH 1511-1512, 1521); and *Auctorem Fidei* (DH 2617). Rahner, for instance, states that sin transformed a natural process – dying as natural fulfillment of human beings – in an event of fear and doubts. See Rahner, “Christian Dying,” 247f. N. T. Wright thinks that death, because of sin, gained a second dimension that Scripture illustrates mostly through the image of the exile, as Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. See Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 95.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Rm 5:12.

¹⁶⁸ Rm 8:4; Gal 6:8; *et parr.*

while “σῶμα” will be raised imperishable.¹⁶⁹ With the resurrection, it is “σάρξ” and not “σῶμα” that will disappear. In fact, the risen person is the “σῶμα” fully permeated by God’s “πνεῦμα.”¹⁷⁰ As with the problematic of “heaven and earth,” what is at stake here is the reality of sin and not the disappearance of some part of reality nor the privilege of one over the other.¹⁷¹

3. Implications.

This chapter has highlighted five main ideas. First, the duality “heaven and earth” illustrates all things created by God in terms of complex unity. Although creation has different dimensions, each of which conveys a particular aspect of it, all of them share the same origin, the same source of existence, and the same goal, namely the Creator. This is why Scripture turns to the expression “new heaven and new earth” to affirm all these ideas: God, who created all things in the remote past, will fulfill all things in the absolute future. And along with this duality, the New Testament uses other terms to depict this accomplishment of the whole reality, this time assigning this fulfilling action to Jesus Christ. He is the one through whom all things were made in the beginning, and in whom they will reach their fulfillment and glorification at his return at the end of time.

Second, the fulfillment of the whole of creation entails transformation of all existing things, and therefore neither excludes the transformation of the material reality nor limits redemption solely to human beings. The imaginary that includes cosmic crisis at God’s judgment in the Old Testament, on the one hand, and at Jesus Christ’s return, on the other hand, does not

¹⁶⁹ 1 Co 15:50-54.

¹⁷⁰ 1 Co 15:44-46.

¹⁷¹ Sarah Harding works together, in a very interesting way, all these mentioned subjects in Paul’s theology. After presenting the eschatological anthropology in Paul, she offers a complete interpretation of the anthropology in the old eon, in the overlap of the old and new aeon, and in the new one. See Sarah Harding, *Paul’s Eschatological Anthropology: The Dynamics of Human Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

depict the expectation of the imminent destruction of the material aspect of creation, but the universal scope of God's redemptive activity. Thus the cosmic, catastrophic images associated with Jesus Christ's return to judge creation illustrate the overcoming of evil, the renovation of the whole of creation, and, ultimately, its salvation.

Third, the fulfillment of creation at Jesus Christ's return is not its destruction, but neither is it its replacement *ex-nihilo* for something in complete discontinuity with what was created good by God. This is why the renovation of creation entails the passing away of all the obstacles that block the full relation of creation with God. And this obstacle is sin. Through the theological terms "κόσμος" and "σάρξ," the New Testament names and distinguishes the aspects of creation in general and of human existence in particular associated with sin, and therefore resisting God's will. "Κόσμος" and "σάρξ," and not the material reality, will pass away at Jesus Christ's return. Materiality is intrinsically good and its goal is its fulfillment by God.

Fourth, even if reality must be renewed because of sin, the fulfillment of creation cannot be reduced only to the passing away of sinfulness. This idea can be stated from two perspectives. It is important to recall, on the one hand, that Jesus Christ's death has already overcome sin, a reality which does not exclude the waiting of the future transformation of the whole of creation when Christ comes. As mentioned, the renovation of creation is an event still to come. On the other hand, the eschatological goal of all things is an inner aspect of reality since all things are created by God; in other words, God created reality in order for its fulfillment. Because creation preceded sin, the accomplishment of the whole of creation does not depend on it. It is better to state, therefore, that although the fulfillment is not the response of sin within creation, its renovation passes through the necessary passing away of sin. In this sense, God's fulfillment of all things is more than their existence without sin. Using the image of the new creation as "the new Jerusalem coming from heaven," it is possible to metaphorically imagine God's fulfillment

as the “expansion” of creation, from what it is now, to something new in which God will dwell among God’s people.

Fifth, this transformation of all things in accordance with God’s will has been already initiated in Christ, but it is still to come. This idea becomes clear through the notion of the “kingdom of God.” In fact, God’s kingdom is already present within creation by Jesus Christ and it is led during the present time toward its fulfillment by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the kingdom of God is not a reality foreign to this world. The New Testament holds this idea by using different images and expressions. However, the New Testament also affirms that the present situation of creation does not perfectly fit with the kingdom of God. Even if God’s reign was brought by Jesus Christ and the sin of the world was already overcome by his death and resurrection, a radical change within creation is necessary through Christ’s judgment of it at the parousia. In other words, although this process of “passing away of the form of this world” has already been initiated and the kingdom of God is an ongoing reality within creation, the present evil must be definitively overthrown when Christ comes again. Using the eschatological duality “already/not yet,” it is possible to claim that creation is, paradoxically, already freed from sin and must expect the complete overcoming of it. The parousia entails, therefore, the finishing of a process not yet accomplished — the full and definitive overcoming of sin — in order to lead creation to its fulfillment already started in, by, and through the one who will come again — the transformation of all things in accordance with Christ. When the material, physical aspect of creation will be finally freed from sin by Christ’s judgment, he will transform what was created in accordance with him into “new heaven and new earth.”

Finally, it is important to recall that these reflections on the material, physical aspects of the whole of creation when Christ comes, aim to balance a tendency in contemporary eschatology to depict the *eschaton* mostly through “temporal” categories. These reflections have,

at least, two main consequences. First, as pointed out in the second chapter, the contemporary eschatological discourse is mostly focused on speculation about something that either already happened in the past or not, the presence of an existential and eternal now or not, or the closeness or distance of the future. This is why the temporal polarity already/but not yet is one of the current formulas for both depicting and understanding God as fulfillment of all things. Even if the material and spatial reality of the *eschaton* is not denied, these two aspects of God's fulfillment of all things are clearly less developed than those linked with "time." By recalling, therefore, that God will fulfill "heaven and earth," the eschatological reflection does not receive a new perspective. Rather, it recovers an element that has been constitutive of the expectations of both Scripture and the Christian written tradition, namely God is the goal of all created things; only sin will pass away. Second, this material, spatial approach to God's fulfillment cannot be reduced to "earth." Although it may sound simple and redundant, God is the goal of all creation. This mean, therefore, that everything that exists – all the planets, stars, galaxies – is part of God's will to be all in all. Thus although the eschatological reflection on time includes now those of matter and space, this reflection should not be confined to human history, ecology, and social justice. Thanks to the recent cosmological discoveries, the notion of "creation" has gained universal, cosmic proportions. "All things" and what God is doing with God's creation is more that "this planet" and what is happening within it. This is why Christian concern on ecology and social justice must be framed in the eschatological picture of the fulfillment of the whole universe.

As mentioned in the second chapter, this shift toward more material perspectives and cosmic proportions necessarily challenges some theological assumptions, specially concerning the place of human beings within creation and their role in the fulfillment of all things - the universe. Thus once the first bias referring to the fulfillment of the material, physical aspect of

creation was clarified, it remains to explore the second bias highlighted in the second chapter, namely the "humanization" of most of the eschatological statements. The participation of human beings in God's fulfillment of all things will be the main subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

The Role of Human Beings in the Fulfillment of All Things

The preceding chapter showed that the parousia entails the fulfillment of the whole of creation, meaning that all aspects of present reality, with the exception only of sin, will be renewed and glorified by God in Jesus Christ at the end of time. As was argued in previous chapters, through the duality “heaven and earth,” Scripture holds that creation is a diverse and complex unity, and that the material aspect of creation will neither be destroyed nor replaced. Rather, the goal of “heaven and earth” is their fulfillment in God. Thus the whole of creation is basically aimed, since its absolute beginning in God, to become a “new heaven and new earth” when Christ returns. And this is why, although the parousia will entail the passing away of sin and its consequences, the main goal of God’s action does not point to this purpose. The hope in the fulfillment of all things is based on God’s faithfulness as Creator and not on God’s intention to give solutions to a cosmic drama provoked by some human fault.

This fifth chapter will delve into some theological questions linked to these statements, this time from the perspective of the role of humanity in the fulfillment of creation. In fact, along with the conviction that the hope in the fulfillment of the whole of creation is ultimately based on God, Scripture and Christian written tradition hold not only an intrinsic solidarity between the fulfillment of both human beings and the rest of creation, but also the eschatological implications that human actions have for humans and for the reality in which they live. But what could be the eschatological role of human beings in a process that was started by God, is led by God, and will be fulfilled by God, and that involves the whole of creation? As was shown in the second chapter, when the eschatological reflection affirms the role of human beings in creation without

explaining how these actions can impact a process which exceeds by far their factual possibilities from a both theological and scientific point of view, this reflection risks reducing eschatology to what happens on this planet and the responsibility that human beings have within it before God.

In order to examine these questions from a biblical and systematic perspective, this chapter will use the classic theological way this bond between humanity and the rest of creation has been depicted, namely by the duality subjection/liberation of creation to/from sin, and the role of human beings in both situations.

The first section will explore the idea of creation being “subjected” to sin and the role of human beings in this current situation. As already argued, creation as a whole is originally and intrinsically good because it is willed by God, and therefore the only thing that will not have a place in God’s fulfillment is the element that did not have its origin in God, namely sin. But can a situation caused by human beings — something which is embodied in Adam’s fault — be broadened to the whole of creation as the theological reason for a condition from which creation must be liberated? This first section aims then to clarify humanity’s role in the current situation of creation by surveying Paul’s perspective on this issue and the way Christian written tradition has understood this solidarity between human beings and creation.

The second section will survey this same question on origins but from the perspective of the future. Have human beings any responsibility or role in the fulfillment of the whole of creation? Christian theology holds that, although redemption is a free gift from God already realized in Jesus Christ and any human action is grounded in God’s grace, it is the responsibility of human beings to open themselves to receive this grace by accepting Jesus Christ and behaving in accord with his way of living. In this sense then human beings have a fundamental role in their salvation. Human beings’ salvation is not something that God gives despite them or without the concurrence of human liberty and the works it responsibly fashioned during time. Does this same

“rule” apply for the fulfilment of the other aspects of creation? Is the redemption of all things accepted and received only through human beings’ liberty?

These two sections will be worked from the biblical text that framed, in a certain sense, the discussion on the relationship between humanity and creation in terms of the duality subjection/liberation, namely Rm 8:19-23. This biblical approach, as well as the way these two topics have been interpreted by the Christian written tradition, will offer some light in exploring the link between creation, sin, and redemption. These insights will be very useful when showing, at the end of this chapter, how an eschatological reflection in tune with cosmological discoveries should not underestimate the role of human actions and the effects of sin, but fit them within the context of a theology of creation and of God’s action within it.

1. Human Responsibility and the Current Situation of Creation

Rm 8:19-23 holds an important place in the way the Christian theological tradition has understood and shaped the relationship between the destiny of human beings and creation. In general terms, Rm 8:19-23 holds that creation is not as God originally designed it inasmuch as it was subjected, not by its own will, to a situation of futility and corruption. Despite its present situation, creation anxiously longs for God’s salvation. Because creation was subjected in hope, it groans in agony because of its present suffering but especially for the expectation of its future glory. According to the text, this hope of creation is directly associated with the resurrection and eschatological glorification of believers. Although the parousia is not specifically mentioned in Rm 8:19-23, the text argues that believers will be glorified with Christ, and therefore their bodies will be redeemed. The whole of reality eagerly awaits this moment, in which the children of God will be revealed and creation will share their freedom.

A closer reading of Rm 8:19-23 allows us to highlight some topics already mentioned in the preceding chapters. First of all, the way this text refers to creation. As discussed in chapter three, the New Testament uses different expressions to illustrate creation. In the case of the Letter to the Romans, Paul uses all of them.¹ However, Rm 8:19-23 refers to only one of these expressions — “κτίσις” — using it four times.² Among all the possible meanings of this word in Rm 8:19-23, most biblical scholars agree that Paul uses “κτίσις” in this text to refer to the aspect of creation that is non-human.³ Following this interpretation, creation understood as the material, physical aspect of reality is what Paul would have in mind when he states that creation is hoping for future freedom and glory amidst the present situation of suffering.

Besides this, the text holds that this non-human aspect of creation is in a state of both suffering and hope. As mentioned in chapter four, material reality is not destined for destruction, but for its transformation in God. Although reality is marked by contradictions and conflicts, its future lies in God. This situation described in Rm 8:19-23 is already introduced in the preceding verses from an anthropological perspective. According to Rm 8:17-18, although believers can suffer with Christ in this present age, this suffering cannot be compared to the glory they will enjoy with Christ in the future. Rm 8:19-23 follows this same rationale but in cosmological

¹ The Letter to the Romans uses the three synonyms of “heaven and earth” pointed out in the previous chapter. Paul affirms that Jesus Christ is the one from, through, and for whom all things are (Rm 11:36; “τὰ πάντα”). Moreover, the letter sustains that sin entered this world because of one man (Rm 5:12) but it will be reconciled by God (Rm 11:15; “κόσμος”). Finally, Paul states that God has shown God’s plan since the creation of the world (Rm 1:20), a reality which is groaning in the expectation of the revelation of the children of God (Rm 8:19-23; “κτίσεως”).

² According to Rm 8:19-23, “κτίσις” expects the revelation of the children of God (v. 19), is subjected to futility (v. 20), will be freed from its slavery to corruption (v. 21), and is groaning in labour pains (v. 22).

³ According to Harry Hahne, the word “κτίσις” in Rm 8:19-24 has five interpretations among biblical scholars. First, this word includes all creation. Second, it refers to non-human creation. Third, “κτίσις” alludes to humanity. Fourth, it refers to non-human creation and unbelievers. Finally, it means the angelic realm. Hahne affirms that most scholars agree that Paul uses this word in its second meaning, namely what it is called “nature.” For the list of authors who use the word “κτίσις” in Rm 8:19-23 with those mentioned different meanings, see Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 177–78. See also Gregory Fewster, *Creation Language in Romans 8: A Study in Monosemy* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–12. For another list of the meaning of the word “κτίσις” in Rm 8:19-23, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1975), 411–12.

terms: as believers share with Christ in his suffering in order to share in his glory, creation suffers in the present but hopes for its future transformation when redeemed human beings are glorified. In other words, the expectation in the midst of present suffering is the shared framework of both human beings in Rm 8:17-18 and creation in Rm 8:19-23. However, and despite this common context of suffering and hope, the content of the expectations is not exactly the same. It is true that both human beings and creation await liberation from their suffering and their fulfillment as a result of Jesus Christ's coming. But while creation waits for the revelation of the children of God,⁴ they are not expecting the fulfillment of creation. Rather, they hope in Christ's coming and the consequent glorification of their material reality, namely the resurrection of their bodies.⁵ To put it in other terms, while creation is eagerly awaiting the liberation that the appearance of glorified human beings will bring to the whole of reality, the text does not affirm something similar about human beings referring to creation. This eschatological link between human beings and creation, as well as its apparent "one-way" direction, will be explored some paragraphs below. For the moment, it is possible to argue already that both human beings and creation share a common situation of suffering as well as a common hope in their future salvation. There is a clear solidarity among them. But although their fulfillment will come only from God, Rm 8:19-23 suggests that the content of their expectations is different: human beings await salvation in the Lord, and creation awaits in the revelation of the children of God.

⁴ Rm 8:19.

⁵ Rm 8:24.

1.1. The Subjection of Creation (Rm 8:20-21)

Before exploring the eschatological solidarity between human beings and creation in Rm 8:19-23, it seems important to note that this text takes the current situation of the suffering of creation retrospectively back to the temporal beginning of all things. According to Rm 8:19-23, the suffering of creation is due to its subjection to futility and corruption — “ματαιότης” and “φθορᾶς” — in the past.⁶ Yet it is necessary to state that this subjection was not part of creation itself. Rather, the text is very clear in affirming that creation was changed from its original state to this situation which was imposed on it. Futility and corruption/decay did not form part of God’s original plan for God’s creation. Thus although creation “was subjected” to its present situation from time immemorial, this action did not have its origin at the moment of creation. God creates all things good and in accordance with God’s will. And the current situation of creation does not respond to this project.

This change within God’s creation has been interpreted in two ways. One interpretation of Rm 8:20 attributes the subjection of creation to Adam’s sin as the efficient cause of its current state of “corruption.” The disobedience of Adam broke the relationship not only between God and human beings, but also between God and the whole of creation. Because of the intimate link of human beings and creation before sin,⁷ they “dragged” creation with them into the consequences of their sin. According to this interpretation of Rm 8:20, Paul is framing in a

⁶ Rm 8:20. Although some versions of the Bible translate “φθορᾶς” as “decay,” most of the references to this expression in Christian written tradition use the word “corruption.” It is interesting to note that this difference in the translation of “φθορᾶς” already shows the underlying theological stances which will be illustrated in the course of this chapter. These translations are influenced by the way the consequences of sin within creation are interpreted. While the word “corruption” shows the negative aspect of the subjection of creation because of sin, the word “decay” tends to underline the aspect of creation which is part of the normal process of birth and death. And while “corruption” appears mostly in translations which tend to associate the subjection of creation with human actions, the word “decay” is predominantly used in translations which associate this subjection with God. In fact, these two words will be used during this chapter to highlight not only the different translations, but their different theological backgrounds.

⁷ Gn 1:26-28; cf. Ps 8:5-8.

cosmic scope what he says in an anthropological way in Rm 5:12-19: as Adam brought sin and death to humanity, his sin reached the whole of creation, corrupting it. This idea could be reinforced by other biblical texts that allude to the negative effects of human beings' actions on creation in continuity with Adam's fault — the murder of Abel that stains the earth with his blood,⁸ or the sinfulness of Noah's generation that overwhelms the earth.⁹ Adam's sin, therefore, would be the cause of the subjection of creation to its current situation of futility and "corruption."¹⁰

The other interpretation of Rm 8:20 does not deny the effects of human sin. In fact, it states that Paul has Adam's fall clearly in view. But it is important to affirm that God, not Adam, is the one who subjected creation to futility. According to this interpretation, Paul has the curse of the ground by God after the fall as the background of the current state of creation.¹¹ Human sin is not, therefore, the immediate cause of creation's futility and "decay." But though it is God who subjected creation to this situation, the reason for the curse is the disobedience of human beings. In other words, God not only "penalized" human beings because of Adam's sin, but also subjected creation as a judicial pronouncement in response to his sin. This rationale can be found in other Old Testament passages in which the only reason for God to direct God's anger toward creation is human beings' sinfulness.¹²

⁸ Gn 4:10.

⁹ Gn 6:5-7.

¹⁰ For the interpretation of the subjection of creation directly caused by Adam's sin, see, for instance, Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1963), 74; Lampe, "New Testament Doctrine of Ktisis," 78; Ernest Hunt, *Portrait of Paul* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1968), 96; Charles Giblin, *In Hope of God's Glory: Pauline Theological Perspectives* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 394.

¹¹ Gn 3:17-18. For the influence of this text on Rm 8:20, see, for instance, Cranfield, *Romans*, 413; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 235; Frederick Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 172; Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 187.

¹² Cf. Gn 6:5-7; Is 13:9-13; 24:1f; Jr 4:23-28; Ezk 32:6-13; *et parr.*

According to most biblical scholars, this second interpretation of Rm 8:20 must be preferred inasmuch as it makes more sense within the context of the letter.¹³ For the moment, it is enough to affirm that Rm 8:19-24 holds that the present situation of creation is due to the subjection of creation by God as a result of human sin. Because of this, the present creation is subjected to futility and decay. The impact of Adam's fall extends to non-human creation, but "nature" is not a victim of sin.

1.2. The Role of Human Beings and the Subjection of Creation in Christian Written Tradition

This biblical interpretation of Rm 8:19-24 concerning the subjection of creation to its current situation of suffering and the role of human beings in it has also been elaborated from a theological, systematic perspective throughout the Christian written tradition. It is possible to recognize at least three different interpretations of the subjection of creation, and therefore of what creation must be liberated from.

First, creation must be freed from its fallen situation caused by human sin. Creation intrinsically changed from its original state to corruption. Sin perverted not only human beings, but also the whole of creation. Throughout Christian written tradition, this perspective has had several theological versions, some of them more extreme — i.e. Marcionism and Manichaeism — and others more moderate — i.e. Martin Luther and John Calvin. In the case of Luther and Calvin, they stated that creation was perverted because of human sin, and therefore it just cannot work in accordance with God's original design. Luther held that, before Adam's expulsion from

¹³ Rm 8:21. For the interpretation of the subjection of creation to futility by God as a consequence of Adam's sin, see James Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 470; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 505; Edward Adams, "Paul's Story of God and Creation: The Story of How God Fulfills His Purposes in Creation," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed. Bruce Longenecker (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 28–29; Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 187–88.

Eden and the curse of creation, it was uncorrupted.¹⁴ But God's punishment of human beings also reached the whole of creation.¹⁵ Even though the flood cleansed it, creation was depraved from its original state.¹⁶ Death and corruption are clear expressions of this fallen situation. Because of sin, therefore, the process of creation became retrogressive rather than progressive.¹⁷ Calvin shared this point of view by affirming that creation was deeply damaged by sin. After the fall, not only is human existence influenced and governed by the degeneration of the good, but so also the whole of creation. According to him, this situation becomes evident in the consequences of sin — death and suffering — but in particular in the difference between this world and the kingdom of God. Because sin has reached the most basic aspects of creation, its fulfillment at Christ's coming cannot be reduced to an extension of the present condition of creation. Rather, the parousia will be the radical transformation of it.¹⁸

It is necessary to state that both Luther and Calvin do affirm, unlike Marcionism and Manichaeism, the original goodness of God's creation. However, these two theologians build their thought on the contrast between the fallen present situation of creation and the original one. It is the duality fallen/unfallen that leads Luther and Calvin to stress mostly the negative

¹⁴ See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955), I, 77–78.

¹⁵ See Luther, I, 99.

¹⁶ See Luther, I, 205, 310.

¹⁷ See Bret Stephenson and Susan Bratton, "Martin Luther's Understanding of Sin's Impact on Nature and the Unlanding of the Jew," *Ecotheology* 9 (2000): 86. For the salvation of creation in Luther's theology, see Paul Santmire, "Creation and Salvation According to Martin Luther: Creation as the Good and Integral Background," in *Creation and Salvation. A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernst Conradie, vol. 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 173–202.

¹⁸ For Calvin's own understanding of the current situation of creation and its future renovation through the lens of 2 Pt 3 and Rm 8, see Jean Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992); *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947). And for the salvation of creation in Calvin's theology, see Ernst Conradie, "John Calvin on Creation and Salvation: A Creative Tension?," in *Creation and Salvation. A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernst Conradie, vol. 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 203–24; Ernst Conradie, "Eschatology in Calvin," in *Saving the Earth?: The Legacy of Reformed Views on "Re-Creation"* (Berlin: LIT, 2013), 64–70.

consequences that human sin brought not only to human beings but to the whole of creation in its innermost reality.

The second perspective concerning the present situation of creation holds, in a certain sense, the opposite view. According to it, creation is not in a fallen situation. Despite the fact that human sin has consequences for both human beings and creation, all the aspects traditionally associated with the “corruption of creation” — suffering and death — are not expressions of some kind of damage produced by sin within creation. Rather, suffering and death are part of the innermost nature of creation, and therefore they are even the condition of possibility of its very existence. The elements classically associated with sin, therefore, must be theologically understood as part of God’s original design of creation instead of receiving any moral value. This interpretation of the current situation of creation has received its best light by the development of the theology of creation through the lens of the evolutionary process. In fact, as mentioned in the first chapter, most of the contemporary theologians who dialogue with science and ecological issues share this perspective.

By way of example, the theological work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin seems pertinent and illustrative of this point. According to him, God’s creation is contingent, finite, and participative of being. Creation is not self-sufficient, and therefore it ontologically depends on its creator. This means that God creates all things good, but not perfect — understanding “perfection” in terms of self-sufficiency and complete unity which are attributes that only God has.¹⁹ This neutral absence of perfection, of which death and suffering are the expression, is present in the universe from the beginning.²⁰ Human sin, therefore, is not the cause of the

¹⁹ Teilhard holds, in opposition to a static vision of reality, that God’s creation is the process of unification of the multiple. Creation is a multiplicity in a process of formation toward its ultimate unity in God. Cf. Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, 79–86.

²⁰ Cf. Teilhard de Chardin, 51.

physical reality of death and suffering. Rather, it is the consequence of the misuse of human freedom within this context of creation's natural contingency.²¹ Without denying the reality of sin, Teilhard and those theologians inspired by his theological reflections interpret all the negative aspects of creation — for instance, violence within nature and the extinction of species — not as consequences of any human wrong decision at the beginning, but as fundamental elements of the process of evolution started, led, and directed to fulfillment by God.²²

This same approach can be found in Rahner's theology of creation, especially in his explanation of the notion of "self-transcendence of creation." Rahner states that God freely chooses, from the beginning, to create something different from God in order to communicate God-self. Creation exists, therefore, to be the recipient of this self-communication. This does not mean, however, that creation is a passive recipient of this divine will. Rather, creation has been endowed by its Creator with the active capacity of self-transcendence for accepting God's self-communication on its own by the grace by which God empowers creation. God not only enables the material universe to exist, but also gives it the dynamism to become self-conscious of God's free gift of self. From this point of view, the evolutionary process and all its characteristics must be theologically understood as the emergence of creation by itself toward God inasmuch as God's presence within creation enables the universe to exist, to emerge into the new, and to be, in the case of human beings, self-conscious of this divine process in which it is involved from the beginning.²³ This is why, although creation was affected by sin, God's salvation in Christ is not

²¹ Cf. Teilhard de Chardin, 187–98.

²² Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, affirms that the whole process of evolution can be theologically understood as the empowerment of creation by its Creator. It is possible to affirm that evolution is the manner in which creation, in an autonomous way, realizes, by the power by God, the mandate received by its Creator. This is why she holds, by using the classical notion of primary and secondary causality, that the relation between creation and God "is marked simultaneously by ontological dependence and operational autonomy." Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts. Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 160.

²³ Rahner understands this principle of self-transcendence as the emergence of spirit from matter. Because there is a mutual correlation between matter and spirit, the evolutionary process entails the development of matter in the

the rescue of creation from its corruption. Rather, it is the fulfillment of the evolutionary process initiated and led by God from within since the beginning in Christ.²⁴

The third theological perspective concerning the current situation of creation holds that reality was affected by sin, but not in an ontological way. Referring somehow to Paul's expression in 1 Co 7:31, this perspective sustains that creation must be freed from "the present shape of this world" conveyed in the notions of death and suffering, but not from a fallen situation provoked by sin. This point of view is evident, for instance, in Irenaeus' theology of creation. He stated, in clear opposition to the Gnostic dualistic interpretation of reality, that human sin affected creation but without changing it in its original goodness.²⁵ Irenaeus based this conviction of the intrinsic goodness of creation on the immanence of God's Word within all things from their creation to their fulfillment. Thus he stresses that the whole of creation, because it was made by and in the Word, will be part of the final salvation through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.²⁶ The only aspect of creation that will disappear at the end of time is the "appearance of this world," an expression that is used here to illustrate the facet of creation affected by sin.²⁷ Origen also makes a distinction between the effects of sin for human beings and

direction of the spirit, and the self-transcendence of the material into the spirit. See Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," 177. For Rahner's theological interpretation of the evolutionary process, see also Rahner, "The Secret of Life"; "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World."

²⁴ See Rahner, "Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World."

²⁵ See Irenaeus, "Adversus Haereses," V, 24, 1.

²⁶ See Irenaeus, V, 32, 1; V, 36, 1.

²⁷ See Irenaeus, V, 36, 1. According to Hans Boersma, Irenaeus' theology balanced the two perspectives just mentioned in this section. From a restorative approach of creation, Irenaeus held that Incarnation entails the re-opening of the way to God closed by human sin. In this ethical model of redemption, God comes to remove the obstacle present within creation, namely sin. From an evolutionary approach, he sustained that the Incarnation is the maturation of a process initiated at the beginning of creation. Because all things were created good but not perfect in accordance with the Word, they need to grow into maturity and fellowship with God until the Word becomes flesh. In this case, God comes to fulfill the present state of creation, namely its inner imperfections. See Hans Boersma, "Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus: A Model for Ecumenicity in a Violent World," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 2 (2002): 209. For the salvation of creation in Irenaeus' theology, see also Svein Rise, "Irenaeus on Creation and Salvation," in *Creation and Salvation. A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernst Conradie, vol. 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 21–36.

for creation. Defending, against the Marcionites, the true humanity of Christ as a condition for salvation, Origen stresses the goodness of both Creator and creation.²⁸ This is why, Origen thinks, Paul did not refer to the material aspect of creation in Rm 8:19-22. Rather, the “creation” that is perverted as a result of the original sin is “rational creation.”²⁹ Rational beings, not the material aspect of creation, are groaning because they are subjected to futility and corruption, and they expect their liberation when the children of God will be revealed.³⁰ Augustine also made this interpretation of Rm 8:19-22, though based on different theological assumptions. Considered as the first Christian thinker who systematized the doctrine of the fall and original sin in response to both Pelagian anthropological optimism and Manichean anthropological pessimism, Augustine actually held that sin disrupted human beings in their original purpose, as well as the relationships among them and with creation.³¹ However, Augustine maintained that only human beings, not creation, have been punished after the fall by God.³² Creation is not guilty of sin, and therefore it does not deserve any punishment.³³ Creation keeps, therefore, its original state even after human sin. In fact, this is the rationale that Augustine applies to his specific interpretation of Rm 8:20: the creation subjected to futility refers to sinful humanity and not to the whole of creation.³⁴

²⁸ See Origen, “De Principiis,” II, 2, 4.

²⁹ See Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10*, trans. Thomas Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 68.

³⁰ See Origen, “De Principiis,” II, 3, 6..

³¹ See Augustine, *Of True Religion* (South Bend, IND: Gateway, 1959), 45, 84; Augustine, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, ed. John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 1, 18, 29; Augustine, *Against Julian*, trans. Matthew Schumacher (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 1, 6, 25.

³² See Augustine, *De Genesis Contre Manichaeos*, 1, 13, 19; Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, trans. David Mosher (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 3, 67.

³³ See Augustine, *De Genesis Contre Manichaeos*, 1, 13, 19; Augustine, *Quaest. in Heptat*, 83.

³⁴ See Augustine, *Quaest. in Heptat*, 67. According to Thomas Clarke, Augustine rejected the solidarity between human beings and the rest of creation either in sin, divine judgment, or redemption. The reason for this stance would be Augustine’s antagonism with Manichaeism. See Thomas Clarke, “Saint Augustine and Cosmic Redemption,” *Theological Studies* 19, no. 2 (1958): 150. For the salvation of creation in Augustine’s theology, see Scott Dunham, “Creaturely Salvation in Augustine,” in *Creation and Salvation. A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernst Conradie, vol. 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 75–92.

Using other arguments, Aquinas also affirms that human sin did not change creation in its innermost reality. He states that God creates all things good and for their fulfillment. They come from God and have their end in God.³⁵ This is why sin affected creation, but not in its innermost and original reality. Aquinas explains this nuance by establishing a distinction between two perfections in creation: on the one hand, the first perfection is inherent in nature; on the other hand, the second is the perfection that all things will reach at the end of time. According to him, after the fall, the first perfection was kept, but the second one was lost. While the grace within creation was lost because of sin, the nature of creation remained intact.³⁶ Concerning death and corruption, Aquinas does state that they are consequences of human sin. However, he holds that all material things are, by nature, susceptible to corruption and dissolution. Corruptibility is a condition of matter. Since they are originally composed of contrary elements, material things have the potency for corruption.³⁷ In the case of human beings, this potency for corruption became act. Because of sin, their natural immortality and incorruptibility changed due to sin inasmuch as it is the lack of the body's subjection to the soul.³⁸

The Second Vatican Council also assumes this third perspective in order to refer to the present situation of creation. In fact, *Gaudium et Spes* holds that creation has not been damaged by sin. Rather, creation is deformed by sin.³⁹ By quoting Irenaeus' expression, the text implies that sin affected creation, but not in its inner good nature.⁴⁰ In fact, *Gaudium et Spes* highlights this idea when affirming that the shape of the world will pass away, and that creation will be

³⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, STh II, q. 1, a. 8.

³⁶ Aquinas, STh I, q. 73, a. 1. Aquinas applies this same principle to human beings: while the original justice was completely destroyed by sin, and the inclination to virtue was diminished by it, the nature of human beings is neither destroyed nor diminished by sin. Cf. Aquinas, STh I, q. 85, a. 1.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, STh I, q. 85, a. 6.

³⁸ Aquinas, STh II, q. 164, a. 1.

³⁹ GS 39.

⁴⁰ GS 39 quotes the expression "deformed by sin" of Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses*, V, 36, 1.

unchained from the bondage of vanity.⁴¹ With the overcoming of death, the corruption of creation will be invested with incorruptibility.⁴² In a certain sense, these statements summarize all the afore-mentioned theological stances which hold, from different perspectives, that creation is not in a fallen situation because of human sin. Rather, creation was affected by sin, and therefore its fulfillment in God entails the overcoming of the consequences of sin within it. As repeatedly stated, this is the idea that the expression “the present form of this world will pass away” illustrates.

1.3. Creation was Subjected by God, not Damaged by Human Beings

In light of the overview of Rm 8:19-24 and these three different theological interpretations of the subjection of creation, it is possible to affirm two things. First, confronted with the theological reason of why creation is subjected to a state that is not its original one, while some hold that human beings directly exposed it to corruption as an immediate consequence of sin, others argue that God is the one who subjected creation to its current situation as a direct or indirect consequence of sin. Between these two interpretations, biblical exegetes mostly argue that creation must be liberated from a condition to which it was subjected by God rather than reconstituted from a state in which it had fallen by human sin. Second, referring to the theological consequences of this subjection, there are also two different views: while one sustains that creation is good but is now subjected to corruption due to sin, the other affirms that the current state of creation reflects its inner contingency, and therefore its dependency on God. Although it seems theologically more coherent, if God is the one who

⁴¹ GS 39.

⁴² Idem.

subjected creation, to prefer the second interpretation and then exclude both humanity and sin as the central reason of God's redeeming action upon creation — in fact, the three mentioned perspectives use this rationale — it is important to clarify the biblical and theological reasons for this option. Because, while a theocentric perspective can frame the debate concerning the future of all things on God's faithfulness with God's own creation and not on human beings' action, it is not evident why creation was subjected to “decay” and not to “corruption.”

This problematic can be clarified by interpreting what creation must be freed from in Rm 8:20-21, namely “futility and corruption/decay.” In the case of “futility,” there are two main interpretations of this notion. On the one hand, “futility” can be translated as a synonym of “vanity,” because of the link that this notion would have with the book of Ecclesiastes. The use of the same word by both Paul and the translation of Ecclesiastes made by the LXX — “ματαιότης” — allows us to interpret futility in terms of the vanity of all of life apart from God.⁴³ On the other hand, the word “futility” is used in Rm 8:20 to illustrate the inability to which creation was subjected by God in attaining its goal. In other words, “futility” means the damage that human sin caused to non-human creation in its normal development willed by God. According to this second interpretation, Paul gave to nature anthropomorphic characteristics to affirm that, although nature is morally neutral — it cannot either obey or disobey God as humans

⁴³ Qo 1:2,14; 2:1, 11-16; 4:4-16; *et parr.* According to the authors who claim that the book of Ecclesiastes is the background of Rm 8:20, the use of the same word by both Paul and LXX — “ματαιότης” — allows us to interpret “futility” in terms of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Futility then means the vanity of all of life apart from God. See, for instance, Cranfield, *Romans*, 413; Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology*, 42-43. Other authors state that this interpretation cannot be made inasmuch as Ecclesiastes focuses mainly on the vanity of human experience, but Rm 8:19-23 affirms this reality for all creation. Moreover, the vanity of Ecclesiastes is, in a certain sense, part of the free will of human beings. On the contrary, the futility of creation is something imposed on creation without any moral decision on its part. Thus futility should be interpreted as the frustration of creation caused by its slavery to death and decay. See, for instance, Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 507. On this point, the interpretation of H. Hahne seems more appropriate to the context of the letter, namely futility as the damage that human sin caused to non-human creation in its normal development willed by God. See Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 192.

do — creation wants to act in accordance with God’s design, but is restricted because of its present situation.⁴⁴ Thus, while the first interpretation of futility has a moral connotation, the second one refers mostly to the consequences of sin in the normal development of creation toward its goal.⁴⁵

The expression “corruption/decay” in Rm 8:21 also has these two main interpretations. On the one hand, the word “φθορᾶς” can be read as referring to moral corruption and evil. In fact, there are some New Testament texts in which this word is used with a moral connotation as the actions which are wrong in the sight of God inasmuch as they respond to the basest instincts.⁴⁶ This meaning is closer to the translation of this word as “corruption.” On the other hand, the word “φθορᾶς” can mean death and decay. According to this interpretation, there is a direct link between what Paul affirms in Rm 5:12-19 concerning Adam bringing death to humanity, and in Rm 8:21 referring to creation and its perishable nature. Just as death affected all human beings because of sin, it also affected, by extension, the whole of creation. This interpretation is reinforced by the use of the word “φθορᾶς” in 1 Co 15:42, 50 to refer to the earthly human bodies as perishable and to their lack of heavenly glory.⁴⁷ As with “futility,” the “corruption/decay” to which creation was subjected is interpreted then from a perspective which is either “moral” or “functional.”

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Paul Evdokimov, “Nature,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18, no. 1 (1965): 1; Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 192.

⁴⁵ Besides these two main interpretations of “futility” in Rm 8:20, there are another four possible meanings of this notion. First, it is a synonym for “corruption.” Second, it refers to evil spiritual powers within creation. Third, this word refers to idolatry and false gods. Finally, it refers to the spiritual emptiness due to the present situation of creation. For the references of this interpretations, see Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 190–91.

⁴⁶ Gal 6:8; 2 Pt 2:12.

⁴⁷ According to some of the already cited authors, this interpretation of “corruption” in terms of sin and decay shows more consistency with the general meaning of the word “φθορᾶς” in the New Testament. See Cranfield, *Romans*, 414; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 509; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 471–72; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 553.

In order to clarify which of these two interpretations of the expressions “futility and corruption/decay” makes more sense in the context of Rm 8:19-23, they must be read through the lens of something that was strongly underlined before, namely that God is the one who subjected creation to its present situation. In general terms, this context gives support to three main claims. The first claim seems to be fairly evident in the text, namely the subjection of non-human aspect of creation was not a decision made by itself. The text is explicit on this point in stating that creation was subjected “not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it.”⁴⁸ This is why, and although Paul personifies creation in Rm 8:19-24, the moral neutrality of creation does not allow us to impute to it responsibility either in the past — as creation caused its subjection — nor in the present — as creation behaving “against” the will of God for it. The “futility and corruption/decay” of creation is not a consequence of the evil action of the non-human aspect of creation against its Creator.

The second claim was already justified, namely human sin is not the direct cause of the subjection of creation. As mentioned, Adam’s sin is the reason of this subjection to “futility and corruption/decay,” but not its immediate origin. It is God who subjected creation because of sin. This creates, therefore, a distinction not only between the agent of the subjection — God — and the reason for the subjection — human sin — but also between the reason for the subjection — human sin — and the consequences of this subjection — futility and corruption/decay. In other words, “futility” and “corruption/decay” are consequences of sin, but they are neither necessarily sinful in themselves nor cause for the sinfulness of creation. Thus even if the reason for this subjection by God was human sin, it is important to state that the consequences for creation are not necessarily its corruption or its damnation to act “against” God’s original will for it. Creation

⁴⁸ Rm 8:20.

is then subjected by God because of sin, but it is not necessarily in a situation of antagonism with God.

The third claim leads to prefer “decay” instead of “corruption” to describe the current situation of creation. As mentioned, it is the distinction between the *reason* and the *consequences* of this subjection, and therefore between sin and the situation of creation, that makes possible the not necessarily reduction of creation to “corruption.” However, the decisive point here is the one who subjected creation, namely God. Precisely because it is God who subjected creation, the consequences of God’s judicial pronouncement in response to sin cannot be viewed as equivalent to sin or something that causes sin. In other words, God cannot subject God’s creation to “corruption” on God’s own behalf without contradicting God’s inner nature and God’s original will for creation. And the same rationale applies to the understanding of “futility”: rather than the moral interpretation that ascribes to creation some kind of incorrect behavior, the subjection of creation must be interpreted in more functional terms by which creation is not completely in tune with God’s purpose for it. God is origin only of what is good. For all these reasons, it is possible then to affirm that creation expects in God its liberation, not from its sinfulness or some fallen situation, but from the “futility and decay” to which God subjected it.⁴⁹

But why did God subject creation? In which sense can this subjection be justified without attaching blame to God? Is this subjection of creation by God caused by the fundamental solidarity between human beings and its environment, as if creation should fit with the new

⁴⁹ According to Douglas Moo, Rm 8:19-22 does not suggest by any mean that creation is in a fallen situation. This idea is reinforced, he states, if this text is read in light of Paul’s possible use of Is 24. The use of Isaiah suggests that the slavery of creation is a contingent state and not a once-for-all ontological change in creation. See Douglas Moo, “Romans 8:19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 1 (2008): 74–89; “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 3 (2006): 463. In another article, Moo sustains that this influence of Is 24 in Rm 8:19-22 suggests that Paul’s conviction about the physical fulfillment of the whole of creation derived from Isaiah’s hope for the restoration of Israel and, by extension, for the whole world. See Moo, 463.

situation of human beings after the fall? And if the “futility and decay” understood as contingency and death are part, as one of the theological interpretations argue, of the inner process of creation, why were these aspects not included in the moment of creation itself and become part of it because of God’s subjection? Unfortunately, Rm 8:19-23 does not give an explanation for these theological questions. What is possible to recall is that Rm 8:19-23 is not the only biblical text in which God acts against the non-human aspect of creation driven not by some problem with creation itself, but by human’s sin.⁵⁰

However, and since Rm 8:19-23 is classically used as the biblical basis for the theological argument about the current situation of creation in its relationship with human beings, it is important to highlight what this overview of Rm 8:19-24 leads to so far: first, any reflection based on this text concerning the situation of creation must situate human responsibility in a larger context of God’s action within the whole of creation; second, the role of human actions and the effects of sin should not be underestimated, but situated within the frame of a theology of creation and of God’s action within it. These ideas are very useful for a theological reflection in light of cosmological data. In fact, taking out human responsibility and sin as the central point of the theological debate concerning the current situation of creation, it seems easier to dialogue with disciplines which demonstrate that some of the classic elements theologically linked to sin — of which one of the most important is death — are present within the cosmic process long before human beings.

2. Human Responsibility and the Future Fulfillment of Creation

All these reflections on human beings and the current situation of creation have important

⁵⁰ Cf. Gn 6:5-7; Is 13:9-13; 24:1f; Jr 4:23-28; Ezk 32:6-13; *et parr.*

implications about the way this relationship can be conceived in eschatological terms. In fact, it is Rm 8:19-24 itself that makes this link between the present and the future by arguing that creation expects its liberation from the situation to which it is subjected. The image of creation “groaning in labor pains” illustrates this dual reality of both living a painful present and hoping for a future liberation. In the context of Rm 8:19-23, the groaning of creation as a mother giving birth is a sign of the suffering because of the subjection, but also of the hope in the coming redemption and glory. The non-human aspect of creation is then in a state of suffering and hope.

It is important to note that Rm 8:19-23 not only makes references to the present suffering and the hope of future liberation, but the text itself is structured by this dual theme. In fact, this dual motif is already summed up in the verse that precedes the passage in question — “the present suffering is nothing as compared with the future glory” (v. 18) — and makes a transition between the use of this dual-sided theme for believers (vv. 14-17) and for creation (vv. 19-23). In the particular case of Rm 8:19-23, the interplay of suffering and hope can separate the verses into two big groups: on the one hand, creation is subjected to futility (v. 20a) and groans and suffers the pain of childbirth (v. 22); on the other hand, creation expects the revelation of the children of God (v. 19), and hopes in sharing their freedom (v. 20c-21) of which the labor pains are the previous sign (v. 22). And because the very structure of this passage refers to this dual theme of suffering and liberation, all that can be said about the eschatological future of creation in Rm 8:19-23 must necessarily echo what was said about its subjection.

One immediate consequence of this view is the interpretation of what creation must be liberated from. The text holds that creation “will be set free from its bondage to decay”⁵¹ In the light of what was said concerning the subjection of creation, it is possible to start by affirming

⁵¹ Rm 8:21.

that creation expects its liberation from futility and decay, not from sin. In fact, the distinction made between the reason and the consequences of creation's subjection also resulted in the distinction between the "subjection" and "sin." This nuance is important, especially when comparing this idea with something strongly stated in previous chapters, namely the eschatological fulfillment of creation entails the passing away of the consequences of sin in creation. As mentioned, Christ's return will abolish all the effects of sin within creation. In addition, it was stated that the renovation of the non-human aspect of creation means neither its destruction nor its replacement. Rather, the fulfillment of all things implies the passing away of the "form of this world" because sin not only contradicts God's will, but also frustrates creation in its original purpose. While these statements are true, the theological nuance between the "subjection" and "sin" provides the basis for the clarification of this claim concerning the future of creation: the fulfillment of the non-human aspect of creation is not confined to the passing away of sin. If the eschatological future of creation were exclusively the overcoming of sin, this could mean that creation is hoping for the future restoration of the pre-fall conditions, and therefore nothing genuinely new can be expected from the coming of Christ at the end of times. But if the overcoming of sin is just one of the elements of the fulfillment of all things by God, the eschatological expectation of creation is open to its transformation into something greater not only from what it is now, but also from what it has been before. Although this point will appear in the next chapter when exploring the Christological consequences of Col 1:15-20 for eschatology, it is necessary to hold that the theological foundation of this hope for creation, just as any Christian eschatological expectation, is Jesus Christ. The hope that the whole of creation will be transformed and not discarded, replaced, or refreshed is ultimately based on the death and resurrection of Christ. For the moment, it is enough to say that, even if the eschatological transformation of all things includes the overcome of sin, Rm 8:19-23 suggests that the

fulfillment of creation predates its relation with sin and exceeds the simple abolition of it. As will be shown, the Creator will fulfill all things through the power of the Holy Spirit, not because of sin, but because of Christ as origin, sustainer, and goal of creation.

Besides this, it is important to recall that the eager expectation on the part of creation is directly associated with the manifestation of “the children of God” in glory.⁵² Rm 8:19-23 establishes this link in two ways: creation is waiting for the revelation of the children of God (v. 19), and creation will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (v. 21). While the first verse focuses on the moment which is expected — the revelation of the children of God — the second verse is more centered on the content of this expectation — the freedom that creation will share with them. According to the text, therefore, the expectation of creation and its fulfillment are directly associated with the freedom with which the children of God will reveal themselves. But how are these two events — the liberation of creation and the glorification of believers — associated with each other? If the fulfillment of all things is something that only God can perform, how is the liberation of creation reliant on the children of God? Does the non-human aspect of creation depend on human beings’ actions to reach its goal in God? These are the questions that will lead to the exploration of the main topic of this section, namely the scope of the eschatological role of human beings within creation.

⁵² The expression “children of God” can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, this phrase does not refer to believers, but to angels. Given that any other New Testament passage speaks of the revelation of believers, and God’s revelation usually is directed to people and not to the non-human aspect of creation, the expression “children of God” cannot be applied to believers. On the other hand, the phrase refers to glorified believers. This interpretation is based on the context of Rm 8, in particular on those verses that precede Rm 8:19-24 and directly refer to believers as “children of God” (vv. 14-17). For the first interpretation, see Olle Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature: The Flood-Tradition as Matrix of Romans 8:18-27* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 120–21. For the second interpretation, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 412; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 459, 470; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 507; Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 184.

2.1. Creation Will Obtain the Freedom of the Glory of the Children of God (Rm 8:21)

The biblical link between the common destiny of human beings and creation has been already set out indirectly. As noted earlier, the use of the expression “new heaven and new earth” in Scripture mostly refers to the renovation of the material reality of creation in close connection with the gathering of God’s people. The book of Isaiah illustrates, for instance, the new creation in the context of the restoration of Israel from among the nations, as well as the process of bringing all human beings together to glorify God.⁵³ The second of these references is very explicit on that point inasmuch as it links the notion of “new heaven and new earth” with all nations worshipping God in the new Jerusalem and in Zion. The Second Letter of Peter argues that the delay of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of “heaven and earth” are due to God’s patience, and therefore the time that God gives to all humanity for being gathered around the Gospel.⁵⁴ And the book of Revelation resorts to the image of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven to depict the new creation as the place in which God dwells among all the nations.⁵⁵ There, the whole of humanity will be gathered to worship God and the Lamb. All the references to the notion “new heaven and new earth” in Scripture explicitly associate the eschatological fulfillment of creation with the gathering of all human beings in God.

Besides these texts, there are other biblical writings that link the new creation and the eschatological future of human beings. For instance, it was mentioned in the chapter on the parousia that the final gathering of all peoples represented through the image of the “conversion of both the Jews and the pagans” is a sign of the imminent coming of Christ and his fulfillment of all things.⁵⁶ And this same chapter also highlighted that the resurrection of the dead and the

⁵³ Is 65:17f; 66:22f.

⁵⁴ 2 Pt 3:8-9.

⁵⁵ Rev 21:1-3.

⁵⁶ Rm 1:16.

transformation of the material aspect of creation are events that will be fulfilled together when Christ comes. In fact, the Letter to the Ephesians conveys that the transformation of the present body into a spiritual one will take place as part of Jesus' work of bringing all things together.⁵⁷ And the Letter to the Philippians asserts that the resurrection of the dead is part of God's transformation of the whole of creation.⁵⁸ From different perspectives, therefore, Scripture associates the eschatological destiny of humanity and the rest of creation. Their fulfillment cannot be separated. But despite this unequivocal biblical link between the future of human beings and the non-human aspect of creation, Scripture is less explicit when explaining how this relationship is made. And in a certain sense, Rm 8:19-23 puts in evidence these same difficulties.

In order to show this problem, it seems necessary to recall the two main images that Rm 8:19-23 uses to illustrate the hope of creation in its liberation, namely creation's "groaning in labor pains" in "eagerly expectation" of its future. As previously shown, the "groans of labor pains"⁵⁹ refers to creation as both subjected in the present and expectant of the future. The image of creation "giving birth" depicts simultaneously what creation has been experiencing until now, and what it is awaiting with eager longing. Thus the "labor pains" do not suggest meaningless suffering, but imminent joy after the labor is complete.⁶⁰ Moreover, this image of creation groaning in pain makes explicit reference to two other "groanings" in Rm 8:19-23: the groaning

⁵⁷ Cf. Eph 1:19-20.

⁵⁸ Cf. Phil 3:20f. See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 229-36.

⁵⁹ Rm 8:22.

⁶⁰ This image of "labor pains" as a sign of what is coming appears in other texts of Scriptures (cf. Is 13:8; 21:3; 26:17; 66:7-8; Jr 4:31; 22:23; Hos 13:13; Mich 4:9; Mt 24:8; Mk 13:8; Jn 16:21; Gal 4:19; 1 Thes 5:3). In the New Testament, most of these references to labor pains appear in the context of the signs associated with Jesus Christ's coming. Moreover, it is interesting to highlight the particular parallel between Rm 8:22 and Is 24:4. Both texts affirm that creation groans/mourns in pain. But while Is 24:4 holds that the mourning of creation is due to human sin, Rm 8:22 associates the groaning of creation not only with its present futility, but also with the eager expectation of the future. For the parallel between Rm 8 and Is 24, see Laurie Braaten, "The Groaning Creation: The Biblical Background for Romans 8:22," *Biblical Research* 50 (2005): 19-39; "All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28, no. 2 (2006): 131-59.

of human beings⁶¹ and of the Spirit.⁶² Despite the differences among these “groanings,” all of them are signs of hope and expectations of future salvation. In fact, Christians, who already have the first-fruits of the Spirit, and therefore already have salvation in hope,⁶³ groan in the expectation of the liberation of their bodies. And the Spirit, who helps Christians in their weaknesses, groans within them to express their innermost expectations. In fact, the Spirit is already acting within believers when helping them to call God “Abba! Father!” in order to recognize their divine filiation.⁶⁴ This presence of the Spirit within believers is a guarantee of the future redemption of both human beings and creation. The Spirit is already in action, but in an invisible way.⁶⁵ This is why believers, who are already called “children of God” because of the presence of the Spirit in them, must expect with persevering confidence to see the realization of what is already happening by the Spirit. And this is why creation waits with eager longing to see the revelation of this divine action in the children of God.

The second image — “eager expectation” — also reveals the double aspect of the current situation of creation, both subjected and alert for its future. The basis for this expectation is explicitly given by the text: creation was subjected “in hope” that it will be liberated.⁶⁶ The vocabulary used for expressing this conviction is abundant in Rm 8:19-23, and continues in the verses that follow this section.⁶⁷ Moreover, this idea of the subjection of creation “in hope” reinforces the interpretation concerning God as the one subjecting creation. Only God, not human beings, could subject creation with a hope for its future redemption. Creation was

⁶¹ Rm 8:23.

⁶² Rm 8:26.

⁶³ Rm 8:24.

⁶⁴ Rm 8:16.

⁶⁵ Rm 8:24-25.

⁶⁶ Rm 8:20.

⁶⁷ According to Rm 8:19-23, creation “expects” (v. 19), “waits” (v. 19), and “hopes” (v. 20). In addition, the text affirms that believers “wait” for adoption (v. 23), a verb that is used on more occasions in the following verses for believers (v. 25), this time coupled on four occasions with the verb “hope” (vv. 24-25).

subjected to its present situation by God, and it will be redeemed in the future by God. Thus Rm 8:19-23 does not exclude either God's initial goodness of creation nor God's redemptive purposes for it. And even if the question concerning the reason why God subjected creation to a situation that seems to contradict original God's plan for it arises again, the text allows us to affirm only that, because it is God who subjected creation, this condition is neither original nor final.

Besides this, the image of "eager expectation" is important because it is the notion used by Rm 8:19-23 to establish the eschatological relationship between creation and human beings through the notion of "expectation." The link between them is based on the freedom they will share and that both are eagerly expecting. There is solidarity between creation and human beings not only in the consequences of sin, but also in the expectation of the deliverance by God. Both human beings and creation will be freed by God. When Christ comes, creation will be freed from its present situation and will experience the freedom of the redeemed, glorified human beings.

It is important to note that it is precisely here where the difficulty appears. In fact, Rm 8:19-23 affirms that creation is expecting the manifestation in glory of the children of God — not the coming of Christ or God's liberation, at least in specific terms. As was stated before, although the final and absolute expectation of human beings and creation coincides in its object — Jesus Christ giving human beings' bodies their glory in the universal resurrection, and creation its redemption at the final day — the content of their expectations is differently depicted — human beings expect the manifestation of Christ, and creation expects the manifestation of the children of God in glory.

This differentiation in Rm 8:19-23 produces, at the least, two possible interpretations of the eschatological relationship between creation and human beings. On the one hand, the redemption of creation is a direct consequence of the redemption of human beings. Just as

creation was led by human beings to corruption in the past, so creation will result in its freedom when the children of God will be glorified. In other words, the expectation of creation is the liberation of human beings that will affect creation as its consequence. This interpretation is based on the relationship of solidarity that God established between creation and human beings, who were created from the earth and received the “stewardship” of it. This earthly solidarity would be the reason for Rm 8:19-23 to hold that creation specifically expects the redemption of human beings’ bodies.⁶⁸ As already stated, believers already have the first-fruits of the Spirit, but they still await the glorification of their material aspect, namely their bodies. And when this happens, the whole of physical reality will be glorified as well.⁶⁹ Moreover, this would be also the reason why Rm 8:19-23 affirms the expectation of creation in the manifestation of the children of God, but not the other way around.

The other possible interpretation of Rm 8:19-23 holds that the transformation of creation coincides with the redemption of human beings. Both events are not sequential actions as if the liberation of the children of God, especially of their bodies, caused the liberation of the material aspect of creation. Rather, they are simultaneous events that, understood in unitary terms, are different aspects of the unique will of God to fulfill the whole of creation when Christ comes. Put differently, the redemption of human beings’ bodies and the liberation of creation are linked not because one event will lead to the other, but because both entail the fulfillment of the physical aspect of all things by God’s coming.⁷⁰ According to this interpretation, creation is not specifically waiting for a salvation which will happen through human beings when they will be

⁶⁸ Rm 8:23.

⁶⁹ See Käsemann, *Romans*, 234; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 509; Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 198.

⁷⁰ From this perspective, the liberation from futility of both the physical aspect of human beings (Rm 8:23; 1 Co 15:42, 50) and the rest of the material creation (Rm 8:21) are different, complementary aspects of the God’s will to share God’s glory with the whole of created reality. Cf. Eph 1:19-20; Phil 3:20 f.

glorified in the resurrection of the dead. Rather, creation is waiting for God's final action upon the whole of creation which, in its anthropological aspect, involves the manifestation of the children of God and the redemption of their bodies.

As seen above, Rm 8:19-23 is not explicit enough in the way this relationship between human beings and creation should be understood. Although it will be stated that the second interpretation should be preferred rather than the first one — the eschatological significance of human action for creation must be framed within the context of God's eschatological purpose for all things from the moment of their creation — it is necessary to affirm, for the moment, that Rm 8: 19-23 clearly shows that the liberation of creation from its subjection is linked to believers' freedom in the future. In fact, the theological reflection on this topic throughout Christian written tradition will help to affirm that human actions have eschatological significance for them and for reality, but they cannot be unduly amplified to a universal scope that exceeds their capabilities and, above all, only God has.

2.2. The Role of Human Beings and the Liberation of Creation in Christian Written Tradition

This eschatological relationship between humanity and the non-human aspect of creation has been interpreted from a theological perspective throughout the Christian systematic tradition. Because these interpretations have used Rm 8:19-23, in most of the cases, to justify not only this eschatological link between humanity and creation, but also to argue how God saves all things in Christ, this section will explore these interpretations from a soteriological point of view. In other words, the diverse theological ways of understanding God's salvific purpose accomplished in Christ will be the angle for exploring how these stances have theologically depicted the eschatological link between humanity and creation. For illustrative purposes, this section will

gather the different soteriological stances in three main models, naming them “ascending salvation,” “descending salvation,” and “salvation as justification.”⁷¹

Before exploring each of these three models, it seems necessary to say something about Christian soteriology and the different ways of depicting God’s salvation of the whole of creation in Christ. In fact, the conceptual multiplicity used during Christian written tradition for depicting this event — redemption, expiation, divinization, atonement, liberation, etc. — shows this diversity. However, and without trying to be exhaustive, it is possible to affirm that all Christian soteriology must have, in one way or another, five main features: first of all, God is the salvation, and God offers it as a free gift. Thus, salvation is not a prolongation of creation, nor simply the result of human activity, nor an impersonal process as a product of the history. Second, God’s salvation is operative within history. Instead of liberation from history, God gives history its real meaning by transforming it into a “history of salvation” and leading it toward its fulfillment. Third, salvation is an invitation to creation as a whole. This is why salvation means, at once, the accomplishment of human beings, reconciliation of all things, and participation of creation in divine life. Fourth, God’s salvation is brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though the whole life of Jesus Christ is a salvific event, the paschal mystery concentrates God’s salvation inasmuch as Jesus Christ conquers, by the cross and resurrection, the most serious consequence of sin, namely death. Finally, salvation is a trinitarian endeavor. God is not only triune in “being,” but also triune in activity. Yet the distinctive activities of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit must be always maintained; they always act together

⁷¹ For a complete explanation of the soteriological models during Christian written tradition, as well as their distinction into these three groups, see Bernard Sesboué, *Jésus-Christ L’Unique Médiateur. Essai sur la Rédemption et le Salut*, vol. I (Paris: Desclée, 1988).

whether in the moment of creation or the event of salvation.⁷² These six main features will be therefore present in the following three models of salvation. The difference lies, as in most of the theological stances, in the way these ideas are organized or which of them articulate the others.

As mentioned, the first model is called “ascending salvation.” According to this model, salvation is a process that goes from the humanity of Jesus Christ to God, especially pointing to the cross as the way of saving. Even if this soteriological stance highlights the ascending movement of salvation from humanity to God, it is necessary to point out that this model tends to cancel any human cooperation with God in the salvation of both themselves and creation. Given the “damaged situation” of human beings after the fall, they are mostly seen as the “objects” of salvation by Jesus Christ. Anselm’s theology is a good example of this model. According to him, the theological explanation of why the Father allowed the death of his Son on the cross is the adequate reparation of human offense against God through Adam’s sin. Anselm affirms that Jesus is the satisfactory victim who restores the broken relationship between an offended God and a guilty humanity. Human beings must repair the offense against God, but they cannot fix such problem; so it was necessary that Jesus — the God made human — restored this affront by the offering of his life.⁷³ Although Anselm’s goal is not to explain the relationship between human beings and creation, the human role can be clearly deduced. In fact, Jesus Christ had to do, according to Anselm’s rationale, what human beings are not capable of doing. God brought salvation to the whole of creation through a man — Jesus — but without the cooperation of human beings.⁷⁴

⁷² For the characteristics and models of salvation through Christian written tradition, see Emmanuel Durand, *L’Offre Universelle Du Salut En Christ* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2012).

⁷³ Anselm, “*Cur Deus Homo*,” in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260–356.

⁷⁴ For the idea of satisfaction in Anselm’s argument as something “necessary” in order to procure forgiveness and salvation, see Thomas Noble, “The ‘Necessity’ of Anselm: The Argument of the *Cur Deus Homo*,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 50, no. 1 (2015): 53–66.

From a different perspective, Luther's theology also fits in this model of salvation. As mentioned, he held that human beings lost their capability to act correctly in accordance with God's will since Adam sinned. Because human beings cannot liberate themselves through their actions perverted by sin, Christ saves humanity from its present situation through his vicarious death. By using the word "atonement," Luther states that Jesus' death is a sacrifice that only he could offer to the Father in order to give salvation to all human beings.⁷⁵ Faith in this divine sacrifice, and not human works, is the cause of salvation. In fact, Luther uses the difference between faith and works in Paul's theology to affirm that the cooperation of human beings in God's salvation is not based on human works, but only on the free reception in faith of God's grace offered in Christ's death.⁷⁶ Calvin assumes a similar perspective. He affirms that Jesus Christ saves humanity by substitution, and his death is an act of solidarity with human beings who were fundamentally changed by Adam's sin in their capacity to do what is good.⁷⁷

All these authors affirm, by using different arguments, a model of salvation in which Jesus stands in the place of human beings in order to offer himself, as a human being, to the Father as a mediating victim of salvation. Given that human beings themselves must be saved from their present situation of sin, their own role in the salvation of creation is barely treated.

⁷⁵ According to Gustav Aulen, there are three ways of understanding "atonement." First, this notion means "reparation" in which Jesus' death reestablishes God's friendship with human beings. Second, this notion means "sacrifice" in which Jesus' death is the expiatory victim that brings salvation. Finally, "atonement" refers to Jesus Christ as the example that believers must follow. See Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 2010). For the idea of atonement in terms of expiation and communion, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Quaestio Disputata. The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 418–32. For different approaches to the idea of atonement from an Evangelical perspective, see Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁷⁶ See Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), 276–307.

⁷⁷ For the sacrificial language of salvation, see Ingolf Dalferth, "Christ Died for Us: Reflections on the Sacrificial Language of Salvation," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. Stephen Sykes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 299–325.

The second soteriological model has a “descending” movement. According to this model, salvation is a process which moves from God to humanity through Jesus Christ, focusing especially on the Incarnation as the way of saving. Thus salvation is conceived as a process of growth toward God in which the Incarnation is its highest and most revealing moment. Irenaeus, for instance, exemplifies well this stance. According to him, the Incarnation is not simply a response to sin, but the realization of the will of the triune God from the moment of creation. By establishing a direct link between creation and salvation, Irenaeus affirmed that God redeems all things by “recapitulating” them in Christ who is their *raison d’être*.⁷⁸ The Incarnation reveals the inner goodness of creation and its original eschatological purpose, namely participation in God’s life. The goal of the Incarnation, therefore, is to bring all things to be what they originally were intended to be, namely like Christ.⁷⁹ Athanasius also highlighted the salvific aspect of the Incarnation. By reasoning similarly to Irenaeus’, Athanasius argues that the reason for the Incarnation is not human sin. According to him, salvation was brought about by Incarnation inasmuch as the person of Jesus Christ allows human beings to “contemplate God,” and as a consequence, to realize how creation will be.⁸⁰ Because Jesus Christ reveals the very nature of God — divine love for humanity since the very moment of creation — the Word become flesh shows the rationale by which creation was brought about, namely God’s “philanthropy” that creates all things from the beginning for saving them by God’s presence.⁸¹ Thus the Incarnation

⁷⁸ See Irenaeus, “*Adversus Haereses*,” III, 22, 1.

⁷⁹ See Irenaeus, III, 19, 1.

⁸⁰ See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1982), 54; “On the Council of Nicea (De Decretis),” in *Athanasius*, ed. Khaled Anatolios (New York: Routledge, 2004), 14.

⁸¹ See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1–18. This idea concerning God’s philanthropy as the reason for the Incarnation, and therefore of salvation is also shared and developed in the theological thought of Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa. See Gregory Nazianzen, “Oratorio,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), LXV; Gregory of Nyssa, *The Catechetical Oration of St. Gregory of Nyssa* (London: SPCK, 1917).

reveals God's eternal salvific plan for creation inasmuch as it shows that the goal of God's love for all things is, from the very beginning, their divinization.⁸²

All of these ideas are clearly highlighted in the theological thought of Maximus the Confessor, especially by the way he understands the Incarnation and the divinization process of creation led by God. Maximus argued that all things owe their differences and uniqueness to God who creates them. Thus, all created things are both diverse from their origin inasmuch they are the image of the triune God, and furthermore unique because all things were created with a unique *logos* in accordance with the unique *Logos* of God. Although sin provoked a confusion in the correct alignment between their unique *logos* and the *Logos* from which they were created, the divine grace continues operating within all things leading them to their divination.⁸³ This is why the Incarnation, rather than a response to sin, is the way God gives, in the very person of Christ, unity to the diverse creation and a unique fulfillment to every single creature.⁸⁴ Salvation of all and every creature in Christ is the process by which creation, as a harmonious diversity, "participates" in God's life according to the will of God from the beginning. For Maximus, therefore, God creates all things with Incarnation in mind. It is the end for whose sake creation exists.⁸⁵ Thus Incarnation reveals that all things are under a process of divinization of which the Word made flesh has always been, is now, and continues to be its fulfillment.⁸⁶

⁸² See Athanasius, *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians*, ed. John Henry Newman (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1977), I, 38–39, 42–45; II, 47, 59, 70; III, 25, 33.

⁸³ See Maximus the Confessor, "Questiones Ad Thalassium," in *St. Maximus the Confessor's Questions and Doubts*, trans. Despina Prassas (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 2.

⁸⁴ Cf. Maximus the Confessor, 60; "Ambiguorum Liber," in *St. Maximus the Confessor's Questions and Doubts*, trans. Despina Prassas (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 41.

⁸⁵ See Maximus the Confessor, "Questiones Ad Thalassium," 60.

⁸⁶ For the concept of "participation" in Maximus' theology, see Denis Edwards, "Final Fulfilment: The Deification of Creation," *SEDOS Bulletin* 41, no. 7 (2009): 181–95. For the way "nature" reflects God's presence in Maximus' theology, see Joshua Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and His Predecessors* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013). For the divinization of human beings in Maximus' thought, see Jean-Claude Larchet, *La Divinisation de l'homme Selon Saint Maxime Le Confesseur*, Cogitatio Fidei 194 (Paris: Cerf, 1996).

Although the “descending” soteriological model can be understood as being contrary to the “ascending” one in the way it illustrates the role of human beings in the fulfillment of creation, such is not necessarily the case. With the exception of Maximus the Confessor, there is no explicit reference to this issue. According to him, Christ brings all things to unity and healing. In this process, Christ unites human beings with himself, not only for becoming a symbol of the transfiguration of all things, but also for sharing his role of transforming and healing creation with redeemed humanity. Renewed in Christ, human beings participate in the transformation of the whole of creation as his “intermediaries.”⁸⁷ It is necessary to affirm, however, that the other authors do not deny this eschatological relationship between human beings and creation. They simply do not underline this point. Thus the “descending” model, by stressing the loving coherence of God’s plan in Christ from creation to salvation despite sinfulness, tends to be more vague in explaining the role of human beings in their “process of divinization” as well as in their eventual participation in the salvation of creation.

The third model receives its name from the soteriological notion of “justification.” This notion comes primarily from Paul’s theology. He affirms, in particular in Rm 1–4, that human beings can be saved/justified — “δικαιώσις” — by faith in Jesus Christ. The righteousness from sin necessary for being before God is exclusively brought by Christ.⁸⁸ The Letter of James also affirms that salvation comes only and exclusively from God, and therefore any human works can obtain a justification that is received only by grace in Jesus Christ. Both biblical writers refer to Abraham’s faith to support their claim.⁸⁹ But although nothing except God can save — not even

⁸⁷ See Maximus the Confessor, “De Ambigua,” in *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, trans. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 41.

⁸⁸ For a contemporary understanding of the notion of “justification” in Paul’s theology, see James Dunn, “Justification by Faith,” in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 334–89; Jared Wicks, “Justification in a Broader Horizon,” *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 4 (2003): 473–91; Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking A Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁸⁹ On this point, both Paul and James use the same reference to Gn 15:6. See Rm 4:2; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23.

the correct compliance with the law given to them by God — Paul and James affirm that works have an important role to play in the life of justified human beings. By the relationship that these authors establish between “faith” and “works,”⁹⁰ they assert that while God’s justification is received only by faith in Christ, the Spirit empowers and calls human beings to do good works.⁹¹ This discussion concerning God’s justification by faith and its relationship with human works was one of the core subjects of the Council of Trent.⁹² Against Luther’s interpretation of “justification by faith,” Trent looks to complement this theological truth by stressing the role of human works in the reception of God’s justification. In fact, Trent does not deny that God and faith are the causes of human beings’ justification. Quite the opposite, the document holds that the *efficient cause* and the *final cause* of justification is God alone.⁹³ Moreover, the council states that the *meritorious cause* of justification is the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and the *instrumental cause* of justification is the sacrament in which believers participate in Christ, namely baptism.⁹⁴ Only God’s grace justifies the sinner before God. However, the council also highlights the role of human works in their own salvation inasmuch as they prepare and dispose human beings for the reception of God’s grace.⁹⁵ Thus works are not only fruits of the justification already obtained by faith, but also signs of the free movement of human will toward the reception of salvation.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Rm 3:28; 4:1-5; Eph 2:8-10; Jas 2:21-25.

⁹¹ Although it seems that Paul and James do not agree in the role they give to “works” and “faith,” it is important to note that, while Paul in Romans contrasts “works” and “faith,” James contrasts “works” and “words.” Thus James is not affirming that “works” can save, but that they can show better the faith that inspires them than simply “words.” See David Maxwell, “Justified by Works and Not by Faith Alone: Reconciling Paul and James,” *Concordia Journal* 33, no. 4 (2007): 375–78.

⁹² These ideas are mostly treated in the chapter VII of the *Decree on Justification*, entitled, “The Nature and the Causes of the Sinner’s Justification” (DH 1528-1531).

⁹³ See Trent (DH 1529).

⁹⁴ See Trent (DS 1529).

⁹⁵ See Trent (DH 1533-1535).

⁹⁶ See Trent (DH 1559); cf. Trent (DH 1532, 1538). It is necessary to point out that both Christians and Lutherans agree on the main elements of the doctrine of justification. In fact, both churches have issued a joint declaration on their common understanding of the role of faith and works in the justification of human beings. According to this

This doctrine of justification was taken up by the Second Vatican Council. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, Christ is now at work in the hearts of all human beings by the power of his Spirit, and therefore makes human beings free in order to dispose them to salvation.⁹⁷ But Vatican II not only affirms that works dispose and prepare human beings for the reception of grace. In addition, the council claims that good works will be assumed by God when Christ fulfills creation. The council argues, stressing the importance of earthly progress for the construction of God's kingdom, that the continuity between this creation with the new one can be extended to the good works.⁹⁸ In a certain sense, therefore, *Gaudium et Spes* implies that human beings prepare creation, as they do for themselves, for the reception of God's grace. And this idea concerning the role of human beings in the preparation of creation for salvation explains the statement in *Lumen Gentium* which affirms that creation will attain its end through human beings.⁹⁹

Unlike the other two soteriological models described above, salvation understood as “justification” is more explicit about the relationship between God's salvation and the participation of human beings. On the one hand, this model asserts that the Father saves creation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. In the case of sinners, they receive justification before God from sin as a free gift from their own creator and savior. Thus salvation of all things comes only from God, and by faith in the justification offered in Christ. On the other hand, this model claims

declaration, justification is the work of the triune God, and only by grace are sinners accepted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit (n 15). And in this relationship between faith and works, the good works follow justification and are their fruits (n 37). See “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” 1999, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

⁹⁷ GS 38.

⁹⁸ GS 39.

⁹⁹ According to *Lumen Gentium* 48, the entire world “is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him” The Catholic Catechism refers to this number of *Lumen Gentium* when affirming that the universe itself is closely related to man and attains its destiny to him. See *Catechism*, 1042.

that God's justification is received by an act of freedom on the part of human beings. Although any human act can justify human beings, "good works" have soteriological value inasmuch as they prepare and predispose human beings for the reception of God's salvation. Moreover, human works convey eschatological significance for creation because they will be fulfilled by God when Christ comes, as well as collaborate in the building of God's kingdom. In this sense, good works are not only the fruits of justified human beings or the disposition for the reception of God's grace. Besides this, good works are part of the material that helps in building up God's kingdom, and therefore will be fulfilled with the whole of creation when Christ comes. Although only God's free action will fulfill creation, human beings are invited to collaborate with this divine action by building a cultural and social environment that fits with God's kingdom revealed in Christ. As mentioned in the first chapter, most of contemporary eschatological reflections have this idea as a key element.

2.3. Creation will be Fulfilled by God, and Human Beings are Invited to Participate

Taking into account the overview of Rm 8:19-23 and these three soteriological approaches of the way God saves all things in Christ, the main point of this section is to re-address how the eschatological link between humanity and creation can be understood — in terms of either "dependency" of creation on humanity or "correlation" in a common fulfillment — with the goal of clarifying why the second interpretation of Rm 8:19-23 should be preferred over the first one from both a theological and a biblical point of view.

As already stated, the eschatological relationship between humanity and the non-human aspect of creation in the context of Rm 8:19-23 can be interpreted in terms of "dependency" of the latter on the former. One of the arguments for claiming a reliance of creation on humanity is based on the biblical solidarity between them from the beginning of creation. Thus Rm 8:19-23

would affirm that the freedom of the non-human aspect of creation will result from the glorification of believers as its consequence. This eschatological solidarity — with the latter understood in terms of dependency of creation on human beings — would be grounded in the idea of the moral neutrality of creation. Given that the non-human aspect of creation does not have its own will, and God's salvation is done *through* the acceptance of salvation of the part of the creature, the reception of God's grace by creation would be made through the particular role that human beings have within it. In other words, because the fulfillment of creation by God is not done "despite" it, humans "accepts" salvation not only on the part of themselves, but also of creation. When humanity is then glorified by God, the non-human reality conceived as the neutral context in which the relationship between two wills takes place - those of God and those of human beings – would sequentially participate in the salvific event.

This eschatological reliance of creation on humanity would have the human body as the link of their relationship. According to this interpretation of Rm 8:19-23, the body forms part of the non-human creation inasmuch as it is the "material aspect of human beings." And because the liberation of the children of God conveys the resurrection of their bodies, their glorification entails, as a consequence, the liberation of all the aspects of creation associated with the body, namely the material, physical dimension of creation. It is God who fulfills the whole of creation in Christ, and the liberation of the non-human reality is done *through* the glorification of human beings' bodies as a consequence.

This idea is reinforced when the fulfillment of creation is seen as the necessary environment for glorified human beings. As stated, Rm 8:19-23 argues that the liberation of creation from its subjection will occur in and with the glorification of the children of God inasmuch as all of them are part of the same salvific action. But the reason for the fulfillment of the material reality of creation would not be necessarily the matter itself, but human beings. As

creation is made by God for human beings, and therefore their destiny is linked from the beginning, the fulfillment of the non-human aspect of creation by God is required to give human beings a place that fits with their future transformation. Therefore, God is the one who fulfills the whole of creation in accordance with Christ, and the transformation of the non-human reality will be done *for* and *because of* the glorification of human beings. This idea would suggest, therefore, that creation has only an instrumental value — i.e. creation is “useful” for human beings, rather than that it is good in itself.

Finally, this interpretation of Rm 8:19-23 in terms of dependency of creation on human beings can also be illustrated by conceiving human beings as the sum of all created reality. Human beings would be a “microcosm” that, in a certain sense, condenses all created things. This stance has two possible versions. On the one hand, human beings represent all things because they are created in the image of God and as images of the whole of creation. According to this, each single human being concentrates all aspects of creation since, in their body and soul, the two realities that form the universe — material and spiritual — are mingled. Thus the redemption of the whole cosmos would not be separated from the future of those who are the representative images of it.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, human beings represent all things since they are, in the process of becoming of creation, the place in which the spiritual development of matter becomes evident and gains self-consciousness. In the framework of the evolutionary process of creation, human beings are the part of creation that sums up the cosmic process in which matter develops toward spirit. Thus the entirety of the cosmos - organic and inorganic - is

¹⁰⁰ According to George Conger, the idea of human beings as “microcosm” entails the corresponding similarity in pattern, nature, or structure between human beings and the universe. This notion with roots in the thought of Pythagoras and Plotinus was assumed by Christian thinkers to illustrate the correspondent harmony between God’s creation and human beings, and the coherence between the material/spiritual duality of creation and the duality body/soul of human beings. See George Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967).

focused and unfolded in human beings because they reflect, through their own existence and use of liberty, the whole cosmic becoming process of matter toward spirit. Despite the risk that this evolutionary perspective places human beings within a larger cosmic context, if this theological stance does not highlight enough that God will transform the whole of creation in accordance with the glorified humanity of the risen Christ — the one who is the reason and the way of the fulfillment of all things — it is also at risk of the “anthropocentrism” that it wants to avoid.

All these reasons that justify an interpretation of the future of creation in terms of dependency on human beings generally are combined within the eschatological stances. For instance, Bonaventure stated that, in Incarnation, creation reaches its full dignity through the human body which represents and synthetizes it. Thus the fulfillment of creation is mediated by the transformation of human beings by God.¹⁰¹ From a different perspective, Aquinas argued that the eschatological redemption of all things is not because of sin, but by virtue of the inner goodness of creation.¹⁰² In this sense, creation will be fulfilled because of itself. But this redemption of the non-human aspect of creation, in Aquinas’ view, is dependent on the glorification of human beings inasmuch the new form of creation must be entirely in congruity with redeemed humanity.¹⁰³ Ruiz de la Peña and Alan Galloway are contemporary examples of this same approach. On the one hand, de la Peña holds, from a Heideggerian perspective, that given that being-in-the-world is a constitutive part of human beings, they cannot rise without it;¹⁰⁴ risen humanity demands a risen world.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, Galloway argues that human beings cannot be restored without the transformation of the whole material reality. Because the

¹⁰¹ See Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, VII, IV, 2–4.

¹⁰² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, STh II, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁰³ Aquinas, STh III, q. 74, a. 1; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. C. J. O’Neil (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), ScG IV, 97, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Juan L. Ruiz de la Peña, *La Otra Dimensión: Escatología Cristiana* (Madrid: EAPSA, 1975), 215.

¹⁰⁵ Juan L. Ruiz de la Peña, *El Último Sentido: Una Introducción a la Escatología* (Madrid: Marova, 1980), 106.

link between human beings and the natural universe is the body, the glorification of human beings in their bodies demands the transformation of the entire natural reality as well.¹⁰⁶

The notion of “microcosm” can be found in the anthropological reflections of some Fathers of the Church.¹⁰⁷ Because human beings are created in God’s image and concentrate all the aspects of creation both material and spiritual, they have a particular position within creation. But by using the notion of “microcosm” applied to human beings, these cited Fathers are not stressing the dependency of creation on human beings. Rather, they show the coherence of God’s creation, its goodness, and the fulfillment of all things in Christ as something willed by God since the beginning. This cosmic perspective of the role of human beings is also evident in Teilhard’s theology. Although the references to human beings in terms of “microcosm” are not abundant in his writings, Teilhard clearly affirms that the whole evolutionary process has human beings as a “totaling up moment” of the development of creation toward Jesus Christ as its directionality and goal.¹⁰⁸ And this idea also echoes Rahner’s thought. For him, the movement of the development of the cosmos is directed to its fulfillment through a conscious relationship to its ground. This is why the evolutionary process entails the process of self-transcendence of matter toward the spirit in which the human being is where creation both becomes conscious of itself and can freely accept its ground — God.¹⁰⁹ Finally, Vatican II claims that the human being is a synthesis of creation by which the latter reaches its ultimate expression.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the council argues that all creation was made by God on human beings’ account.¹¹¹ Because of this

¹⁰⁶ See Allan Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ*. (London: Nisbet, 1951), 47.

¹⁰⁷ See, for instance, Clement of Alexandria, “Cohort Ad Gentes,” in *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. William Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), pt. I; Gregory Nazianzen, “Oratorio,” pts. LXV, vii; Maximus the Confessor, “De Ambigua,” pt. 37.

¹⁰⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, “The Mass on the World,” 126.

¹⁰⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 188–92.

¹¹⁰ GS 14.

¹¹¹ GS 39.

intimate relation of creation to human beings, the fulfillment that God will give to the whole of creation at the end of time — both the non-human reality and the human race — depends on human beings inasmuch as creation will attain its end “through” them.¹¹² Thus by using different reasoning, all these theological stances establish, to a greater or lesser degree, a relationship of eschatological dependency of creation on human beings.

The other way of interpreting this eschatological link between humanity and creation in Rm 8:19-23 holds that both will receive a correlative fulfillment by God as part of a common destiny. In other words, the fulfillment of humanity and creation cannot be separated from each other, but not because the transformation of one of them depends on the other. Rather, the ground of this eschatological link is the common participation in the same final, fulfilling event, namely Christ’s coming.

This claim can be supported from a biblical and theological perspective. From the biblical side, it is possible to affirm that creation is not directly expecting in the revelation of the children of God, but in Christ’s parousia from which the revelation of the children of God is one of its signs. As mentioned, Rm 8:19-23 affirms that creation is “eagerly waiting” its future liberation. But, in the New Testament, these kinds of “expectations” not only have eschatological connotations, but they are also directly associated with Christ’s second coming,¹¹³ and to the Spirit through whom believers expect their glorification.¹¹⁴ The very word “ἀποκαταδοκία” in Rm 8:19 refers to the final eschatological event that has Christ’s coming as its foundation.¹¹⁵ In addition, the “revelation” that creation is awaiting in Rm 8:19 also refers to the parousia. As mentioned in the third chapter, the word “ἀποκαλύπτω” used twice for the children of God (Rm

¹¹² LG 48.

¹¹³ Phil 3:20; 1 Co 1:7; Heb 9:28.

¹¹⁴ Gal 5:5.

¹¹⁵ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 109.

8:18-19) mostly points to the “revelation” of Christ at his coming and of events surrounding his parousia.¹¹⁶ Thus, and since many things will be publicly revealed at the moment Christ comes, the parousia will publicly manifest and complete, through the resurrection of their bodies, the filiation that the “children of God” already have by faith.¹¹⁷ Perhaps this filiation that believers “already” have through the Spirit is the reason why Rm 8:19-23 makes the difference between the expectation of creation and the children of God. While human beings, who already have the first-fruits of the Spirit, hope in the glorification of their bodies, creation groans in labor pains in expecting its liberation from futility and decay. Yet regardless of the reason of this distinction, it is fair to affirm that both humanity and creation are “groaning” in expecting their transformation that will happen and be revealed only when Christ comes again.

From a more systematic perspective, it is also possible to state that both expectations must be framed in God as their final object of hope. The whole of creation will be fulfilled by God, and only by God. This idea is very clear in Scripture and Christian written tradition, and has been highlighted through all the preceding chapters. God will fulfill God’s creation inasmuch as God is both the absolute origin and the absolute goal of creation. In addition, it was shown that this idea is a requirement for any Christian soteriology. The three soteriological models mentioned above hold, although through different argumentations, that the triune God is the sole cause of the salvation of all things. In fact, each of these models tries to depict the mystery of God’s salvation from an angle that, in conjunction with the others, shows the richness of this process willed by the Father, realized in Christ, and led by the Spirit.

¹¹⁶ For the revelation of Christ at his second coming — 2 Thes 1:7; 1 Co 1:7; 1 Pet 1:7, 13 — for the revelation of some events at the parousia — 1 Pet 4:13, Rm 2:5; 1 Pt 1:5.

¹¹⁷ Rm 8:14-17. Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 412; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 470; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 550. According to Hahn, this revelation of the children of God at the parousia can be understood as the first moment the entire church will be seen as a whole. See Hahn, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 183.

Besides this, it is also possible to assert that the fulfillment of humanity and of non-human creation are directly associated. This link can be understood from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, all created things — of which human beings are part — will receive their fulfillment as a whole in Christ when he comes. This shared hope of humanity and creation in God's liberating action is based on God's will that all created things be saved by their participation in God's trinitarian life. Only sinfulness and all its associated elements will pass away by Christ's judgment of the whole of creation. The eschatological expectation, therefore, is that God will be all in all at the moment of the parousia. Notions such as a "new heavens and new earth" associated with the gathering of God's people, the resurrection of the dead as part of God's renewal of the whole of creation, or the transformation of the present body taking place as part of Jesus Christ's coming, are examples of this hope in God bringing all things together at the parousia. Every single created thing will reach its singular fulfillment in the context of God's action upon God's creation.

On the other hand however, this divine fulfilling action upon creation as a whole does not deny the diversity that constitutes this creation. This is why God will transform the whole of creation by fulfilling every created thing in its singularity. In the case of human beings, the life of every single person will be fulfilled by God in accordance with both its particularities and its personal free option for or against God's salvation in Christ. In the case of non-human creation, each aspect of creation will be renewed by God to participate in God's life and presence, giving glory to its creator. The fulfillment of the whole of creation entails the transformation of every single creature in accordance with God's will for it. These two complementary aspects of God's fulfillment of creation — a whole process which entails the particular consummation of each created thing — is particularly clear in the notion of "new heaven and new earth" explored in the fourth chapter: creation is a diverse unity which will be transformed by its creator. And this same

principle can be applied when the notion of “new creation” as a whole is used for believers. In fact, “new creation” is explicitly associated with the idea of each single human being becoming “a new creation” through participation in Christ’s mystery through baptism.¹¹⁸ God is the one who will renew the whole of creation by fulfilling every single creature in accordance with its own nature.

For all these reasons, it seems more biblically and theologically coherent to affirm that the fulfillment of all things must be framed within the context of a theology of creation and of God’s action upon it, and not within the context of a soteriology focused on sin and human actions within creation. Moreover, this eschatological perspective focused on God’s faithfulness with creation deals better with one of the important challenges of contemporary eschatological reflection, namely the contemporary cosmological data. In fact, this discussion concerning the dialogue between theology and science will be one of the core elements of the next chapter. But precisely for carrying out this dialogue it is necessary to state, for the moment, that regardless of how the fulfillment of non-human creation could be conceived, both Scripture and Christian written tradition affirm that its transformation is associated with human actions. The fulfillment of creation does not depend on them, but it is linked to them. This theological clarification must be done precisely in order to avoid the opposite tendency: because only God fulfills creation, human beings are not the ones responsible for either the present or the future of creation. And this stance can be even more justified when comparing the scope of human actions with the size of universe. The value of human actions is completely irrelevant for either the current state of the universe or its final state. This is why, and despite that the concrete realization of the future of creation remains unknown inasmuch as it depends only on God and exceeds the scope of any

¹¹⁸ Cf. 2 Co 5:17; Gal 6:15; Tit 3:5.

human action, it is necessary to affirm that human beings *do* have a particular role in the fulfillment of all things.

But what is the value of a human being's action in the fulfillment of all things by God? As noted above, Trent underlined the role of human actions for the disposition to receive God's salvation in Christ. Although only faith in Christ saves, works prepare human beings for the reception of God's salvific grace. Thus good works are not only the natural consequence of redemption, but also the way human beings freely respond to God's offering of salvation in Christ through the inspiration of the Spirit. Vatican II also stressed the eschatological importance of human actions by pointing out, in tune with their value for individual salvation highlighted by Trent, their eschatological social role. Good works collaborate in the preparation of reality to fully accept God's kingdom, and therefore they will be fulfilled at the end of time as part of creation. Thus good works not only dispose both individuals and social structures to receive God's grace offered by Christ's kingdom, but they also form part of the reality that God wills fulfilled. Human actions have eschatological value not only for themselves, but also for the physical and cultural environment in which they develop their existence and relation with God.¹¹⁹

It is very important to highlight that the importance of good works is not based on their necessity for the salvation of all things, but on their eschatological value for what God is doing

¹¹⁹ On this point, it is interesting that the conciliar reference to this idea can be interpreted in two different senses. As mentioned, the statement concerning the importance of human activity and its eschatological role appears in GS 39. The English translation of the Latin version of this number is that "all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise" will be transfigured by God. In this translation, the possessive "our nature" refers to the nature of human beings, and therefore the "good fruits" are the result of human activity. The French translation of GS 39 also uses a possessive for "nature" and "enterprise," namely "*notre*." However, the Spanish translation of the original version holds that "*todos los frutos excelentes de la naturaleza y de nuestro esfuerzo*" will be fulfilled by God. In this translation, the expression "*la naturaleza*" does not refer to human beings as their nature, but to "the nature." This is more evident given that the Spanish translation does refer "*nuestro esfuerzo*" to human beings, making then a distinction between "*la*" and "*nuestro*." According to this translation, it is possible to affirm that the works of both nature and human beings will endure in the eschatological fulfillment. The original Latin version of GS 39 – "*hos omnes scilicet bonos naturae ac industriae nostrae fructus*" – allows both translations.

with creation. In other words, the question concerning the importance of good actions should not be focused on whether they are necessary or superfluous for the transformation of creation, but on how they collaborate in what God is doing by the action of the Holy Spirit and what God will fulfill when Christ comes again. This conviction that creation is saved by God in Christ is what should lead believers to collaborate with God in the fulfillment of all things. In other words, as a corollary of the faith in God's salvation of creation in Christ, human beings must participate in earthly works. Given that history has reached its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, human beings are invited not only to believe in this salvation, but also to participate in this ongoing reality. Salvation means personal union with God, and therefore, personal union with what God is doing. Therefore, although Christians can say little about the future of the whole cosmos, they can affirm that God's action transforms what human beings have shaped. The only future is the coming of God, and every action must take its shape from this certitude.

For all these reasons, theological reflection on the role of human beings in the eschatological fulfillment of creation cannot be done without considering that God alone, not human beings, fulfills creation in Christ. And this is why all the prepositions used to illustrate the role of human beings in creation (i.e. creation will be fulfilled by God *through, for, because, in,* and *by* human beings) must be applied primarily to Jesus Christ and only by analogical extension to human beings. In other words, creation will be fulfilled *through, for, because, in,* and *by* a particular human being, namely Jesus Christ, the one who will come again to fulfill the whole of creation.

3. Implications

By way of summary of this chapter, it is possible to state the following concerning the liberation and the fulfillment of creation. First of all, the present state of creation was not

originally willed by God. Human sin affected all things, not merely human beings themselves by putting the whole of creation in a situation that differs from God's original plan for it. This change within creation provoked by sin does not imply, however, that human disobedience did not have the power to change God's creation nor to contradict God's original plan for it. They are not capable of condemning creation to a situation not sought by its Creator. As mentioned, the exegetical interpretation of Rm 8:19-23 leads mostly to sustain that God was the one who established this state within creation because of sin. Futility and decay, therefore did not form part of creation from the beginning, and it is God, not human sin, who subjected God's own creation to this state.

However, this divine action cannot be intended by God as the damnation of creation to a fallen state by God. Rm 8:19-23 holds that God subjected, not damned, creation to futility and decay. Besides this exegetical perspective, it is difficult to argue, from a more systematic point of view, that the Creator replaced the original goodness of creation with a fallen state in order to give its goodness back again at the end of time, without contradicting God's coherent faithfulness with creation. Even the restorative understanding of God's fulfillment held by theologies during Christian written tradition — i.e. because the original disobedience brought sin and death into the world causing its fall, Christ came to restore creation to its original state — base their restorative rationale on Adam's fault as the cause of the fall and not on God's incoherence *vis-à-vis* God's original plan for creation. This idea of God's coherence toward creation is reinforced by Rm 8:19-23 when affirming that creation was subjected by God in hope. It is true that the current condition of the natural order was not originally willed by God. But because it is God who subjected creation, this order is not final either. According to Rm 8:19-23, and to most of the theological reflection, and magisterial texts in Christian tradition, it is possible to state then that the non-human aspect of creation is not in a fallen situation because of either

human beings or God. Rather, it is subjected to a situation that will pass away when God will fulfill God's own creation.

This theocentric perspective frames the role of human beings within the present and future situation differently than a perspective that focuses these same topics mostly on an anthropocentric perspective. Concerning the present state of creation, it is not condemned to corruption by a human's fault. Rather, creation is subjected to decay by God. And concerning the future, creation is not hoping in the liberation of the children of God. Instead, the whole of creation — including human beings — is expecting its transformation by God when Christ comes again. In terms of Rm 8:19-23, while human beings, who already have the first-fruits of the Spirit, hope in the glorification of their bodies, creation groans in labor pains in awaiting its liberation from futility and decay. Both expectations have God as their final object of hope. And both fulfillments will occur as different complementary aspects of the same event illustrated in Christ's second coming.

Finally, it is important to hold that this theocentric perspective of the present and future of creation does not exempt human beings from their own responsibility. In fact, both Scripture and Christian written tradition show that, regardless of how the fulfillment of non-human creation could be conceived, the role of human beings in the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God cannot be denied. However, this role must always be understood while considering that only God, not human beings, fulfills creation in Christ. All the efforts of human beings have an eschatological value – they collaborate in God's fulfilling action upon creation – insofar as they make reference to Jesus Christ as the only savior. In fact, he is the one who will fulfill all things at the end of time by gathering them through the Spirit. Thus all the prepositions used to illustrate the role of humanity in creation — i.e. creation will be fulfilled by God *through*, *for*, *because*, *in*, and *by* human beings — must be applied primarily to Christ and only by analogical

extension to human beings. In other words, creation will be fulfilled by God through, because, in, and by a particular human being, namely Jesus Christ, the one who will come again to transform all things in accordance to himself. This idea, strongly highlighted in Col 1:15-20, will be one of the key elements of the next and final chapter.

Chapter VI

The Parousia as a Suitable Symbol for a Cosmic and Personal Eschatological Renewed Narrative

The sixth and final chapter of this dissertation will address some of the theological difficulties that the eschatological statements mentioned in previous chapters face, in particular the challenges coming from cosmological theories and those from the criticism that rejects any all-embracing narrative. In this context, the parousia of Christ — the future coming of the one who is present within creation as the risen Lord — will be used as a theological notion for a personal and cosmic eschatological narrative.

As seen in the second chapter, the way in which sciences measure the unfolding of the universe from a spatial-temporal point of view surpasses and broadens what theology classically calls creation, thus putting into question some of the core eschatological statements. Because most of these statements seem to be closely related to a particular vision of the cosmos which is outdated by contemporary cosmology, there are some assertions that have lost not only their evocative power, but also their plausibility – i.e. a harmonic cosmos with a teleological presupposition, the preponderant role of human beings within it, or even their participation in the cosmic end. And the same seems to be true for the eschatological narrative. The modern criticism of the human capacity of knowledge has increased the consciousness of the real scope and nature of human knowledge. And the post-modern criticism of the representative value of language has highlighted how this knowledge is strongly influenced and even determined by the subject who reflects. This is why the classic eschatological imaginary and narrative mostly associated with pre-modern representation of reality disappeared or became, for many people,

merely mythological symbols. Eschatological reflection is therefore questioned by its actual scope and for its real competence of illustrating what it claims to know.

In this context, is not the eschatological narrative reduced to wishful thinking? And is not the parousia an idea that even “increases” these stated problems? The second chapter finishes with the claim that the parousia is an inspiring eschatological notion that broadens the interpretation of God’s fulfillment to a fully transformed universe, offers an illustrative and dynamic image of God’s future action upon creation, and can prompt believers to recognize and embrace their role in God’s fulfillment. But if the parousia entails, for instance, the gathering of God’s people at the end of time, what happens with this statement when recent cosmological theories argue that predictions concerning the end of the universe do not coincide at all with the prediction of the end of human beings — because the universe will continue existing after the human species disappears? And what happens with the concrete, physical return of Jesus Christ as fulfillment of the whole of creation? Besides the incommensurable temporal difference between the end of humanity and the end of the universe, there is also the spatial difference between them. The universe is formed by millions of millions of galaxies, in which human beings live on a small planet that is part of a small planetary system within a small galaxy. Should the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God be reduced to “planet Earth” and what Jesus Christ will eventually do when he comes “here”? Could it be affirmed that the concrete, physical return of Christ can happen without human beings? Or should this statement of the parousia be completely dismissed because of its unrealistic, fantastic character?

And this narrative problem would affect not only the notion of parousia, but also the very idea of the fulfillment of creation by God. As discussed in the fourth chapter, the eschatological statements concerning the whole of creation affirm the fulfillment of all things in God. The cosmic, catastrophic images associated with Jesus Christ’s return do not entail either the

destruction or the replacement of the material, physical reality of creation, but the overcoming of evil, the renovation of the whole of creation, and, ultimately, its salvation. All created things in their own particularities will reach their fulfillment in God by sharing in God's trinitarian, eternal life. But while eschatology holds the fulfillment and accomplishment of all created things, the cosmological data predicts the eventual collapse of the universe. There is a general consensus among current cosmological theories that the present process of expansion of the universe could end in either of two ways: either a reversal of the present expansion to a violent contraction to infinite density or an infinite expansion to end in the complete, formless dissipation of matter and energy. Do these scientific predictions contradict the Christian expectation of the future fulfillment of the whole of creation? And even if there are no contradictions between them, how will this end-event ever affect, let alone inspire, any believers if the event takes place when humanity has already disappeared? In short, how can the parousia be a theological notion for a personal and cosmic eschatological narrative? And how can this narrative, in tune with these criticisms, effectively be a source of hope?

In order to explore these challenges, this final chapter has two main sections. The first section will explore some of the questions that cosmological theories raise for eschatology, and the way that some theologians have addressed this issue during recent decades. While some affirm that these new cosmological theories make all eschatological statements obsolete because of the cosmology on which they are based on, others claim that the necessary dialogue between cosmology and eschatology, in particular from the perspective of the dual continuity/discontinuity of Jesus's resurrection, can coherently explain both the cosmological data and the Christian faith. This first section aims then to explore the end of the universe by means of a Christological approach in which Christ's resurrection appears as the theological lens for imagining the predicted end of the universe and its hoped-for fulfillment.

The second section will survey the challenges that contemporary eschatology faces from a narrative point of view. In a context where most of the classic imaginary of the Christian future seems to have lost its evocative force, it is necessary to retrieve the all-embracing Christian salvific narrative of Jesus Christ's return as the imaginative moment that visually illustrates the fulfillment of all things in God. From the perspective of the Christological symbol of parousia, this section will explore the necessity of coherently imagining the future because it affects the way of living within the present, of the importance of interpreting each personal Christian narrative within a master eschatological narrative that theologically explains these cosmological theories concerning the end of the universe, and of the role of sacraments as narrative "summaries" of the whole process of God's fulfillment of creation.

These two sections — the necessary coherence between eschatological claims and cosmological theories, and the retrieval of an eschatological narrative inspired by the notion of parousia — will be framed, as was done in the previous chapter, from the perspective of Paul's theology, in particular Col 1:15-20. This biblical text will offer a pertinent context for exploring the challenges noted above inasmuch as this hymn not only refers to the fulfillment of all things in Christological terms, but also narratively illustrates the entire cosmic story of salvation.

1. A Renewed Eschatology in Tune with Contemporary Cosmological Theories

Just as Rom 8:19-23 holds an important place in Christian theology for the way this text describes the eschatological relationship between humanity and creation, so Col 1:15-20 plays a considerable role in illustrating the cosmological scope of salvation and how the universe is ordered in accordance to a Christological rationale.

Broadly speaking, Col 1:15-20 is a hymn which depicts Christ as the image of God, as well as the origin, the sustainer, the goal, and the reconciler of all things. In this sense, the hymn

is a depiction of the cosmos as an ordered whole where Christ is the "rule" that governs it. For that reason, it is also an illustration of the whole cosmic process from its beginning in Christ to its final reconciliation through him. Col 1:15-20 covers then the entire cosmic process through the lens of a Christological perspective: all things have their origin for and through Christ in the absolute past (v. 16), they are kept together in Christ in the present (v. 17), and they are reconciled to Christ through his death — a reality that will be evident for all in the future (vv. 18-20). All things then are basically interconnected since they have a unique origin - the firstborn of all creation (v. 15) — and a unique goal — the firstborn from the dead (v. 18) — in whom God creates, dwells, and reconciles everything that exist.¹

In order to show the challenges these statements face because of contemporary cosmological theories, it is necessary first to understand how this hymn frames the fulfillment of creation within the context of Christ's role in it. This outline of Col 1:15-20 will be done, where relevant and appropriate, in comparing this hymn with the elements already highlighted from Rom 8:19-23. In fact, both passages share a narrative of creation which includes the story of the origin of creation, the illustration of a problem within it, and the expectation of a resolution of this present situation. This approach will be helpful in order to appreciate the way different theologians have addressed and reformulated these cosmological challenges to Christian eschatology during the last decades.

¹ The origin and actual structure of the hymn quoted in the letter to the Colossians — Col 1:15-20 — provokes debate among biblical scholars. There is no one opinion on the actual structure of the hymn and the possible "insertions" into it. Despite the differences among biblical scholars concerning this point, they mostly agree on three main ideas. First, the repetitive structure of the hymn suggests that it is liturgical material. Second, the hymn has two main sections separated by the vv. 17-18a. Finally, the background of the hymn seems to be the Jewish wisdom literature. For a useful explanation of this hymn, see Jerry Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 60–79. For a good analysis of the linguistic structure of the hymn, see N. T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20," *New Testament Studies* 36, no. 3 (1990): 446–51. And for the discussion of the Jewish-wisdom framework of this hymn, see Jean Noël Aletti, *Colossiens 1,15-20: Genre et Exégèse Du Texte* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

1.1. God Sustains All Things in Christ and Reconciled all of Them to Him (Col 1:17, 20)

An overview of the Letter to the Colossians shows that the letter illustrates “creation” by using all four concepts pointed out in the fourth chapter of this dissertation — “heaven and earth,” “all things,” “creation,” and “world.”² In the particular case of Col 1:15-20, the hymn clearly mentions the first three of these expressions.³ Despite the linguistic differences among these expressions and all the possible nuances that the latter could entail, it seems appropriate to affirm that these nine references to “creation” mostly designate it as the whole of things created by God. This assertion is supported by the cosmic framework of the entire hymn and the number of times the word “all things” is mentioned in these five verses. In addition, this claim is justified by the two descriptions that the hymn makes of the different created things. On the one hand, Col 1:16 asserts that what was created by God through Christ includes all things “in the heavens and upon the earth.” In a clear allusion to Gen 1, the hymn reminds us that every single reality owes its existence to God, as well as asserting that all things have been created in Christ. On the other hand, Col 1:16 uses the category “visible and invisible” to reinforce the all-embracing character of the hymn’s cosmology. All beings in all realms of reality depend on Christ. The introduction of four other elements — “thrones,” “dominions,” “rulers,” and powers — reinforces all that

² The Letter to the Colossians states that God is creator of all by affirming that God creates “heaven and earth” (Col 1:16; cf 1:20). The expression “all things” is used mostly for depicting the Christological aspect of creation. In fact, the Letter argues that the whole of reality created by God in Christ (Col 1:16, 17, 18, 20; “τὰ πάντα”), and all things will be reconciled in him (Col 3:1; “τὰ πάντα”). Besides this, the Letter also uses the expression “world” in order to describe the aspect of creation that antagonizes with God (Col 2:8, 20; “κόσμος”). Finally, the expression “cosmos” also appears in the Letter to illustrate the whole of creation (Col 1:15; “κτίσις”), as well as the aspects of creation that can be associated with the place which human beings and other species inhabit (Col 1:23; “κτίσις”).

³ The expression “τὰ πάντα” - all things – appears six times (Col 1:16, 17, 18, 20). The expression “οὐρανὸς καὶ γῆ” - heaven and earth - is used twice in this hymn to refer to “all created things” (Col 1:16, 20). The word “κτίσις” – all creation – is used once in this hymn (Col 1:15).

visible/invisible represents.⁴ For all these reasons, the “creation” described in Col 1:15-20 comprises the whole of reality. All the aspects of reality distinguished by the hymn expand the comprehension of what “all things” means. On this specific point, both Rm 8:19-23 and Col 1:15-20 coincide in the all-embracing scope of “creation.” Nothing that exists is outside this definition.

Another point to emphasize concerning the notion of “creation” in Col 1:15-20 is the way this hymn describes its current and future situation. Compared with Rm 8:19-23, this hymn shows at least two main differences. In Rm 8:19-23, while the origin of creation is not explicitly mentioned, the current situation of creation is clearly described as problematic — creation is subjected to futility and decay. In Col 1:15-20, the narrative is the opposite: while the origin of creation is explicitly described as made in and through Christ, its current situation is not explicitly stated as a problem that needs to be resolved. Even though Col 1:20 refers to a future “reconciliation” of all things in Christ — an expression that could imply the restoration of something that was broken — the hymn does not suggest that the reason for this reconciliation is a present conflict within creation. According to Col 1:15-20, the creation of all things and their reconciliation are linked not by some problem, but by Christ in whom they were created and will be reconciled.

This difference somehow leads to the second one. Besides the difference in the origin, these passages also differ in how they describe the resolution of this cosmic narrative. In Rm 8:19-23, the text ends by affirming that creation expects its *liberation* from futility and decay for

⁴ According to Jerry Sumney, these four terms within the hymn aim to stress to linked ideas. On the one hand, Christ has a superior place not only in relation to all social, political, and therefore visible structures on earth, but also to the numerous beings that, according to the ancient world, invisibly populated heaven. On the other hand, non-Christians believe in heavenly beings which are “more powerful” than Christ. This is why this hymn underlines that all things “visible and invisible” are subordinate to Christ inasmuch as all of them have been created through him. Sumney, *Colossians*, 67–68.

sharing the freedom of the children of God. In Col 1:15-20, the hymn concludes by describing the *reconciliation* of all things in the one by whom they are created, namely Christ. Thus while Rm 8:19-23 describes the current situation of creation in terms of groaning and hope of its liberation when Christ comes, Col 1:15-20 illustrates this current situation of creation as already ruled by Christ and awaiting the peacemaking of all created things in him. However, and despite these differences in the way the two passages describe the story of creation in both its origin and its resolution, it is important to point out that the basic shared narrative of these two texts reinforces the idea of the all-embracing scope of the expression “creation.” Both narratives go from the origin to the fulfillment of all things.⁵

This all-embracing meaning of “creation” in both texts further highlights another fundamental similarity between them, namely they focus the whole cosmic story in God through Christ. In Rm 8:20, it is God who subjected creation to futility and decay in hope. And it is God who will give both humanity and creation their freedom and glory. Rm 8:19-23 does not refer explicitly to Christ, but his participation in the liberation of creation can be supposed, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, inasmuch as the glorification of the body expected by believers will happen only when Christ comes again. In the case of Col 1:15-20, it is also God who has acted in Christ. But unlike the mostly theocentric approach of Rm 8:19-23, the hymn in Colossians is clearly Christocentric. In fact, Christ is directly or indirectly mentioned at least eleven times in the hymn, and the four citations of “God” are always in a close link with Jesus Christ as God’s image, God’s dwelling, and God’s reconciler.⁶ Thus this hymn highlights God as

⁵ For an illustrative comparison of these two narratives of creation, see David Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 118–21.

⁶ Even though the word “Jesus Christ” does not appear within the hymn, the masculine pronouns in the singular third person within the hymn (“he” and “him”) refer to God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13) eleven of the twelve times these pronouns are used. The only exception is the pronoun “himself” applied to God (Col 1:20). Besides this, the hymn refers to “God” three times.

creator from a strong Christological emphasis in which God creates all things in Christ, sustains them in Christ, and reconciles them through Christ. In every sense of the word, Jesus Christ is the center of Col 1:15-20.

Therefore, the way Col 1:15-20 illustrates Jesus Christ and how it conveys his relationship with creation is the central element of the hymn. The hymn starts by holding that the Son is the image of the invisible God (v. 15). By emphasizing the otherness of God with the word “invisible,” the text presents Christ as the manifestation of God to creation. The identification is affirmed when Col 1:15-20 affirms that all the fullness of God dwells in the one who reconciles all things through his death in the cross (v. 19). Thus the hymn argues that the Son who is before all things and Jesus who made peace by his blood are the same person. Christ is image and dwelling of God.⁷

Together with stressing the divinity of Jesus Christ by affirming that he is both co-eternal with God and Word made flesh, the hymn uses this same narrative dual structure to argue that Christ is the “firstborn” of all things and from all who died. In fact, the first part of the hymn affirms that Christ is the firstborn of all creation (v. 15). In direct allusion to the Wisdom of God in the Old Testament and the way it is a reflection of the active power and governance of God over creation,⁸ Christ appears, in the context of the hymn, as the person who incarnates all the characteristics that Wisdom performs. Christ has then a superior place in relation to all created things not only because he was before all things, but also because they were created for him.⁹

But the hymn applies the title “firstborn” both to the pre-incarnate Word of God (v. 15)

⁷ According to N. T. Wright, one of the key elements of the hymn is its ability to hold together two things which theology found very difficult: the complete humanness of Jesus, and his full identification with God. See Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 461.

⁸ Cf. Pr 8:22f; Si 24:1; Ws 7:17-26; 9:1f.

⁹ For an interesting overview of the influence of Wisdom literature on Col 1:15-20, see Anthony Dunne, “The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian ‘Christ-Hymn’: A Re-Evaluation of the Influence of Wisdom Traditions,” *Trinity Journal* 32, no. 1 (2011): 3–18.

and to the man Jesus now exalted (v. 18). This is why the second part of the hymn extends the Christological priority to all the dead in the present and the future inasmuch as Christ is the “firstborn” and the “beginning” of something new. By repeating the same expression “firstborn,” the hymn implies that the supremacy of Christ over all things is not only at the beginning of all things, but is confirmed to the whole of creation by his resurrection. The preeminence of Christ over creation is complete. This idea is reinforced by the way the statements concerning the superiority of Christ over all creation in the first part of the hymn (vv. 15-16) receive an ecclesiological and soteriological approach in the second part of it (vv. 18b-20). Christ has the first place in everything: in all creation and in the church. In other words, the risen Christ who is head of the body is the one in whom all things will be reconciled by God. Just as all things were created through Christ and have their existence in him, so they will be reconciled by God through Christ. He is, therefore, the “firstborn” and “beginning” of both God’s creation and God’s new creation.¹⁰

All of the above clearly reflects a Christological view of the whole cosmic narrative. Christ is the first of all in the past, in the present, and in the future. In fact, the expressions “for him,” (vv. 16a, 16b) and “through him,” (v. 16b) refer to the role of Christ in the moment of creation; the expression “in him” (vv. 17, 19) alludes mostly to his present role in creation holding all things together; and, the expressions “through him” (v. 20) and “to him” (v. 20) seem to indicate both the present and the future eschatological role of Christ. In fact, God wanted to find all fullness in him (vv. 19; 2:10) as the intended goal of creation, a reality that is already

¹⁰ This double use of the word “firstborn” highlights a point already mentioned: the equivalence that the hymn gives to the divinity and humanity of the Son. Thus Christ is both identified with the divine wisdom, and differentiated from the Father. See Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 459–63.

reached by his death and resurrection (v. 20).¹¹ For all these reasons, the hymn claims that Christ has been in a close relationship with creation from its beginning and will be so until its final reconciliation in him.

Before exploring how this theological claim might shed some light on the renewal of eschatological thought in tune with contemporary cosmologies, it is important to finish this section focused on Col 1:15-20 by briefly explaining how this relationship of close dependency of creation on Christ should be understood. According to Vicky Balabanski, the different cosmological backgrounds from which this relation between Christ and creation can be interpreted follow two main rationales, namely a cosmology of “distance” and a cosmology of “divine permeation.”¹² The first rationale analyzes the hymn through the eventual echoes of Platonic and gnostic cosmology within it. According to this perspective — cosmology of “distance” — the divine realm is strictly separated from creation, and therefore the connection between these two realities is possible by an intermediary who fills the gap. Thus Christ is the intermediary who plays the role of the Platonic Demiurge or gnostic Sophia-wisdom by participating in the creation of all things as God’s most high representative or personified characteristic — the Logos of God.¹³

The second rationale interprets the hymn through stoic cosmology. Instead of the necessity of an intermediary between divinity and creation, this cosmology asserts a rational agent that holds all things together from within. This perspective — cosmology of “divine permeation” — holds that Christ is the immanent divine rationale within creation who leads all

¹¹ Most of the prepositions used in Col 1:15-20 — especially “through” and “for” — also appear in Rom 11:36 and 1 Co 8:6 to speak of the relationship between Christ and creation.

¹² See Vicky Balabanski, “Critiquing Anthropological Cosmology: Retrieving a Stoic ‘Permeation Cosmology’ in Colossians 1:15-20,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 151–60.

¹³ For Balabanski, even Jewish wisdom literature reflects a “cosmology of distance” inasmuch as it presents Sophia-wisdom as the intermediary between God and creation. See Balabanski, 154–55.

things to their purpose willed by God. In this case, therefore, the Logos of God is not only the fundamental origin by which all things are created, but also its divine dynamic principle that actively and permanently acts through all and in all.

Between these two interpretations, Balabanski argues, the stoic categories explain better the relationship between Christ and creation within the hymn. This idea rests on the basis that the reconciliation of all things is found only in the one through whom and in whom they are created in such a way, namely the firstborn of all things and the dead. Rather than an intermediary between God and creation, Christ is the inner rationale of the whole of creation. And although Balabanski recognizes the stoic tendency to illustrate God and creation in pantheistic terms, she maintains that the stoic categories help better to understand the Christological synthesis made in Col 1:15-20 by means of Hellenistic thought and Christian experience.¹⁴ Despite the reasons for interpreting the hymn in one way or the other, the most important point here is the close relationship between Christ and all things. For the hymn, creation cannot be understood without Christ.

After this overview of Col 1:15-20, it is possible to argue that this Christological hymn sustains that all created things — without exception — are the subject of God's present holding and full reconciliation in Christ. By using a Christological perspective that goes from the pre-existent Son to the risen Christ and that includes everything from the whole of creation to the church as his body, this hymn embraces all things from their most fundamental origin to their total and remote future. The hymn, then, shows Christ not only as the temporal beginning and end of all things, but also creation's *raison d'être*, inner rationale, and total goal. The fullness of

¹⁴ Cf. Balabanski, 157. For Balabanski's ecological perspective of this hymn, see Vicky Balabanski, "Hellenistic Cosmology and the Letter to the Colossians: Towards an Ecological Hermeneutic," in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David Horrell et al. (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 94–107.

God dwells in Christ, and his fullness permeates all things moving them to their full reconciliation in him.

1.2. Theological Challenges of Cosmological Discoveries to Eschatological Statements

Col 1:15-20 summarizes some of the most important ideas of how Christian theology understands creation and the fundamental role of Christ within it. In tune with other biblical texts, especially with Rm 8:19-23, this hymn illustrates all things as part of an all-embracing narrative in which God is their origin and fulfillment. This narrative involving the whole of creation has Christ as its inner rationale. He is the cause and goal of creation because Christ is the one by whom the Spirit of the Creator creates, sustains, and reconciles all things. The problems arise, however, when these biblical statements, their assumptions, and especially some theology built on them are confronted by contemporary cosmological theories on the beginning, the existence, and the end of all things: the universe.

According to contemporary science, our solar system and our planet within it originated nine billion years after the Big Bang: origin of the universe.¹⁵ Cosmology and biology have shown that human beings are not only newcomers in the expansive universe, but also a consequence of this evolutive process. The first microorganisms originated on Earth only two billion years after the formation of the solar system, and the immediate ancestors of human beings — a wide range of related hominid species — emerged on Earth just five to six million years ago. The genus homo made its appearance in Africa only two million years ago, and homo

¹⁵ This theory holds that the origin of the expansion of the universe was a massive blast of pure energy from a hot, dense mass just a few millimeters wide. This explosion of energy was the factor which caused the entire universe — all matter and energy, even space and time themselves. Although scientists debate about how this event took place, there is almost unanimity among them that the entire cosmos had a beginning about 14 billion years ago, and its origin was a simultaneous event everywhere in space, which since then is continuously expanding.

sapiens between 200,000 to 100,000 years ago. In other words, human history is an extremely short period of time compared with the history of the universe. Human beings are part of a process that had been running without them for millions and millions of years.

And this process will end without them. Without including the concrete possibility of human beings destroying life on earth (by irreversible pollution and destruction of the environment) and the real possibility of destroying the whole planet (weapons of mass destruction), scientists present reliable descriptions of two main events that will make life on earth completely disappear, namely the impact of asteroids or comets on earth, and the changes in our sun. These two cosmic events, added to other possible events — such as a near explosion of a supernova, the proximity to a black hole, or the collapse of a nearby massive star — are situations that are certain to happen. Although they will occur on a time-scale in the order of more than 5 billion years, these singular events indicate that human beings certainly will not participate in an event which will happen on a time-scale of trillions of years and in which these singular events are only moments, namely the collapse of the universe itself.

According to cosmological data, this end could happen in two different ways. On the one hand, it is possible that the universe will act as big stars do. After their fuel ran out, some stars produced a huge amount of expansive energy. But afterward, these stars shrunk to a small and dense mass that in turn attracted more and more matter because of their force of gravity. This was the case of black holes. Thus the universe that is yet in increasing expansion because of the Big Bang, will reduce its speed and, in the opposite direction, it will collapse under its own weight in an event that scientists called "the Big Crunch."

On the other hand, it is also possible that the universe itself will continue expanding. If that is the case, the universe will either increase its speed of expansion indefinitely in a process of complete dissipation of matter, or decrease its speed, slowing the expansion, thus preventing

the breakdown of the universe but transforming it into both a colder and darker place. The compelling evidence in the past few years shows that the theory of a low-density, forever-expanding universe is more solid than the theory of a collapsing universe. But regardless of the promoters and detractors of each theory, there is a broad consensus that the universe, which had a beginning billions of years ago, will reach some kind of end.¹⁶

In light of these cosmological theories, the eschatological statements clearly come under scrutiny. If the universe will collapse and eventually end, how is it possible to hold that the whole of reality was not meant by God for either destruction or replacement, but for its transformation? How can theology justify that creation will become a “new heaven and a new earth” or that this present reality, not some other, will be reconciled in Christ at the end of time? And what will happen with the biblical expectation of God dwelling within creation with God’s people when cosmological theories state that this cosmic end will take place in millions of millions of years when humanity will be already extinct? In this context, can theology keep affirming that Christ will return for fulfilling all things? If the parousia is confined to planet Earth, this conflicts with Scriptures and Christian written tradition that explicitly affirm the cosmic scope of this event. But if Christ’s coming will coincide with the end of the universe, his “coming” will occur when life on Earth has already disappeared. The fundamental question could be formulated in the following terms: does contemporary cosmology render obsolete only the cosmology on which classic theology was based, and the eschatological statements that seem to have been drawn from it?

¹⁶ For reviews of the basics of physical cosmology, see Peter Coles and George Ellis, *Is the Universe Open or Closed?: The Density of Matter in the Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Fred Adams and Gregory Laughlin, “A Dying Universe: The Long-Term Fate and Evolution of Astrophysical Objects,” *Reviews of Modern Physics* 69, no. 2 (1997): 337–372; Stoeger, “Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe.”

In the effort to clarify the meaning of these questions, it is possible to recognize three main approaches to this issue. First, there are some scientists who claim a clear incongruence between eschatology and contemporary science. They have exposed not only the differences between the classic Christian cosmological presuppositions and those of contemporary physics, but also the incompatibility between these two domains, in particular concerning the role that classic Christian theology has usually given to human beings within creation and the expectation of the future fulfillment of all things. The ideas of the physicist Steven Weinberg and the biochemist Jacques Monod are usually used as examples of how these changes in the understanding of the universe render obsolete theological statements on the future of creation.¹⁷ And because biblical cosmology and its subsequent eschatology cannot be made intelligible in the context of contemporary physics, questions such as whether Jesus Christ will return do not make sense or are but empty speculation.

From the opposite perspective but sharing this same principle of non-compatibility between the knowledge of theology and science, some theologians propose the independence of the former from the latter. Setting aside the most fundamentalist, pietistic stances, it is possible to recognize theologians who argue that neither nature nor the human person can offer an adequate means of what the future of the whole of reality is. Hans Urs von Balthasar is a good example of

¹⁷ According to these two Nobel laureates, the prevalence of chance in the evolutionary process shows the pointless character of the universe. See Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (London: Collins, 1972). The biologist Richard Dawkins and the philosopher Daniel Dennett also argue that the scientific discoveries invalidate religious belief. According to them, the scientific model is the only source of knowledge, while religious statements cannot be experimentally tested and evaluated. See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1987); Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

this perspective.¹⁸ Moreover, eschatological statements need not necessarily be fully paralleled with contemporary cosmology because science can neither confirm nor deny the eschatological expectation of God's coming. Given that the subjects of knowledge of theology and science are totally different – for the former it is God, and for the latter it is the material universe – the same difference affects their questions, domains, and methods. Cosmological data, then, can be in disagreement with some theological truth without undermining the latter. In fact, there is no contradiction inasmuch as the biblical “end” and the cosmological “end” do not refer to the same event.¹⁹

These two perspectives that argue either the incongruence or incompatibility between science and theology have a point which is important to highlight: they claim their independence from each other. However, this difference between them cannot mean complete absence of common ground. On the scientific side, it is necessary to be aware of the empiricist prejudice that states that, while the scientific knowledge is *objective* and thereby *true*, any other knowledge coming from a different method is *subjective* and thus *false*. Moreover, the description that science makes of nature should not be confused with a prescription of the way nature will behave. In other words, it is important to be aware of the assumption that what science predicts

¹⁸ Balthasar argues, in a clear opposition to Teilhard's theology, that the cosmos cannot serve as the final meaning of revelation. In doing so, Balthasar thinks there is a danger of transforming a theology of the glory of God into some kind of “new naturalism.” Cf. Balthasar, *Only Love Is Credible*, 7–8; *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. IV (New York: Ignatius Press, 1989), 19; *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. V (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 450.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Keith Ward, “Cosmology and Religious Ideas About the End of the World,” in *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology From a Cosmic Perspective*, ed. George Ellis (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 244–45. According to Robert Russell, the reasons that some eschatological positions have for considering scientific data irrelevant are four. First, theology and science are two separate fields with different subjects of knowledge. Second, science is merely provisional inasmuch as its theories are continually changing. Third, the eschatological expectation primarily entails the vision of God and not the transformation of the cosmos. And fourth, the eschatological future basically refers to spiritual immortality and, only as a consequence, to the resurrection of the body. See Robert Russell, “Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Deadlock to Interaction,” *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 1002–3.

must come to pass.²⁰ On the theological side, although the truth of revelation does not need the confirmation of science, the latter provides a more precise knowledge of reality, and therefore allows theology to have a better interpretation of God's revelation. Based on the theological principle that the reality created by God is one, coherent, and understandable, the contribution of science to theology in the depiction of reality is absolutely necessary. Even though the different fields of knowledge have also different ways and methods of describing reality, they cannot be completely incoherent from a theological point of view inasmuch as they portray God's creation.

Along with this approach that claims incongruence between eschatology and contemporary science, there are scientists and theologians who have tried to integrate these two fields. On the scientific side, it is possible to highlight the works of the physicists Paul Davies, Freeman Dyson, and Frank Tipler, all of them gathered under the term of "physical eschatology."²¹ According to Davies, the second law of thermodynamics and its implications make pointless the ascending progression of the universe from least developed structures to more developed ones.²² This does not mean, in Davies' view, that humanity is condemned to disappear. In this cosmic scenario which will become more and more hostile to human beings, their way of surviving is the storage of human information on the part of the descendants of human beings who will be constituted by "artificial intelligence."²³ Dyson assumes a similar stance. He argues that the survival of life is consistent with the physical laws and the future situation of the universe because life does not depend on the *matter* it informs, but on the

²⁰ See Robert Russell, "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction," in *What God Knows: Time and the Question of Divine Knowledge*, ed. Harry Poe and Stanley Mattson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 119; "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Deadlock to Interaction," 1007.

²¹ The term "physical eschatology" was coined by Dyson to illustrate the attempt of making eschatology from the cosmological data. See Freeman Dyson, "Time Without End: Physics and Biology in an Open Universe," *Review of Modern Physics* 51, no. 3 (1979): 447–60.

²² See Paul Davies, *The Last Three Minutes: Conjectures About the Ultimate Fate of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 13.

²³ See Davies, 99; *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 206.

structure it adopts.²⁴ Life is information processing, and therefore it is capable to evolve toward any material structure that allows it durability.²⁵ Finally, Tipler argues that the “anthropic principle” by which the universe progresses toward the existence of life can be extrapolated from the origin of reality to its future in a theological sense.²⁶ In other words, the evolutionary process itself, guided by the anthropic principle, shows that the increasing complexity within the universe is not only the origin of life, but also its goal. Thus Tipler asserts, by using Teilhardian terminology, that life once appeared will continue until arriving to its Omega Point.²⁷ Although carbon-based life will disappear because of the second law of thermodynamics, other ways of living could continue insofar as they can find another way of codifying information.

Some theologians have also tried to integrate contemporary cosmology into their eschatological reflection. These efforts have been done in two different directions. On the one hand, some argue that, facing the cosmological data, the only solution is the “adjustment” of the scope of the eschatological sentences to a human scale. In other words, the only expectations consistent with the contemporary cosmological theories are interpersonal eschatologies focused on the relationship between the believer with God within the present, and local eschatologies concerned on building communities able to live, in tune with the environment, in accordance to God’s will.²⁸ This claim would be justified not only by the cosmological theories and the

²⁴ See Freeman Dyson, “Life in the Universe: Is Life Digital or Analogue?,” in *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology From a Cosmic Perspective*, ed. George Ellis (Randor: Templeton Foundation Press., 2002), 140–41.

²⁵ See Dyson, “Time Without End: Physics and Biology in an Open Universe,” 453; *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

²⁶ See Frank Tipler and John Barrow, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁷ See Frank Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (New York: Anchor, 1997), 181.

²⁸ Karl Peters names these two types of eschatologies as “realized interpersonal eschatology” and “local, future societal or planetary eschatology.” See Karl Peters, “Eschatology in Light of Contemporary Science,” an unpublished paper presented to the Theology and Science Group of the American Academy of Religion (1988) cited by Mark Worthing, *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 176. According to Worthing, Peters understands “realized interpersonal eschatology” as small communities in which evil

impossibility of affirming the fulfillment of the whole of creation, but also by an interpretation of biblical eschatology primarily through the lens of the relationship between God and this planet and its inhabitants.

On the other hand, there are theologians who try to directly respond to the challenge presented by cosmology. Because God will fulfill the whole of reality, the eschatological reflection cannot avoid the cosmic scope. Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are good examples of this. Pannenberg states the indispensable mutual influence between science and theology.²⁹ He holds that, in a scientific context in which no theory can fully grasp reality, the idea of God is the most adequate explanation for understanding the whole of finite reality. But if this reflection on God as the source, sustainer, and goal of reality is not influenced by science and the implications of the future of the universe, eschatology risks, in Pannenberg's view, becoming irrelevant.³⁰ Moltmann also claims the necessary dialogue between science and theology of creation. Assuming ideas from evolutionary theory, he describes creation as a tripartite process — “original creation,” “continuous creation,” and “new creation” — which has cosmic dimensions and is eschatologically oriented.³¹ In other words, creation as a whole is a cosmic process that is constantly created and renewed by God. Eschatology must be guided by this theocentric principle. It is important to note, however, that Moltmann affirms that this principle risks remaining abstract if it is not specified in Jesus Christ as the paradigm of the new

is overcome within themselves and which serve as part of the “future societal and planetary community” in which the expected eschatological goal is realized, namely the reduction of evil to a minimum. See Worthing, 176–77.

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*, ed. Ted Peters (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

³⁰ For Pannenberg's theological dialogue with contemporary sciences, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Theological Questions to Scientists,” in *The Sciences and Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Arthur Peacocke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 3–16.

³¹ For the tripartite concept of creation, see Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 121. For the eschatological orientation of creation, see Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 209–10.

creation of all things. Thus Moltmann's all-embracing eschatology, which includes the personal, historical, and cosmic eschatology, has Christ — in particular his resurrection — as the key for interpreting the hope in God's fulfillment of creation. Because God creates all things and God will restore them in Christ, eschatology must include a reflection on the future of the entire cosmos in the light of the event on which the eschatological hope is based, namely Christ's resurrection.³²

Although the efforts of these scientist and theologians to integrate cosmological data are recognized, they are also criticized. On the side of "physical eschatology," the criticisms can be summarized in five points: first, the almost complete absence of references to eschatological statements; second, the exaggerated extrapolation of scientific data; third, the reduction of life to a simple processing of information; fourth, the anthropological dualism that reduces human bodies to a structure capable of supporting life which can be replaced by a different one; and finally, the confusion between the notion of "eternal life" — as it means living forever — with the Christian hope in the "fulfilment of life."³³ On the side of theologians, the criticisms point in two directions. First, for those who reduce the eschatological reflection to a personal and social scope, it is necessary to keep in mind all that has been discussed on the fulfillment of the whole of creation from the biblical and theological perspective. Moreover, it is inconsistent to affirm

³² Cf. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 132.

³³ For the strength and weakness of Tipler's ideas, see Fred Hallberg, "Barrow and Tipler's Anthropic Cosmological Principle," *Zygon* 23 (1988): 139–57; Willem Drees, "Eschatology and the Cosmic Future," in *Beyond the Big Bang: Quantum Cosmologies and God* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1990), 117–54. For direct criticisms of "physical eschatology," see John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction With the World* (Boston, MA: New Science Library, 1989), 96; *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 116–17; Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 151–52; Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming - Natural, Divine, and Human*, 345; Robert Russell, *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega: The Creative Mutual Interaction of Theology and Science* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 571; Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 132–36; Mark Worthing, "Can God Survive the Consummation of the Universe?," in *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 160–98.

the fulfillment of the “Earth” within a context in which the same cannot be affirmed of the universe. If sciences are correct and theology cannot offer an intelligible response, all the “future-oriented, this-worldly oriented eschatologies” of most contemporary theologians are in serious difficulties.³⁴ And second, for those theologians who assume the challenges of cosmological theories, it is important to be aware of the use they give to the word “creation.” Maybe by the need to be contextual, the meaning of the word “creation” equivocally and interchangeably moves from all things to planet Earth. In other words, although these theologians claim that their eschatological thought is framed within the cosmic context, their statements about the fulfillment of the whole of creation tend to be bounded to the planet Earth and what is happening there.³⁵ Another criticism asks whether these eschatological positions respond more to philosophical concerns than biblical or scientific insights. However, the main criticism against most of these theologians focuses on their inadequate, arbitrary, and inaccurate use of scientific knowledge — if not a clear lack of it.³⁶ In the theological effort to be consistent with both cosmological theories and the goodness of creation, some fundamental physical laws are not taken seriously enough — for instance, the second law of thermodynamics, and therefore the real possibility that the “good creation” could end in nothingness.³⁷

³⁴ This expression in double quotes is taken from Kathryn Tanner, “Eschatology without a Future?,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 222. For other theologians who expressly recognize the difficulties that contemporary cosmologies pose to eschatological reflection, see, for instance, John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 351–62; Pannenberg, “Theological Questions to Scientists,” 12, 14–15; Peacocke, *Paths From Science to God: The End of All Our Exploring*, 48, 135.

³⁵ For a criticism of Moltmann’s thought on this particular point, see Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, 29–30.

³⁶ For reservations to Pannenberg scientific approach, see Wilkinson, 38. And for reservations to Moltmann’s use of cosmological data, see Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecology in Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 255; Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, 30, 37.

³⁷ LeRon Shults, Mark Worthing, and Frank Tipler claim, with different nuances, that the main problem between eschatological thought and cosmological discoveries lies in the lack of scientific knowledge on the part of theologians. Worthing, for instance, argues that while scientific theories concerning the origin of the universe have a role to play in theologies of creation, these same theories have played a minimum role in the renovation of eschatological statements because of the poor understanding of these theories by systematic theologians. See LeRon Shults,

The third approach to the interaction between eschatology and contemporary cosmology addresses the necessary dialogue between these two domains. As mentioned in the first chapter, some theologians — most of whom came from the scientific domain to theological reflection — share the conviction that Christian theology must rethink some of its fundamental truth in dialogue with sciences and the way they describe reality. The reflections of John Polkinghorne and Robert Russell are a good example of this approach. With respect to eschatology, and unlike “physical eschatology,” they represent a group of theologians who want to do their reflections based on a prior commitment to theological statements.³⁸

One of the principles on which Polkinghorne bases his argument is the unity of reality. According to him, theology must affirm a unity of truth since creation has its exclusive origin in God. Thus science and theology point to this single reality, and therefore their descriptions of it cannot be in complete disharmony. Because both are giving an account of the same reality, they must be capable of fruitful interaction in their efforts to give an intelligible account of reality.³⁹ This is why, in Polkinghorne’s view, any claim referring to an apparent incompatibility between cosmological theories of the futility of the universe and eschatological expectation of the fulfillment of creation should not be the option of one of the stances over the other. Although the eschatological hope is based on God’s faithfulness to creation and not on the predictions of sciences, a credible eschatology must be grounded on the duality continuity/discontinuity that

Christology and Science (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 144, 149; Worthing, *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics*, 171; Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*, xiii. On this point, Daniel Hardy holds that the non-engagement of theologians with eschatology is the reason scientists have turned to this issues. See Hardy, “Creation and Eschatology,” 122, 122.

³⁸ In Robert Russell’s words, what is necessary is “the reconstruction of eschatology in light of science but based on its theological and biblical resources.” See Russell, “Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction,” 119. This same idea is highlighted by Ian Barbour. According to him, the difference between a “natural theology” and a “theology of nature” lies in their reference to the religious traditions. In the case of the “theology of nature,” the reference to these traditions is not only explicit, but also normative. See Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (London: SCM, 1998), 98–101.

³⁹ Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians*, 4, 12; *The God of Hope*, xxiii.

these two disciplines offer. While science can clarify the elements of continuity required for giving support to any reasonable eschatology, theology can give the elements of discontinuity between the present reality and its future fulfillment in God.⁴⁰ As mentioned above, the reason for expecting the fulfillment of creation is God's faithfulness to creation. If the whole of reality is loved by God and guided by God's care since its creation, it must have a destiny beyond its death.⁴¹ The only ground of such a hope is Jesus Christ's resurrection. His resurrection from the dead is a way of imagining the continuity of the universe within its most radical discontinuity, namely its end.⁴² This is why Polkinghorne holds that the future of the universe will not be *ex nihilo*, but *ex vetere* — the transformation of the universe created by God *ex nihilo*.⁴³ As Jesus Christ bears the signs of the dead in his body, the new creation will be the transformation of the universe from what it is now.

Robert Russell is also engaged in the dialogue between cosmological theories and eschatological expectations. He argues that systematic theology must assume the challenge of science's description of the universe if it wants to keep affirming the biblical hope in the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God.⁴⁴ Russell recognizes that this dialogue is not easy for theology especially in light of the predictions of the eventual collapse of the universe. If the scientific presuppositions on which contemporary cosmologies are based are right, they show the contingency of the universe, and therefore the pointless character of the eschatological

⁴⁰ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 12; "Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 29–30.

⁴¹ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 164; *The God of Hope*, 148.

⁴² Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 162; *The God of Hope*, 113, 143.

⁴³ Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality*, 102–3; *The Faith of a Physicist*, 167; "The End of the World and the Ends of God," 30.

⁴⁴ Russell, "Eschatology and Physical Cosmology"; "Bodily Resurrection"; "Sin, Salvation, and Scientific Cosmology: Is Christian Eschatology Credible Today?," in *Sin and Salvation*, ed. Duncan Reid and Mark Worthing (Hindmarsh, Australia: ATF Press, 2003), 130–54.

expectations. But if this equation is inverted — i.e. the hope on which eschatological expectations are based is right — the, Russell argues, it is possible to hold that the universe and its inner laws can be the subject of transformation in the future. In Russell's view, this claim can be scientific and theologically supported: from the scientific perspective, there are theories that call into question the ontological deterministic view of physical and biological laws; from the theological perspective, there is a divine action that actually shows God's renewing action within creation, namely Jesus Christ's resurrection.⁴⁵ This divine action, however, does not mean God's interventionism in creation, as if the resurrection were an extraordinary event that breaks the law that God-self gave to God's creation.⁴⁶ Russell holds that it is the other way around: the resurrection shows that God made the universe with the inner capability of being fulfilled.⁴⁷ In other words, if God is both the origin and goal of all things, God creates a universe with preconditions that make it transformable.⁴⁸ And because the resurrection is the model for imagining the future of the universe, the capability for fulfillment of the universe is precisely shown by referring to its "death" as a necessary moment for its final transformation.

Just like the other two perspectives, these theological reflections have criticisms.⁴⁹

However, the most important point to make here is that, in the dialogue between eschatology and

⁴⁵ Russell, "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction," 101.

⁴⁶ According to Russell, God's actions are hidden from science, because God is non-interventionist. In other words, God does not intervene in reality suspending the laws that God-self gave to creation. God acts within and through the natural processes, and the future transformation of the universe by God is a process that is already at work in nature. Cf. Russell, 117.

⁴⁷ Russell, "Bodily Resurrection," 21; "Eschatology and Physical Cosmology," 295.

⁴⁸ Russell, "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Deadlock to Interaction," 1007.

⁴⁹ Polkinghorne is criticized, for instance, for claiming that both science and theology are critical-realist disciplines. For an overview of this "critical realism" as an epistemological method for theology, see Andreas Losch, "Critical Realism: A Sustainable Bridge between Science and Religion," *Theology and Science* 8, no. 4 (2011): 393–416. For a criticism of Polkinghorne's position on this point, see Willem Drees, "Gaps for God," in *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert Russell, Nancy Murphy, and Arthur Peacocke (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 2017), 223–37. Russell is criticized for proposing that both science and theology are based on comparable metaphysical assumptions. Thus science and theology can question each other with the same level of validity. For a critical remark of Russell's proposition, see Klaus Nürnberger, "Eschatology and Entropy: An Alternative to Robert John Russell's Proposal," *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 970–96.

cosmological theories, this third approach assumes most of the elements that challenge the previous two. According to this perspective, an eschatological thought in tune with contemporary cosmology should be built by a dialogue that, under the assumption that reality created by God is a coherent unity, recognizes the contribution of science for a better understanding of revelation, and therefore for giving intelligible reasons for the hope in God's fulfillment of the whole of the universe. This dialogue became particularly relevant because it directly addresses one of the most challenging claims of contemporary cosmologies, namely the eventual collapse of the universe. It is precisely confronted with this scenario that this perspective offers Christ's resurrection as the model for imagining the end of the universe in terms of fulfillment. As it will be demonstrated later, this Christological approach not only fits with the cosmic narrative of Col 1:15-20, but also with the idea that the parousia is a key element for a renewed eschatological narrative.

1.3. Resurrection as Image for Conveying the Fulfillment of the Universe by God

As previously stated, Col 1:15-20 plays an important role in illustrating the cosmic scope of salvation and how the whole of creation is ordered to Christ. All things have a unique origin and goal in the one who is God's image, God's dwelling, and God's reconciler. Christ is the center of this cosmic narrative in which God creates all things in Christ, sustains them in Christ, and reconciles them through Christ.

In this cosmic and Christological context, the hymn makes reference to the resurrection as a key moment of this all-embracing narrative. In fact, the text specifies that the primacy of Christ goes from the creation of all things as the pre-incarnate Word — the firstborn of creation — to their reconciliation as the risen Lord — the firstborn of the dead. The importance of his resurrection within this hymn is stressed when the noun “firstborn” applied to Christ in Col 1:18

is coupled with two other expressions present in this verse — “he is the beginning” and he has “the first place in everything” — and with an explicit reference to Christ’s death on the cross at the end of the hymn — “by making peace through the blood of his cross.” The risen Christ is the head of the church and the one through whom God was pleased to reconcile all things.

It is not surprising, then, that most theologians who engage in the implications of contemporary cosmologies for eschatology make appeal to this text, in particular to Christ’s resurrection as a model for imagining the fulfillment of the whole universe. Although Col 1:15-20 refers to the risen Christ specifically as the “firstborn of the dead” (v. 18), it is possible to extend the consequences of his resurrection to the whole of creation. In other words, because the hymn has Christ as the rationale of a narrative which goes from the creation to the reconciliation of all things, his resurrection is an event that affects the entire cosmos – and not only those associated with Christ’s death through baptism.⁵⁰ Jesus Christ is the beginning of both creation (v. 15) and new creation (v. 20). He has the first place in everything. In the context of this hymn, therefore, it is possible to affirm that the resurrection confirms Christ’s primacy over the living and the dead, but specially over all things “whether on earth or in heaven” (v. 20).

In order to understand how Christ’s resurrection can be a guiding principle for depicting the fulfillment of the whole universe in the context of contemporary cosmology, the eschatological thoughts of Moltmann, Polkinghorne, and Russell are good examples. It is true that, among them, Moltmann is criticized for his apparent lack of rigor in using both the term “creation” and scientific data. However, Moltmann is very explicit, as Polkinghorne and Russell also are, about the theological necessity of reflecting on the end of the universe and the hope in

⁵⁰ The Letters of the New Testament make explicit reference to the participation of believers in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism - for instance, Rm 6:3-8; Col 2:12. In the case of creation, however, this link is inferred. As mentioned on several occasions, Christ’s resurrection is the basis for hoping in the fulfillment not only of human beings, but also of all things created by God.

its fulfillment based on a robust theology of creation in which Christ's resurrection shows that the destiny of the universe is not its annihilation but its fulfillment.

Before addressing this topic, it is important to illustrate some of the principles on which these theologians base their claims. First of all, they agree that theological reflection does not get its eschatological statements from science data, but from God.⁵¹ Moltmann is particularly clear on this point. He argues that eschatology has a different epistemological starting point than contemporary science. The Christian future is not based on the observation of the laws of the universe, but on the experience of God revealed in Christ. In this sense, even though science can anticipate what will happen with the universe in the future by the study of nature's laws, the eschatological expectation in the fulfillment of creation is rooted in God's promise. This does not mean, however, that eschatological reflection should not consider scientific data. If theology wants to keep affirming both the coherence and the intelligibility of God's creation, it is necessary to hold some kind of correspondence among the different ways to understand reality, and therefore to describe its eventual end.

In this necessary relationship between theology and science, these theologians – specially Polkinghorne and Russell think that the most important challenge for Christian hope is the cosmological theories concerning the collapse of the universe. The eventual disappearance of all things questions the eschatological expectations on their fulfillment by God. Even if theology has its autonomy, it cannot affirm things without taking into account the worst scenarios of cosmological theories — for instance, that the cosmos is not capable of sustaining a situation of constant production of life. Far from the triumphalism of Teilhard,⁵² these theologians agree that

⁵¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Cosmos and Theosis: Eschatological Perspectives on the Future of the Universe," in *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology from a Cosmic Perspective*, ed. George Ellis (Randor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press., 2002), 250; Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 12, 29.

⁵² Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 162 f; *The God of Hope*, 12.

the theological statements concerning the hope in the fulfillment of creation must be responsive to the scientific prediction of cosmic futility.⁵³ If there is no theological response to this problem, the eschatological hope is in vain.

It is important to note, however, that it is precisely at this point that these theologians — in particular Polkinghorne and Russell — reverse the problematic. From the cosmological point of view, the ongoing cosmic process does not have an explanation for its own necessity. The contingency of this process, and therefore the eventual absurdity of both human beings and the universe, calls into question God's purpose for creation.⁵⁴ But if the theological conviction of God's faithfulness with creation is assumed as the starting point of the reflection and not as something to verify by science, it is the futility and non-directionality of the universe that is called into question. Russell, for instance, bases his reflection on this principle. He holds that if scientists are right in their theories, the eschatological hope is futile. But if Christian hope is right, the scientific theories understood as predictions based on unchangeable laws could be wrong.⁵⁵ The hope in God's fulfillment of creation questions the paradigm of science by which the future can be predicted as a consequence of the past.⁵⁶ In Russell's view, Christian hope reverses this paradigm: the future, and not the past, can be the hermeneutical key of reality.

This is why these three theologians hold their eschatological position from a strong theology of creation. Moltmann affirms, for instance, that the unity and consistency of God's relationship to creation requires the new creation where all will be integrated, nothing will be lost, and all will be restored.⁵⁷ Because God creates all things inter-connected with one another,

⁵³ Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology*, 118.

⁵⁴ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 163; Robert Russell, "Cosmology from Alpha to Omega," *Zygon* 29, no. 4 (1994): 563.

⁵⁵ Russell, "Eschatology and Physical Cosmology," 289; Russell, "Bodily Resurrection," 18.

⁵⁶ Russell, "Bodily Resurrection," 19.

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 255, 269–70.

their fulfillment is also inter-connected, and therefore all-embracing: the soul cannot be separated from the body, the individual from the community, and the human history from the whole of the universe.⁵⁸ As Moltmann likes to quote, at the end of time, the Creator will be all in all (1 Co 15:28). In the case of Polkinghorne, he states that the new creation is the second stage of God's plan for creation: first, creation is separated from God with the capacity of self-construction in which death is the price of this process; and second, a new creation that means integration of all things into divine life where death will not exist anymore– the fulfillment of creation or *theosis*.⁵⁹ Thus the possibility of new creation is already included at the very moment of creation. If God creates all things with love, Polkinghorne argues, they must have a destiny beyond their death.⁶⁰ Because God keeps God's promise, the universe must be redeemed from transience and decay.⁶¹ Finally, Russell affirms that, if theology is faithful to the biblical revelation, the new creation cannot be reduced to a new earth.⁶² God will fulfill all things which, in the context of contemporary cosmologies, means the whole universe. This fulfillment of creation is possible, in Russell's view, because God creates all things with a capability of being transformed by God. This aspect of creation, however, is not something that creation can perform by itself, as if the new creation could be the result of the inner process of reality. Rather, it is God who fulfills what God creates with the capability of transformation. For these three theologians, therefore, the hope in new creation is grounded in God as Creator of all things. Facing the incapacity of the cosmic process itself to survive its own collapse, only God can do something that can rescue God's creation from its physical end.⁶³

⁵⁸ Cf. Moltmann, 260.

⁵⁹ Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology*, 118.

⁶⁰ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 148; *The Faith of a Physicist*, 164.

⁶¹ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 148.

⁶² Cf. Russell, "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction," 96.

⁶³ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 2; *Science and Theology*, 114.

It is precisely in this context that Christ's resurrection is proposed by these three theologians as the starting point and anticipation of the fulfillment of the universe.⁶⁴ Simply put, just as the Father did not abandon the Son to death by raising him on the third day, so the Creator will not abandon creation to annihilation by transforming it into a new creation at the end of time. According to these theologians, Christ's resurrection is the paradigm for the expectation on the fulfillment of the universe for at least two main reasons. First, Christ's resurrection shows that the eschatological hope entails elements of continuity and discontinuity between the present time and the eschatological future, especially with regard to the physical aspect of creation. As stated in the second chapter, this duality has been the theological basis for defending, since the time of the Fathers of the church, the continuity and discontinuity of the present reality in the new creation, in general, and the continuity and discontinuity of the bodily reality of human beings in this new creation, in particular. It is within this theological tradition that these three theologians claim that Christ's resurrection is the image of hope in a continuity and discontinuity between the present universe and its future fulfillment in God. According to Polkinghorne, this balance between continuity and discontinuity analogical to Christ resurrection is necessary because, without discontinuity, the new creation will be the result of the evolutionary process, and therefore a repetition of the present one; and without continuity, the new creation will be a "second creation" disconnected from the present one.⁶⁵

Second, Christ's resurrection not only allows us to hope in the fulfillment of the universe, but also reminds us that this fulfillment is realized after a real, concrete, and physical end. In other words, the resurrection takes seriously the prediction of the end of the universe. According

⁶⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 241, 258; *The Coming of God*, xi; Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 162–63; *Science and Theology*, 115; *The God of Hope*, 113–23; Russell, "Cosmology from Alpha to Omega," 572.

⁶⁵ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, xxiii.

to Russell, the resurrection is *the* response to the question whether Christian eschatology is consistent with the cosmological scenarios of the end of the universe.⁶⁶ Confronted with the worst scenarios of the cosmological theories,⁶⁷ the bodily resurrection of Christ after his death on the cross is the model for imagining that, even after the end of the universe, it will be transformed by God.⁶⁸ In the case of Polkinghorne, he affirms that the distinction between the present creation and the new one must be as clear as the difference between the death and the resurrection of the dead.⁶⁹ Only the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for hoping that, beyond personal death and cosmic collapse, there is life in God.⁷⁰

It is precisely these two principles that lead these theologians to their understanding of the interplay between continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, they claim a radical discontinuity within a fundamental continuity of the new creation. From this perspective, they mostly agree that while science can cast some light concerning the elements of continuity, the most important role of theology is to show those of discontinuity.⁷¹ Thus a credible eschatology in tune with cosmology involves both continuity and discontinuity, in which theology must say what God will do with creation at the end of time, and science must clarify what should be the necessary degree of continuity that this transformation requires. Russell states that, confronted with the predictions of cosmology, eschatological reflection must highlight the elements of discontinuity of the fulfillment of creation — and not the elements of continuity as it has been doing in the dialogue with science.⁷² In fact, Russell argues that although continuity points out the goodness of creation, it is discontinuity which breaks the prevailing naturalist vision by

⁶⁶ Russell, “Bodily Resurrection,” 6.

⁶⁷ Russell, 15; Russell, “Eschatology and Physical Cosmology,” 267.

⁶⁸ Russell, “Bodily Resurrection,” 9.

⁶⁹ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 143.

⁷⁰ Polkinghorne, 113.

⁷¹ Polkinghorne, 12; Russell, “Eschatology and Physical Cosmology,” 265.

⁷² Russell, “Eschatology and Physical Cosmology,” 295.

highlighting what must be healed and recapitulated.⁷³ For all these reasons, these theologians hold that eschatological thought must strongly affirm the elements of continuity, but in the context of the most radical discontinuity.

This is why, on the other hand, they agree that the elements of continuity in the fulfillment of the new creation are neither the restoration of an original state nor the re-creation *ex nihilo* of all things. Moltmann, for instance, holds that new creation actually entails the “passing away of the form of this world,” understanding this as the aspect of creation affected by sin. However, he argues that the eschatological transformation of creation cannot mean some kind of “restitution” of its original conditions. If Christ’s resurrection from the dead is the model for the fulfillment of all things, the transformation of creation will be the transformation of this original conditions in something that exceeds them.⁷⁴ Moreover, this transformation of reality cannot be only “restorative” inasmuch as it takes into account what has happened within the history of creation gathering up, healing, and transfiguring all things. In the case of Polkinghorne and Russell, they assert that the elements of continuity of the new creation must be present within the context of the discontinuity as in Christ’s resurrection. Thus, although the fulfillment of the whole of the universe will be something new, it is not a “second creation” or something without connection with the current evolutionary process. Rather than a creation *ex nihilo*, the new creation will be the transformation *ex vetere* of the creation *ex nihilo* which is subject of decay and death.⁷⁵

Getting back to the foundation of the eschatological hope, these theologians assert that

⁷³ Russell, 295; Russell, “Bodily Resurrection,” 22.

⁷⁴ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 271–72.

⁷⁵ Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality*, 102–3; *The Faith of a Physicist*, 167; “The End of the World and the Ends of God,” 30; Russell, “Bodily Resurrection,” 22; “Eschatology and Physical Cosmology,” 283; “Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Deadlock to Interaction,” 1011. This expression “*ex vetere*” is also used by Moltmann. See Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 27.

the expectation of the fulfillment of creation is not based on scientific extrapolation of the past or the present, but on God's faithfulness with creation paradigmatically revealed in Christ's resurrection from the dead.⁷⁶ If the resurrection is the paradigm for the new creation, this means that eschatology is based on something beyond what science can investigate or prove. Christian hope is grounded then in God who transcends the limits of any natural expectation. This does not mean, however, that the fulfillment of all things will be a divine act that comes from "outside" the natural law that the same Creator gave to God's creation. Because God not only sustains creation in being, but is also actively present within creation through the natural processes, the future transformation of the universe by God is not something restricted to the future nor coming from outside creation. Rather, it is a process that is already at work in nature inasmuch as the Creator of all things, who is also their Redeemer, creates them with this capability of being fulfilled.⁷⁷ The new creation of all things is a process which, always present within creation as its inner rationale, the resurrection of Christ has set going.⁷⁸

After this overview of the way these theologians understand the mutual interpretative relationship between eschatology and science through the lens of Christology, it is important to point out that they do not explicitly refer to the notion of parousia.⁷⁹ If the eschatological hope is

⁷⁶ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 65.

⁷⁷ Russell, "Bodily Resurrection," 21; "Eschatology and Physical Cosmology," 265; "Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction," 117.

⁷⁸ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 241.

⁷⁹ LeRon Shults consecrates an entire chapter of his book *Christology and Science* to illustrate how the notion of parousia has been understood through the lens of physical cosmology in the last century. He argues that these theologians – in particular Robert Russell – directly address the parousia in their dialogue with contemporary science. Despite this claim, the overview is not very convincing. In fact, his examination of these theologians mainly focuses on the relationship between eschatology and science, and how this relationship gives light for understanding the fulfillment of the whole of creation. See Shults, *Christology and Science*, 109–49. Maybe Shults' best analysis of the notion of parousia within the contemporary scientific context is the work of Thomas Torrance. According to this theologian, many of the conceptual problems with the parousia are rooted in the classic, static model of space and time. Instead of coming from "above" and "in" time, the parousia should be understood as a moment of the whole of Christ's revelation by which he redeems the order of space-time, thus disclosing to humanity a new, fulfilling way of being in relationship to God. See Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005).

based on God's faithfulness with creation revealed in Christ's resurrection, and therefore in God's fulfilment of God's promises, it seems reasonable to extend this rationale to the promise which, closely associated with Christ's resurrection, will be fulfilled at the end of time, namely that the risen Lord will come again in glory. It is true that these theologians highlight the duality continuity/discontinuity of Christ's resurrection as the basis for hoping in the fulfillment of creation by affirming its end. But just as the resurrection depicts the continuity/discontinuity of matter, the parousia could be used for affirming this same duality: the discontinuity of the fulfillment of all things when Christ comes is in continuity with his current presence within creation as the risen Lord. Thus Christ's return itself is not in a discontinuous relationship with creation, as if Christ should re-enter a reality which he left when he ascended after the resurrection. The continuity of the parousia is determined, using the terminology of Col 1:15-20, not only by the coming of the same Christ who rose from the dead, but also by the current presence of Christ in a universe that is created through him and will be reconciled through him in the Holy Spirit.

This idea is very clear in Rahner's reflection. In fact, he highlights the theological importance of the current presence of the risen Christ within creation and therefore the value of his glorified humanity for Christian hope in the fulfillment of all things. Because Christ has never left creation, the parousia is not "another" coming. Rather, it is the full manifestation of the transformation of all things in accordance with Christ. His coming, then, is neither past nor future, but the present which waits for its full transfiguration.⁸⁰ This theological point will be helpful in the final section of this chapter when affirming the value of the parousia for the

⁸⁰ See Karl Rahner, "God Who Is to Come," in *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 149–56; "He Will Come Again"; "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for Our Relationship with God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. III (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967), 35–46.

eschatological narrative. If the glorified humanity of Christ has eternal value, his coming cannot be detached from two intertwined things: on the one hand, the parousia must be a physical reality, regardless of the way this theological statement should be understood; and, on the other hand, this real coming must be illustrated in similar terms as the current presence of Christ in creation. This point will be further addressed.

For the moment, it is important to affirm, in the light of Col 1:15-20, that God's fulfillment has a cosmic scope in which Christ is the rationale of this process. The beginning of all things and their reconciliation at the end of time are linked then by a Christological principle that embraces not only these two ends of the cosmic narrative, but also gives the hermeneutical key to all the moments that lie between them. These ideas find clear echoes in the reflection of the three mentioned theologians. For them, Christ's resurrection is the basis for hoping in the fulfillment of the whole universe that, according to cosmological theories, has collapse as its most certain future. This new creation will be, therefore, in continuity and discontinuity with the current universe because of two intertwined principles: the resurrection of Christ, and the faithfulness of God with creation shown in this event. Every moment of the cosmic process is included in this divine salvific dynamism initiated, led, and accomplished by God in Christ through the Spirit. For all these reasons, the parousia should not be conceived as an isolated event. Rather, it is the fulfilling act of God that, associated with the pre-existent Word, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection, embraces the whole history of salvation and includes the whole Trinity.

It is necessary to differentiate, however, the parousia from the other salvific events and to recall that, even within this all-embracing narrative, Christ's coming is expected and will bring something new to creation. If a renewed eschatology in tune with cosmological theories must highlight the elements of discontinuity between this universe and the new creation, the same

thing should be done with the eschatological narrative of this fulfillment. Moreover, a narrative that does not have elements to resolve nor to await, inevitably tends to bend in upon itself, and therefore to focus not on the future but on the past. As stated in the third chapter, the role of the parousia in the first centuries was precisely to create a tension between the lived present and the expected future. The Christian responsibility *vis-à-vis* the community and the environment was based on the event of the resurrection but also on the expectation of Christ's coming.

The importance of an eschatological narrative open to the discontinuity of Christ's coming at the parousia is one of the topics of the next and final section.

2. A Coherent Cosmic Eschatological Narrative for Imagining God's Future

Echoing most of the elements already addressed in previous chapters, this final section will address the theological necessity to have a coherent and visual eschatological narrative to illustrate the hope in the fulfillment of both human beings and the whole of creation.

The second chapter pointed out three biases in contemporary eschatologies, namely the tendency to depict eschatological fulfillment exclusively through temporal categories, the reduction of the reflection on the material, physical reality of God's fulfillment to humanity and the ecosystem, and the diminution of the eschatological imaginary and narrative. In order to balance the first of these biases, the fourth chapter explored, from a biblical point of view, the importance of affirming that all the aspects of God's creation will be fulfilled by God in Christ. "New heavens and new earth" is the biblical expression to illustrate the expectation that all things will be transfigured when Christ comes. This idea has just been reinforced by sustaining that the hope in the new creation is not in direct opposition to contemporary cosmological theories and their prognosis concerning the eventual collapse of the universe. The resurrection of

Christ is the basis for hoping that, although all things are subjected to death, they will be transformed by God in the image of Christ, who is the origin and goal of the whole of creation.

The fifth chapter showed how the second bias — i.e. the eschatological reflection mostly focused on the responsibility of human beings *vis-à-vis* society and the natural environment — must be balanced by framing the anthropological thought within the fulfillment of the whole of creation by God. Besides this, the discussion of the challenges of cosmological theories to theology also gave some light on this point. In fact, all eschatological perspectives that either restrict God's eschatological fulfillment only to what will happen to human beings and the earth or give human beings a role, seen in a cosmic perspective, seems to be at least disproportionate. This is why some theologians have drawn attention to what Scripture and Tradition have always held — the cosmic scope of God's action upon God's creation — as the big eschatological picture into which human responsibility must fit. Both Rm 8:19-23 and Col 1:15-20 have been very illustrative for this topic. Thus, although the human role in the fulfillment of creation is neither denied nor reduced to complete pointlessness, it is important to recall that human activity receives its real meaning only within the cosmic context of the fulfillment of all thing by God in Christ.

The need to balance the third stated bias — the diminution of the eschatological imaginary and narrative — is linked to the two previous ones. In general terms, images have an irreplaceable value for theology. The analogical character of images enables theological reflection to portray realities that, despite the fact that they lie outside the scope of direct experience or exceed human understanding, are essential elements of God's revelation. This unique value of images becomes even more important when theology refers to the future. Without images that depict God's future action upon the whole of creation, it is not possible for

believers to contrast the current time with God's future consummation. The imagination is essential for illustrating something that, even though it is not realized yet, is awaited in hope.

This value of images cannot be detached from the narrative that organizes them in a coherent way. In fact, the specific meaning of an image is grasped by the place that it receives within the narrative whole, and therefore by the way this image refers to the others. This is why eschatology requires not only images to illustrate something that is beyond human capacities, but also a narrative that both organizes all these images in a coherent account, placing them on a timeline between an immemorial past and an eschatological future in which God is the origin and fulfillment of all things. Without this narrative that theologically describes reality in terms of the history of salvation, it is very difficult to justify, for instance, why the present time and human responsibility within it "already" have an eschatological meaning that has "not yet" been fulfilled. And this requirement about time also applies to space: this narrative allows theology to affirm the continuity of what God has created within the discontinuity of what God will fulfill. Therefore, theology cannot illustrate God's actions in time and space without a narrative that organizes the past, the present, and the future of the entirety of space in terms of creation and fulfillment.

2.1. Jesus Christ is before All Things, and in Him they hold Together (Col 1:17)

In many respects, Col 1:15-20 embodies all these narrative characteristics. As previously stated, this hymn is the story of all things "both in the heavens and on the earth" (v. 16) through the lens of Christ. This narrative argues that the story of the whole cosmos is the story of Christ's involvement in the creation and redemption of all things.⁸¹ Thus creation, from the beginning to

⁸¹ Stephen Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 104, 130.

the end, is illustrated by its intertwined relationship to Christ: in the past, creation was made by Christ; in the present, creation is held together by Christ; and in the future, creation will find the fullness of its renewal and reconciliation in Christ. In fact, this is the reason why most of this cosmic and Christological narrative is based on the propositions which describe the relationship between Christ and creation.⁸² The universal and cosmic scope of the hymn, then, receives its interpretation in Christ.

Because of this Christological rationale, it is possible to argue that all created things have eschatological reconciliation as their innermost goal. Any Christian claim of a teleological principle within creation is not, therefore, the result of any particular characteristic of creation itself. Rather, the narrative link between the origin and the fulfillment of creation is done by the action of God in Christ. He is the origin, the sustainer and the reconciler of the whole of creation. All things in all realms of creation directly depend on Christ (v. 16), are actually ruled by him (v. 17), and await their peacemaking in him (v. 20). This narrative importance of Christ is strongly highlighted by the hymn when it affirms that he is God's image and God's dwelling (vv. 15, 19). In fact, the hymn matches the moment of creation with the statement of Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (v. 15) and the moment of reconciliation with the affirmation of Christ in whom "all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" (v. 19). Christ gives coherence to this narrative that presents creation as an ordered whole in which he is the reason why God creates all things and the cause of its reconciliation. That is why, according to this narrative, nothing that exists is outside Christ's lordship.

⁸² The three Greek prepositions in Col 1:15-20 (ἐν, διὰ, εἰς) refer to the relationship of Christ with creation are mostly translated as "for him," (vv. 16a, 16b) "through him," (v. 16b, 20), "in him" (vv. 17, 19), and "to him" (v. 20).

This Christological interpretation of the cosmic narrative is reinforced by the use of the expression “firstborn” to argue that Christ has precedence over all things (v. 15) and over all who died (v. 18). By repeating this expression, Col 1:15-20 implies that the primacy of Christ over all things at the origin is confirmed by his resurrection. Thus the creation that came into existence in Christ will become a new creation through him. Christ is, therefore, the main narrative framework by which the whole cosmic process, in general, and each single existence, in particular, must be understood. From different angles, the conclusion is the same: for Col 1:15-20, the story of the whole cosmic process receives its meaning from Christ.

Besides the exclusive role of Christ in creation from its beginning to its reconciliation, Col 1:15-20 affirms two other complementary ideas. First, the hymn places the presence of human beings within the salvific plan of God for the whole of creation which exceeds their capacities. In fact, Col 1:15-20 refers to humanity when the hymn mentions the church as the body of Christ: as he is the head of the whole of creation, so he is the head of the church, his body (v. 18). Moreover, if the church is primarily the community of those who have already participated in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism, the eschatological value of human actions have its source in the “firstborn of the dead” (v. 18) who reconciles all things “through the blood of his cross” (v. 20). According to this, human beings do participate in the fulfillment of creation. However, this same principle sets the scope of human responsibility in this fulfillment. Col 1:15-20 places the church within the larger narrative of the creation and reconciliation of all things in Christ. Human beings are not, therefore, the center of this narrative. Rather, they appear included in a plan led by Christ that embraces the whole of creation. The reconciliation of all things – of which human beings are part - will be done by Christ, and him alone. If humans do participate in the salvation of both themselves and creation, this is possible

only to the extent that they participate in Christ. As Rm 8:19-22 does, this hymn also locates human beings' actions within the cosmic narrative of God's action.

The second idea to highlight is the resurrection as the way God will fulfill not only humanity, but also the universe. However, this claim is not immediately evident in the hymn. At first sight, Col 1:15-20 describes the eschatological goal of creation as the "reconciliation of all things" (v. 20) which was already brought by Christ through his death (v. 20). In this sense, therefore, the hymn has a realized eschatology centered in the cross as the efficient cause of this reconciliation. Without denying this – and particularly without distorting the interpretation of the hymn – it is possible to argue that Col 1:15-20 implicitly asserts that this reconciliation, although accomplished by the cross, still awaits its fulfillment in accordance with Christ's resurrection. There are three reasons for this. First, because the paschal mystery as a whole is the source of redemption, the specific moments of Jesus' life from his Incarnation to his resurrection actually bring salvation, but as part of the unique fulfilling will of God that is to be accomplished when Christ comes again. Second, it is possible to affirm, by using the current situation of the baptized as an example, that creation is "already" saved by participation in Christ's death, but it still exists in the "not yet" of its participation in Christ's resurrection. Third, and based on the hymn itself, both creation and the church find their principle of existence in Christ (vv. 15, 17), which means, therefore, that they should have the same principle of fulfillment. The unifying role of Christ in Col 1:15-20 as head of both creation and the new creation is the narrative ground for affirming that the whole of creation will be reconciled in accordance with Christ's resurrection. In Christ, not only does the Christian become a new creation, but all things, both in heaven and on earth, will become new in accordance with the resurrection of Christ.

For all these reasons, Col 1:15-20 fulfills most of the requirements mentioned in the second chapter for a renewed eschatological narrative. First, this hymn illustrates the fulfillment

of all things as God's action on God's creation. The primacy of God in creation is complete. Second, Col 1:15-20 spans the whole of creation from the beginning to the end, linking the origin and the transformation of all things in Christ. Third, the hymn holds that this teleological process includes every single created thing. By referring to "heaven and earth, and all they contain" at the beginning and the end (vv. 16, 20), Col 1:15-20 states that nothing lies outside God's creation and God's fulfillment of it. Fourth, this hymn includes the eschatological role of human beings in the fulfillment of creation, but in terms of participation in Christ's action within it. Finally, Col 1:15-20 seems to indicate that the future of both the human and the non-human aspects of creation are informed by the same principle, namely the resurrection of Christ. The contingency of all things is clearly recognized, but with the hope that they will be transformed by God in Christ. This cosmic and Christological scope of Col 1:15-20, therefore, fits with the requirements of an eschatological narrative that balances both the temporal and the anthropological biases.

But what if these ideas are confronted with the third bias, namely the tendency of depicting the eschatological fulfillment mostly in abstract terms? This issue could be divided into the following questions. What is the value of the images and narrative for something that cannot be either illustrated nor depicted, namely God as future of the whole cosmos? What happens with the eschatological narrative if the images included in this narrative are interpreted in increasingly abstract terms in order to avoid their seemingly mythological nature? Is it still possible to affirm an all-embracing and visual eschatological narrative in the postmodern context where the epistemological value of metanarratives and images is strongly criticized? These questions are at the basis of the reflections of the next part.

2.2. The Importance of a Coherent Cosmic Eschatological Narrative

Despite the importance of imagination for depicting God's future, most contemporary eschatologies lack a visual narrative that illustrates the fulfillment of the whole of creation. As mentioned, contemporary theology set aside the old threatening imaginary that associated the Christian future with the dichotomy reward-punishment. Instead, theology strongly affirms that God-self is the hope of reality. In this sense, therefore, the change of the eschatological imaginary and narrative naturally follow the process initiated by contemporary eschatology as a whole: from the literal depiction of a divine realm of the future of creation — the *eschata* — to the fundamental statement of God as the future of all things — the *eschaton*. This change in contemporary eschatological reflection did not lead, however, to a replacement of the former images by new ones that fit better this new narrative. The result is a lack of narrative illustration of the Christian future. Without a visual imaginary and a narrative that consistently organizes it, the eschatological statements risk being abstract enunciations.

In general terms, this abstraction of the eschatological images and narrative can be explained by referring to two successive criticisms which came mostly from the field of philosophy, and provoked important changes in current eschatological thought: on the one hand, modern criticism of metaphysical knowledge and, on the other hand, post-modern criticism or even rejection of metanarratives.

The first of these criticisms has Kant as one of its fundamental figures. In his theory of knowledge, Kant asserts that objects of knowledge are mediated by the subject's a priori faculties of representation. Human beings cannot know what things are in themselves because there is no knowledge without sensibility shaped by the intellect. This does not mean, however, that some objects which are outside direct experience — for instance, the notions of "world," "soul," and "God" — are meaningless since they are not objects of sense experience. Although

these notions are not objects of human knowledge, they are present in human reason as transcendent ideas, and they have an ethical value. In fact, they are transcendental ideas that perform a regulative function for knowledge.⁸³

This theory of knowledge had direct consequences for the faculty of imagination and the eschatological narrative. As mentioned, Kant held that the imagination does not have an eschatological role because any “image” is shaped from something which was the object of sensible experience. Since human beings require their sensibility for knowing, the eschatological narrative becomes meaningless for the description of reality either present or future. In Kant’s view, the role of eschatology — in case there is one — is restricted to an ethical value, and therefore to its practical consequences for personal experience.

The second criticism — the postmodern criticism of metanarratives — was originally led by Jean-François Lyotard. This criticism participates in an open confrontation of and reaction to the modern notion of sign initiated by de Saussure, Peirce, and Wittgenstein. According to them, the presupposition on which modern epistemology is based — the representation of reality in consciousness, the subsequent designation of this presentation through words, and the final correlation of the word and what it is designating — are not real. Language is mediated by the one who uses it, and the meaning of a word is grasped only within a system of relations and the multiple contexts of usage. Forming part then of the authors mentioned, Lyotard shares with them the necessary replacement of consciousness by language, the order of representation by speech-acts, and denotation by performance.⁸⁴

⁸³ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 350-368. For an overview of Kant’s criticism, see Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸⁴ For a basic review of Lyotard’s ideas, see Stuart Sim, *The Lyotard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011). In tune with Lyotard, but from a more radical perspective, it is possible to highlight the deconstructivist approach of Jacques Derrida. According to him, language is made by signs in relation to signs within a whole network of signs. In the linguistic context, an image is “an image of an image” and refers, therefore, only to other images. The reference to reality is lost once such images relate only to other images. Thus the text and

Yet he believes, based on Wittgenstein's theory of language games, that this new paradigm must recognize the irreconcilability and incommensurability of languages and, therefore, the local context as the only criterion of validity. Because all narratives derive from a specific context and promote a particular way of understanding reality, no discourse can legitimate itself with reference to a metadiscourse that intends to encompass every dimension of reality. In fact, any narrative that claims universal validity immediately falls under the pall of suspicion because of its presumption of totalitarianism. This is why Lyotard holds that the end of the modern episteme — i.e., the epistemology of representation — entails the end of any kind of universalism and, therefore, of the grand narratives that justify it.

These two successive criticisms — represented here by Kant and Lyotard respectively — has had an impact on theology at different levels and, therefore, has opened new-old questions for eschatology. As mentioned, they call into question the value of eschatological images and the real meaning of an eschatological narrative. It is necessary to recognize, however, that this criticism of images and narratives is not something new in the history of theological reflection in general, and of eschatology in particular. In fact, it is possible to trace, even at the risk of oversimplifying this subject, a relationship that historically fluctuates between suspicion and confidence toward the eschatological value of images.⁸⁵

The theological reasons for the caution against images are varied and from different orders. For instance, it is possible to overlook the importance of imagination because of the conception of the eschatological goal of humanity, namely the beatific vision of God. Because

the narrative within does not say something to someone about something. The narrative, rather than producing something different, is the reproduction of previous reproductions which, therefore, refer only to themselves. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

⁸⁵ For an overview of the limits and the possibilities of the use of images in the history of Christian theological reflection, see Chantal Leroy et al., eds., *Ce Que Nous Yeux Ont vu: Richesse et Limites d'une Théologie Chrétienne de l'image* (Lyon: Profac, 2000).

humans can attain the contemplation of God through the cognitive faculties of the soul after death, and therefore without the physical mediation of the body, the importance of imagining the future beyond this direct encounter with God is clearly reduced. From another perspective, it is possible to disregard the eschatological images for their seeming mythological basis and their subsequent incompatibility with the modern way to illustrate reality. Bultmann is the main figure of this stance. In his view, not only is the world-picture that underlies the proclamation of the kerygma by the disciples mythical — history is ruled by supernatural forces — but so too is the way of illustrating the redemptive event of Jesus Christ — a pre-existent being who, coming from and going back to heaven, overcomes death by his resurrection.⁸⁶ Because even the latter is just an image that cannot be accepted as real event,⁸⁷ the salvific dimension of Christianity lies in the existential encounter with God through the proclamation of God's word.⁸⁸ For these reasons, the eschatological imagination tends to be dismissed as unverifiable, unnecessary, and mythological.

It is important to note, however, that most of the difficulties with the representation of God's future lie in a theological principle that predates significantly the contemporary criticism of images: the risk of idolatry. This prohibition of images, which comes from the Old Testament,⁸⁹ is a debate that cuts across the early reflection of the Fathers,⁹⁰ continues in the

⁸⁶ Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," 15.

⁸⁷ Bultmann, 20, 47.

⁸⁸ This idea is already present in Calvin's thought. According to him, images of God cannot say something about God because God is beyond representations. Believers encounter God's salvation through the hearing of God's word. See Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁸⁹ The prohibition of representing God can be seen in Ex 20:1-6. According to von Rad, this norm is one of the fundamental principles for understanding the Old Testament. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1962), 381-83.

⁹⁰ For an overview of the Fathers' cautious attitude toward images – for instance, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen – see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 49-62; Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). It is interesting to point out, however, that not all the Fathers have a negative attitude toward images. The Cappadocians, for instance, defended the pedagogical value of

second Council of Nicaea, restarts in the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent, and is to some extent a permanent tension in theological reflection.⁹¹ Even though the discussion concerning idolatry is fundamentally focused on whether God can be pictured in any material form or not, this same question can be applied to whether God can be represented through any mental image and abstract concept or not. The incomprehensibility and sovereignty of God must be, therefore, somehow respected with this imaginative austerity.⁹²

This prohibition of representing God by any form or image is confronted, however, with another theological principle just as significant, if not more so. According to the New Testament, God is the one who has revealed God-self in many ways, this revelation reaching its fulfillment in Jesus Christ who is God's image.⁹³ While human beings cannot represent God, it is God who reveals God-self as Trinity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a certain sense, God-self, in the Incarnation of the Word, breaks the prohibition of being represented. This is why the same Fathers who are so vigilant against the danger of idolatry are also defenders, for instance, of the irreplaceable value of the sacraments and the importance of the allegorical interpretation of the biblical images in light of salvation offered by God in Christ. During this same period, the value of icons was strongly appreciated, in particular in the East by the Byzantine tradition, for the representation of the mysteries of Christ. Precisely in the midst of the iconoclastic controversy of the eight century, the second council of Nicaea asserts the legitimacy

them. See Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 54–75.

⁹¹ See Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39–72.

⁹² According to Garret Green, the biblical prohibition to representing God is not the image itself, but the belief that God can be manipulated. See Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 91. The same idea is highlighted by Richard Viladesau. He affirms that “idolatry” is not the medium in which God is illustrated, but the attempt to use it as something subject to manipulation. See Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 58.

⁹³ Heb 1:1-2; Col 1:15.

of images in worship. Such a claim was particularly embodied in the decoration of churches, reaching its peak during the Spanish baroque as a response to the Protestant Reformation. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that most of the illustrations referring to heaven or hell which still remain in the collective unconscious of believers comes from this time. Setting aside the exaggerations concerning the depiction of “the last things” — especially those without any reference to God’s salvific will manifested in Christ — this is why the eschatological future is not completely unknown. From a theological point of view, it is possible to say something about the future because it has been revealed by God in Christ.⁹⁴

Therefore, the tension between the representation and non-representation of God’s future is not something new in theological reflection. In this sense, both modern and post-modern criticisms of imagination represent a new framework for thinking about the ever-present tension in eschatological representation. It is true that the role of theological images was significantly reduced after Kant, because of his argument for the epistemological impossibility of knowledge outside sense experience. And it is also true that post-modern criticism also resulted in this disengagement from images because of their inability to refer to reality and the suspicion of their repressive power.⁹⁵ However, and despite this criticism, it is also true that eschatological

⁹⁴ In a certain sense, the fifth century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius is a good example of the tension between these two stances. On the one hand, he affirmed that theology has an “apophatic” dimension since God is unintelligible. Thus God is known through “the obscurity of the unknowing.” On the other hand, he held that theology also has an “cataphatic” dimension. For those who begin the process of conversion, theology offers figurative symbols as a way to reach the knowledge of God. Although Pseudo-Dionysius tends to present the “apophatic” theology as a higher degree of knowledge, both theologies are not mutually exclusive in his thought. In fact, the “cataphatic” theology had an important impact in both the early Eastern iconography and the Western medieval iconography. For Pseudo-Dionysius’ “apophatic” theology, see Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), VII, 3; “The Mystical Theology,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), V. For his “cataphatic” theology, see “The Celestial Hierarchy,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), II.

⁹⁵ Besides the mentioned philosophers, another thinker who stresses the necessary suspicion against images is Gilles Deleuze. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). For an overview of Deleuze’s criticism of images and a theological interpretation of his thought, see LeRon

reflection has received considerable attention over the same period of time. This is why the second chapter tried to demonstrate that the impact of contemporary criticism of images within eschatology is neither the complete disappearance of images nor the complete dissolution of narrative. Actually, there is no eschatological thought without them. Rather, contemporary eschatology shifted from being too concrete to being too abstract in the depiction of the eschatological future.

By way of showing this tendency, the thought of Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Jürgen Moltmann are good illustrative examples. Moreover, their stances are particularly useful given the fact that most contemporary theologians have conceived their own eschatological reflections either for or against them.

According to Rahner, God's incomprehensibility and God's revelation are not opposite "attributes" of God. Retrieving Aquinas' statements, Rahner holds that these two ideas cannot be separated inasmuch as God is made known as mystery.⁹⁶ In other words, God can be genuinely known by human beings, but as the incomprehensible ultimate reality of all things. This principle, applied to eschatology, could be summarized as follows: because the future of creation is God, and therefore everything related to this future is a dimension of God's own being, the eschatological future is a reality that human beings can experience but as a nameless, indefinable, and unattainable mystery. In this sense, Rahner turns the eschatological discussion referring to the objective knowledge of the future (as if eschatology were an account of the end

Shults, *Iconoclastic Theology: Gilles Deleuze and the Secretion of Atheism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁹⁶ See Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVI (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 229; "The Human Question of Meaning in Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVIII (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 94. Cf. "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 41.

as pre-views of future events)⁹⁷ to a discussion of the existential experience of it — God’s present salvific action in Christ and the transposition of this experience into the form of fulfillment.⁹⁸ The access to God’s future within the present is possible, therefore, because of the experience of God’s salvation already present in Christ. This experience of Christ is, in Rahner’s expression, the aetiological source of knowledge of God’s future.⁹⁹ Thus the eschatological assertions receive their meaning only in analogical terms in Christ, the one who is the hermeneutical principle of the fulfillment of creation. Beyond this, eschatology cannot affirm more.¹⁰⁰

Actually, the way Rahner describes the current situation of the dead illustrates his point. According to him, the hope that the dead will eternally dwell in God is based on Jesus Christ, and in the experience of eternity that can be encountered within the personal experience of time and responsibility. However, the eternal life of the dead escapes from the imaginative grasp. If the dead dwell in God, they transcend the concrete expression of their state.¹⁰¹

While Rahner sets the criteria for the contemporary eschatological imagination, Balthasar and Moltmann establish, to a certain degree, the tone of the eschatological narrative. Balthasar claims that theological reflection in general must be conceived as the consideration of God’s glory as it was revealed in Christ. Because God’s glory is, in Balthasar’s view, the most divine aspect of God, the reflection on Christ as revelation of God’s glory — along with God as “Being” and “Good” — must be the center of all the theological reflection.¹⁰² The latter leads Balthasar to hold that theological reflection is a “theological aesthetic” inasmuch as it reflects on

⁹⁷ Rahner, “The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions,” 328.

⁹⁸ Rahner, 335; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 433.

⁹⁹ Rahner, “The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions,” 334; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 432.

¹⁰⁰ Rahner, “The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions,” 332; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 434.

¹⁰¹ Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” 352–53.

¹⁰² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I (New York: Ignatius Press, 2009), 13; *Only Love Is Credible*, 56.

God's glory in terms of "beauty."¹⁰³ In other words, theology becomes "aesthetic" because Christ, in particular in his Incarnation,¹⁰⁴ is the manifestation of God's beauty.¹⁰⁵

This revelation of God's beauty, however, is mediated through the encounter of two freedoms: divine freedom and human finite freedom. Thus, this "theological aesthetics" becomes a "theo-drama" that narrates the beauty of God precisely in the moment in which the encounter of these freedoms reaches its most dramatic peak, namely the Cross.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the death of Jesus is the moment in which the Son experiences the absolute distance from the Father in the free offering of his life, and the Father confirms the absolute proximity to the Son in the free offering of the Spirit.¹⁰⁷ The beauty of God as Trinity is revealed, particularly in the most dramatic moment of the narrative, through this relationship of freedom between the Son and the Father. The dramatic encounter of wills shows that God's nature is being relationships among the three divine persons.

But even if Balthasar's narrative is very visual up to this point, this same principle does not apply to the eschatological aspect of this narrative. In fact, it is quite abstract because it is mostly built around the relational image of "participation." For instance, Balthasar argues that God is the "last thing" of the creature, and therefore the four classical "last things" must be conceived as ways of being in relationship with God.¹⁰⁸ And the same principle works for his depiction of creatures' fulfillment in terms of participation in the eternal offering and receiving of life and love of the Triune God.¹⁰⁹ In Balthasar's view, the dramatic narrative centered in

¹⁰³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, I:69.

¹⁰⁴ Balthasar, I:29.

¹⁰⁵ Balthasar, I:41, 69, 124.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Balthasar, I:92–94.

¹⁰⁷ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Adrian Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); *Theo-Drama: The Last Act*, 247–68.

¹⁰⁸ In Balthasar's words, "God is the 'last thing' of the creature. Gained, he is heaven, lost, he is hell; examining, he is judgment; purifying, he is purgatory." See Balthasar, *Exploration in Theology I*, 260.

¹⁰⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: The Last Act*, 425.

Christ discloses that the exchange of life and love by which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit relate to each other is not something reserved for them. The love of the Triune God is the origin and destiny of the whole of creation.¹¹⁰ The fulfillment of each thing is attained, therefore, by participating in God's inner-trinitarian life and love.¹¹¹

Moltmann develops his eschatological reflection based on the theological notion of hope and the all-embracing scope of God's fulfillment. In contrast to Ernst Bloch's understanding of hope, Moltmann argues that this theological virtue is not the result of the unfolding of the general possibilities of reality. Rather, hope is something genuinely new inasmuch as its source is the faith of God's intervention within history.¹¹² According to Bloch, human existence is driven by different forms of discontent with how reality is, and therefore by an image of what reality should be. This image inspires action inasmuch as it identifies what is wrong within the present and depicts the way reality would be in the future. The realization of the hoped future in the present is guided, therefore, by its image.¹¹³ Up to this point, Moltmann mostly agrees with Bloch in the transformative impact of the future upon the present. As Bloch does, Moltmann asserts that the hoped-for future shapes the present with new possibilities and inspires its transformation in accordance with this imagined future.¹¹⁴ Moreover, both affirm that the difference between the present and the imagined future is the cause of unrest and impatience.¹¹⁵ But while Bloch argues that the active role of hope is based on the degree of concrete realization of this future already latent within the possibilities of the present, Moltmann claims that the

¹¹⁰ Balthasar, 56–57.

¹¹¹ For an overview of Balthasar's eschatology, see Geoffrey Wainwright, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward Oakes and David Moss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113–30.

¹¹² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 192.

¹¹³ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 95.

¹¹⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 34–35.

¹¹⁵ Moltmann, 21.

transformative role of Christian hope is grounded exclusively on God's promise. In other words, while Bloch affirms the continuity between the present and the anticipated future as the "real-possible,"¹¹⁶ Moltmann asserts the discontinuity between the present and God's future as the "genuinely and radically new."¹¹⁷ In this sense, then, the present does not receive inspiration from the hoped-for future as such. Rather, the ground for hoping within the present is God's future which encounters reality in terms of promise.

Moltmann applies this principle of a present always open to God's future to the whole eschatological narrative. According to him, the way God is present in reality is by revealing that God is the one who will be present. In fact, Israel experiences a God who is present both in promising the future and opening the present to new possibilities: the God of the nomads who promises a land and continues opening new opportunities once they arrive there,¹¹⁸ the God of prophets and the promise of God's judgment and lordship not only for Israel, but also over all people,¹¹⁹ and the God of apocalyptic who changes the image of the universe from something static, to a cosmos that is passing away and one that is coming according God's promises.¹²⁰ This experience of a present always open to God's future reaches its total manifestation in Jesus Christ' death and resurrection. This is why Christ's identity is not defined only by what he was and is, but also by who Christ will be and what is to be expected from him: the promise of the righteousness of God,¹²¹ the promise of life as a result of resurrection from the dead,¹²² and the promise of the kingdom of God in a new totality of being.¹²³ For all these reasons, Moltmann

¹¹⁶ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 144, 258–88.

¹¹⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 223; *The Coming of God*, 334.

¹¹⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 96 f.

¹¹⁹ Moltmann, 124 f.

¹²⁰ Moltmann, 133 f.

¹²¹ Moltmann, 230 f.

¹²² Moltmann, 208 f.

¹²³ Moltmann, 216 f.

claims that the biblical eschatological narrative is not based on the epiphany of God's eternal present, but on God's promise that overflows its historical accomplishments and creates expectations of its fulfillment in the future.¹²⁴

The theological positions of Rahner, Balthasar, and Moltmann have determined, in a certain sense, the course of the theological contemporary debate referring to the eschatological images and narrative. And for the same reason, most of the criticism centers on them. In the case of Rahner, for instance, John Thiel has underlined the need to expand Rahner's eschatological hermeneutics. Thiel thinks that, although Rahner's perspective respects the incomprehensibility of God, his approach is fundamentally reliant on Kantian statements regarding the limitation of knowledge.¹²⁵ This is why Thiel proposes a more speculative and visual approach to eschatology that, instead of being constrained by the limitation of sensitive knowledge, explores the objects of hope tied to faith as it is revealed in Christ — basically those associated with Christ's activity as the risen Lord as it is described in the New Testament.¹²⁶ On the other hand, Balthasar receives criticism for his tendency to express the eschatological fulfillment in an abstract and ahistorical way. Metz is clear on this point. He claims that Balthasar's doctrine of history does not take seriously either the linear and teleological biblical vision of time or the current existence of evil

¹²⁴ Moltmann depicts seven characteristics of God's promise and how it produces contraction with reality. First, the promise announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist. Second, it gives human beings the sense of history. Third, it divides reality into one which is passing and another which must be expected. Fourth, the promise portrays then a reality that is still open to something to come. Fifth, it creates an interval of tension between the present and the fulfillment of the promise. Sixth, it entrusts the fulfillment to God. Seventh, the promise opens reality to constantly new and wider interpretations of God's action. See Moltmann, 103–6.

¹²⁵ Thiel, "For What May We Hope?," 520; *Icons of Hope*, 6.

¹²⁶ Thiel, "For What May We Hope?," 519; *Icons of Hope*, 5. A good way to illustrate Thiel's point is the example already mentioned referring to Rahner's vision of the dwelling of the dead in God. Instead of remaining silent, Thiel holds that Jesus' afterlife as it is described by the New Testament allows theology to imagine the life of the blessed dead. The main characteristics of Jesus' apparitions, which can also be applied to the blessed dead, are four: the capacity of keeping promises, the possibility to bear life's pain and wounds, the opportunity to reconcile failures, and the chance to show ourselves to others as we really are. See Thiel, "For What May We Hope?," 531–35; *Icons of Hope*, 25–56. Thiel bases part of his reflection on Hans Frei's interpretation of what Jesus does in the afterlife, and how it serves as a paradigm for the life of the dead. See Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975).

and suffering in creation.¹²⁷ According to Metz, if salvation is not located in the future of history (the horizontal axis of time) but, as Balthasar claims, in the present of the divinity (the vertical axis of eternity)¹²⁸ history itself loses its relevance, and therefore the political imperative against what contradicts God's will in the present. Finally, the way Moltmann argued the radical newness of the new creation is also called into question. More specifically, Moltmann is criticized because of the link he makes between the fulfillment of creation with the *creatio ex nihilo*¹²⁹ or *nova creatio*,¹³⁰ in particular when he associates these terms with the illustration of Jesus Christ's resurrection.¹³¹ By stressing that the consummation of creation is not its restoration of an original state but its transformation into something completely new, he threatens the original goodness of all things, God's faithfulness to *this* creation, and the narrative continuity between the present time and the eschatological future.¹³²

Beyond the specific criticisms directed at Rahner, Balthasar, and Moltmann for their eschatological perspectives, the main question here is how to simultaneously balance, at the least, three tensions for an eschatological narrative. First, the tension between the imperative to approach God's future as a mystery that will never be grasped by any image, and the need to represent God's future because it is the source of orientation for believers in the present. Second, the tension between the depiction of God's future in terms of an all-embracing narrative that

¹²⁷ See Johann Baptist Metz, "Suffering from God: Theology as Theodicy," *Pacifica* 5, no. 3 (1992): 274–287; "Theology versus Polymysticism."

¹²⁸ See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: The Last Act*, 29–30. In Balthasar's words, "the New Testament no longer entertains the idea of a self-unfolding horizontal theo-drama; there is only a vertical theo-drama in which every moment of time, insofar as it has christological significance, is directly related to the exalted Lord, who has taken the entire content of all history—life, death and resurrection—with him into the supra-temporal realm." See Balthasar, 48.

¹²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 36.

¹³⁰ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 179, 215; *The Coming of God*, 27.

¹³¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 194, 221; *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 161–63.

¹³² Douglas Schuurman, *Creation, Eschaton, and Ethics: The Ethical Significance of the Creation-Eschaton Relation in the Thought of Emil Brunner and Jürgen Moltmann* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 106; Ernst Conradie, "The Justification of God?: The Story of God's Work According to Jürgen Moltmann," *Scriptura* 97 (2008): 99.

exceeds the particularity of human history, and the representation of God's future as the fulfillment of every particular narrative which is not simply absorbed within an abstract process. And third, the tension between a narrative that must point out the continuity of this good creation and the new creation, as well as highlight the discontinuity of this current reality of suffering and death and the full transformation of it in accordance with God's will. The balance of these three tensions becomes particularly important inasmuch as it directly addresses the main thesis of this dissertation, namely the necessary renewal of an eschatological narrative from a Christological, cosmic perspective for conceiving the future of the whole of creation and to be really inspired by it in the present time. And, as in the previous section, the references to Col 1:15-20 will be a source of crucial insights.

2.3. Parousia as Image for Coherently Narrating the Expectations of Human Beings within the Fulfillment of the Universe

The second chapter affirms that, in the context of contemporary eschatology, the parousia is a suitable theological notion for a renewed narrative of God's fulfillment of the whole of creation. The inspiring role of this symbol lies in its ability to balance simultaneously the three eschatological biases highlighted at the beginning of this project, namely an undue temporalization of God's future over its material reality, a tendency to reduce the scope of the fulfillment of creation to what is associated with human beings, and the abstraction of eschatological imagination, and therefore of its narrative. In this context, Christ's coming is presented as a theological symbol that meets all these conditions. The parousia is a notion that, grounding all eschatological statements in Jesus Christ, broadens the interpretation of God's fulfillment to a fully transformed creation, offers an illustrative image of God's future action upon creation, and can empower believers to recognize and embrace the role that God has given

them in it.

In order to have an eschatological all-embracing narrative in which the parousia plays a key role, Col 1:15-20 can be restated as an example for depicting God's fulfillment in Christological and cosmic terms. In fact, this hymn asserts that Christ precedes and succeeds the whole of creation. His primacy moves from the creation of all things (v. 16) to their final reconciliation (v. 20). He precedes and succeeds creation. Every single reality is included in this narrative in which Christ is the center and *raison d'être*. Although Col 1:15-20 does not refer explicitly to the parousia, the latter can be assumed as implicitly affirmed. This claim is based on two main principles. On the one hand, there is a profound link between the risen Lord and the one who will come; on the other hand, there are many aspects of God's reconciliation that historically await a later time. Without the intention to force the text, it is possible to argue that, even if the hymn depicts the reconciliation of creation as something fully realized through Christ's cross and resurrection (v. 20), this reconciliation is both an accomplished and ongoing process.¹³³ In other words, the eschatological narrative of Col 1:15-20 is a story with an accomplished goal (Christ's resurrection) and with an expected end (Christ's coming). The eschatological all-embracing narrative is then still open to the coming of the one who already accomplished it.

In order to understand how the parousia meets all these narrative requirements, the duality continuity/discontinuity applied in the previous section for Christ's resurrection will be very useful. In fact, this duality offers a good way to explore the importance of the eschatological imagination, the function of eschatological images for this illustration, and the role of the eschatological narrative to coherently illustrate the personal responsibility within the frame of

¹³³ Sumney, *Colossians*, 75–76.

God's fulfillment of the whole creation. Moreover, this duality will be used to show how the parousia can absorb both the modern and postmodern criticism of images and metanarratives, as well as to point out the role of the sacraments for the believer's eschatological narrative within the fulfillment of the cosmos.

First of all, there are some general principles of the eschatological imagination that must be highlighted. It is important to recall, for instance, that the eschatological future is an unknown reality for reasons other than the temporal distance between human beings and this event. While this temporal distance is relevant, the future is uncertain because of the ontological distance between humanity and the one who is the fulfillment of all things, namely God. Despite all the knowledge human beings could claim about the future and the prediction of all its possible options, the future will never be fully available. Stated in a more accurate way, the future is not *unknown* because is distant; rather, the future is a *mystery* because is God. This is why an accurate illustration of the fulfillment of creation is, as a matter of principle, impossible. Because God is the goal of creation, even the most vivid representation cannot grasp the future fulfillment of all things in Christ. As seen in the previous section, the visual austerity of the Christian future claimed by some theologians is mostly based on this theological norm.¹³⁴ Even Paul refuses to describe the eschatological future. In fact, he did not share the vision he had of heaven,¹³⁵ because the Christian hope goes beyond images.¹³⁶ From this perspective, therefore, any image of God's future must be labeled in terms of discontinuity.

In spite of this limitation, however, it is important to stress the unavoidable necessity of images for eschatological reflection. In fact, paradoxically the inability to depict God's future,

¹³⁴ See Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions"; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 380–82.

¹³⁵ See 2 Co 12:2–4.

¹³⁶ See 1 Co 2:9.

and therefore to accurately describe it, is precisely the cause of the indispensable requirement of the eschatological images. Because the subject of the eschatological narrative goes far beyond any capacity of accurate depiction — God as the fulfillment of the whole of creation — the only possible resource is the imagination. The primacy of images comes then from the nature of what cannot be seen nor described, but only imagined and illustrated. Moreover, because the images provide a more ambiguous picture of reality, the richness of their possible interpretations fits better with the experience of God. And the same principle applies to narrative: it enables the coexistence of paradoxical elements within a single unity in a congruent way. Thus eschatology requires the polysemous nature of the images and the flexible character of the narrative to illustrate a reality that, because it is God-self, can be depicted only through elements in tension.

The Scriptures are full of these eschatological images. For instance, Jesus Christ is illustrated, in the book of Revelation, as the “lion of the tribe of Judah” who is also the “lamb of God.”¹³⁷ In Christ, then, the hope in God’s presence as it is depicted through Isaiah’s vision of “the lamb grazing with the lion”¹³⁸ is fulfilled even in visual terms. Besides the paradoxical aspect of the biblical images, it is important to recall that eschatological thought is built by upon several dualities in which two apparently contradictory elements must be kept in fruitful tension rather than opting for one above the other. Thanks only to the flexibility of the narrative, dualities such as already/not yet or cosmic/individual can coexist simultaneously in the same story.

Another aspect on which the duality continuity/discontinuity sheds light is the way the eschatological imagination works. In fact, the latter shows elements of discontinuity with reality inasmuch as it illustrates something which is not immediately present in either temporal or

¹³⁷ Rev 5:5-6.

¹³⁸ Is 65:25; cf. 11:6.

spatial terms. By its capacity of representation, the eschatological imagination brings into the present an image of the future will be like. But this representation is in discontinuity with the present not only because the future has not yet occurred, but also because this represented future is mainly depicted in contradiction with how things currently are. Most of the biblical eschatological prophecies show this idea — for instance, Rev 21:4 describes the “new heavens and new earth” as the place where the current death and suffering will disappear. From a systematic perspective, Metz and Schillebeeckx use the same rationale of contradiction between the present and the hoped-for future.¹³⁹ It is important to point out, however, that this discontinuity between the representation and what is represented is possible only by referring to things that are — or were — actually subject of sensitive experience. This is why the eschatological imagination is, by definition, analogical. In other words, it describes something that is not yet fully present only by means of something that is available. The only way of speaking about the eschatological future is “immanently.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, and despite the discontinuity between the eschatological imagination and the current reality, all the images referring to God’s future have immanence reality as its only source.

From a biblical perspective, this duality of the eschatological imagination becomes evident in the way the Gospels describe Jesus’ teaching of God’s kingdom, namely by using

¹³⁹ On this point, it is necessary to highlight that imagination itself is the capacity by which something that is absent becomes present. This definition comes from Kant’s definition of imagination. According to him, “imagination is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, [B 151]. This definition is used, for instance, by Garret Green. See Garrett Green, “Imagining the Future,” in *Future as God’s Gift: Exploration in Christian Eschatology*, ed. David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 75.

¹⁴⁰ See, for instance, Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 97–124. Aquinas already recognized this aspect of imagination when affirming that it is a necessary condition for thinking, and that it requires the material of sense data. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, STh I, q. 84, a. 7; Cf. I, q. 86, a. 4; I–II, q. 17, a. 7. And this idea is also highlighted by Rahner’s interpretation of Aquinas through the lens of Kantian thought. In fact, Rahner consecrated most of his book *Spirit in the World* to comment on Aquinas’ understanding of “knowledge” and the importance of imagination (STh I, q. 84, a. 7) in dialogue with the Kantian criticism of knowledge. See Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 20.

parables. Indeed, the expression “kingdom of God” is an image of immanent reality — the king governing over a territory — for depicting the hope in God’s ruling over creation. More specifically, the biblical expectations about the new creation are depicted with reference to the transformation of present realities — i.e. the new Jerusalem, the renovation of heaven and earth, the changing from tears to joy, the banquet in which all nations will finally share together, etc. The fantastic creatures in the Book of Revelation are illustrated by using a set of different elements present within reality but put together in one being in a completely new way — for instance, an ox full of eyes and with six wings.¹⁴¹ Even the Scholastic images of heaven and hell mentioned in the first chapter are also the result of immanent things such as clouds or fire, but illustrated in a transcendent way.

Finally, it is important to point out that the imagination is not arbitrary in the way it represents what is not present. The human capacity of imagining is closely associated with the previous knowledge and the cultural horizon in which this knowledge was acquired. This is why the images are not only based on something specific that is or was present, but the result of the accumulation of previous images and concepts that conform to the collective conscious and subconscious in which the person is situated. Thus the images are an expression of how people conceive themselves, the relationship between one another, the reality around them, and the sensations associated with all these elements. This is why an image is not isolated from either a background in which it is part or other images with which it forms a dynamic unity. In other words, the meaning of the images is grasped within the context of this narrative background in which they make sense.

This narrative background is the “imaginary.”¹⁴² Although the latter is an unarticulated

¹⁴¹ Cf. Rev 4:6-8.

¹⁴² See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3–32; Taylor, “What Is a ‘Social Imaginary’?”

and undefined comprehension of reality, and therefore cannot be quantified, inasmuch as it is the background from which each person accedes and approaches reality. The imaginary, then, determines the interpretation of reality. However, the imaginary is not static. Rather, it is a dynamic reality that changes by the new interpretations which, either deliberately or inadvertently, human beings give to it. For instance, the notion of what creation and human beings are some centuries ago justified the “superiority” of humans over creation or the exclusion of women from civic participation. The symbolic universe in which human beings live, is this narrative dynamic context that gives human beings a place and orientation within reality, as well as the legitimacy to their practices within it.¹⁴³

Most of these principles become explicit in the description of the notion of parousia made in the third chapter; as mentioned, the image of Jesus Christ coming is linked to the biblical symbols of “the Son of man,” and “the day of the Lord.” The extensive biblical references in that chapter are an example of how the full meaning of an image is captured by tracking the echoes and allusions that this image makes to other images within the imaginary of which they are part. And this imaginative interconnection works in the other direction as well, namely not only by referring to other images, but also by synthesizing and configuring them in a new way. Thus the parousia gathers, in one image, most of the expectations of the first Christian communities — i.e. the coming of God and God’s kingdom, the universal judgment, the fulfillment of creation, etc. — transforming thus the eschatological imaginary into a new narrative. And the same thing can be said referring to the believer’s behavior. In fact, both the celebration of the Eucharist or the endurance of martyrdom in explicit reference to the expectation of Christ’s coming are signs of

¹⁴³ Ernst Cassirer is a good example of this anthropological position. Paraphrasing the idea that human beings must be conceived as “rational animals,” he holds that they should be described as “symbolic animals.” See Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 26–26.

how the parousia configured the concrete life of believers during the first centuries of Christianity. In this sense, it is fundamental to state that the inspiring impact of the hoped-for future on the present behavior directly depends on the way this future is illustrated.¹⁴⁴

Before continuing, it is possible to draw two conclusions about the eschatological imagination and narrative. On the one hand, no eschatological statement, either the most abstract or the most concrete, can provide an accurate vision of God's future. Rather, all these statements are images constructed by human beings to illustrate analogically the hope in the fulfillment of all things. In this sense, and despite the fact that the eschatological language points to the discontinuity between this reality and the future one, the eschatological images are always in continuity with this current reality. On the other hand, the eschatological statements cannot exist without images and a narrative that gathers them in a coherent manner. In this sense, they offer a vision of God's future in reference to immanent things but in terms of discontinuity. This is possible through the use of images and narrative in a hyperbolic way. The *eschaton* is a reality that can be expressed by using an hyperbolic language and a narrative of excess.¹⁴⁵ In fact, this is the way the eschatological statements show, by using immanent things, that the *eschaton* is in discontinuity with the present.

But how can these principles, in particular when applied to the notion of parousia, still fit in a context where the original cosmic imaginary has been completely changed, the eschatological images have lost their evocative power because of their apparently mythological origin, and the all-embracing eschatological narrative is called into question for its tendency of

¹⁴⁴ Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God: Hope, Promise, and the Transformative Power of an Imagined Future," 49; George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 144.

¹⁴⁵ Stephen H. Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).

totalitarianism? In this context, it is necessary to show the ability of the parousia to satisfy the three narrative challenges mentioned in the previous section, namely how this notion organizes an eschatological narrative that, while respecting the radical discontinuity of the *eschaton*, meaningfully illustrates the uncertain future of every created reality within the hope in God's fulfilling plan for the dynamic and transient universe.

The first challenge that the notion of parousia must face refers to the value of eschatological images. As argued in the second chapter, the classical illustration of God's future focused on the *eschata* was called into question by the modern rationalistic tendency to equate imagination with something that does not make direct reference to reality. While the concepts are rational, objective, and universal, the images are emotional, subjective, and particular. Because imagination in general was defined as the capacity to represent images which are empirically non-demonstrable, the eschatological imaginary in particular easily fell into the category of the superstitious and irrational. It describes things that, with the current knowledge of reality, apparently cannot happen. In the case of the parousia, for instance, there is no point in expecting its concrete realization. Although Christ's coming is still affirmed by believers when they proclaim the Christian creed, this notion does not have concrete influence in the current life of believers because it illustrates, in mythical terms, something that will not occur. This loss of evocative power of the eschatological images is somehow reinforced in post-modernism. If, as the mentioned contemporary philosophers argue, these images have sense only within a linguistic context, the radical modification of the way people currently conceive their context makes impossible any effective grasp of the meaning of these images. Taking again the parousia as an example, this notion has lost then its evocative power not only because it could be considered a mythical reality, but also because the linguistic context which gave it meaning is not the context in which believers perceive their reality.

In this context, it is fundamental to recall that everything that theology can affirm about God's future must be grounded in Jesus Christ as God's revelation. He is the image of God. In this sense, the Christian illustration of the eschatological fulfillment of all things cannot be based on any theoretical knowledge of reality which illustrates, in an accurate way, what will happen in the future. Rather, any image of God's future must be an attempt to describe, in visual terms, the consequences of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection for the all of creation.¹⁴⁶ This is why Christ is the normative paradigm for hoping and imagining the future reality of all things. Col 1:15-20 is very clear on this point: Christ is the image of God, principle and goal of all created things (v. 15). The eschatological reflection on God's future cannot be separated, then, from Christ as image of this future.¹⁴⁷ Any image of the future must be in continuity with Christ as image of God.

Despite this necessary continuity between the eschatological images and Christ, there is a fundamental discontinuity in this relationship that must be recognized, namely Christ's image is mediated by the experience of his disciples and, in particular, by the way the first Christian communities shared these experiences in the New Testament by the assistance of the Spirit of Christ. In other words, Christ as image of God is accessible for believers thanks to a double mediation: the images used by those communities that wrote about Christ, and the Spirit that both inspired those texts in the past and opens believers to the understanding of these texts in the present. This is why all the eschatological reflection, even though directly based on Jesus Christ, must take into account the discontinuous mediation of the testimony of the Christian communities inspired by the Spirit. But this continuity/discontinuity duality works, however, also in the other direction. Although the images in the New Testament are in discontinuity with

¹⁴⁶ Green, "Imagining the Future," 78.

¹⁴⁷ Green, 77.

the present believer inasmuch as they are mediated experiences of Jesus, they offer the same experience they had with the risen Lord. The biblical texts are based on personal experiences that, by the Spirit, allow others to make the same experience depicted by the texts. Thus the New Testament opens believers to a continuity between the experiences of faith illustrated there and the current experience of Christ. This idea is fundamental in the retrieval of the eschatological imagination: the role of images is not to accurately describe a reality that, by theological definition, eludes any attempt at depiction. Rather, the images are there to enable the current experience of the risen Christ as the origin and goal of the whole of creation.

This fundamental and exclusive role of Christ for imagining God's future and the interpretation of this experience through the lens of the duality continuity/discontinuity become graphically illustrated in the theological notions of the resurrection and the parousia. As sustained in the section consecrated to the dialogue between faith and contemporary cosmology, Christ's resurrection is a suitable model for conceiving the eschatological future of the whole of the universe in terms of continuity/discontinuity. In the case of the parousia, this notion is an appropriate image for illustrating the fulfillment of all things from the perspective of a continuous and discontinuous, all-embracing narrative. In fact, the parousia is a symbol that embodies this narrative duality of continuity/discontinuity. The third chapter made this clear by affirming that Christ's return must be understood as both disclosure of what is already realized, and accomplishment of what is still to come.

All the biblical images used to illustrate Christ's return have this double aspect. For instance, the Lord who will come in glory at the end of time is the same risen Christ who appeared to his disciples before his ascension.¹⁴⁸ He ascended into heaven, but he promised his

¹⁴⁸ Acts 1:11.

presence until the last day,¹⁴⁹ and every time two or three are gathered in his name.¹⁵⁰ He is seated at the right of the Father, but he is also present in the little ones,¹⁵¹ his disciples,¹⁵² and anybody who share with others either bread,¹⁵³ the Scriptures,¹⁵⁴ or a search for God.¹⁵⁵ In fact, presence of Christ in terms of continuity/discontinuity offers a way of understanding the hope in Christ's physical return without either denying or spiritualizing it, namely, given that he is not absent from creation now, his future coming should be the full and public manifestation of his current "physical" presence within reality. In all this process, the Holy Spirit has a key role. For instance, the Spirit of the Lord creates the bond of continuity between the church as body of Christ and the fulfillment of all things when Christ comes again. If the resurrection and the parousia are interpreted through the lens of the duality continuity/discontinuity, this approach opens a different perspective for the eschatological role of images and narrative.

In the categories of Paul Ricœur, the parousia as theological symbol does not intend the transparent illustration of what it points out, but the opening to new interpretations of reality. The symbol "gives rise to thought,"¹⁵⁶ because it does not block the intelligence. Rather, the symbol triggers it.¹⁵⁷ In the case of the theological symbol of the parousia, the richness of the image simultaneously affirms something about God's future — that Christ will come again — and respects the mystery of what is depicted — nobody knows the day nor the hour. This is why the

¹⁴⁹ Mt 28:20.

¹⁵⁰ Mt. 18:20.

¹⁵¹ Mt 18:5; 25:40, 45; Mk 9:37; Lk 9:48.

¹⁵² Mt 10:40; Jn 13:20; cf. Rom 15:7.

¹⁵³ Lk 24: 30-31; Jn 21:12.

¹⁵⁴ Lk 24:27.

¹⁵⁵ Jn 20:15-16.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

¹⁵⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970). According to Ricoeur, it is necessary to recover the original pre-critical role of the symbol, by taking into account the modern criticisms of it. Thus he proposes a "second naïveté" by which the symbol is, given its multiple meanings, an invitation to interpretations. Rather than revealing something by *explaining* it, the ambiguous nature of the symbol opens and creates new aspects of reality by *suggesting* it. See, for instance, Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil; The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

parousia, as all the Christological images, is not a descriptive sign, but rather a pointing symbol in which the opening to new interpretations reaches its highest manifestation, namely the possibility of imagining the transformation of the whole of the universe by God in accordance with what has been already manifested in Christ.

The second narrative challenge refers to the cosmic and personal aspect of God's fulfillment. Besides the direct criticisms of images and narrative, part of the current difficulty of eschatology is its apparent incapacity to illustrate events that both do not coincide in temporal terms, and do not make sense outside an imaginary that does not exist anymore. As argued before, cosmological and biological discoveries changed the vision human beings have about reality in, at least, least two complementary ways. On the one hand, the contemporary awareness of the dimensions of the universe and the extension of the evolutionary process transformed the overly preponderant vision of creation through an anthropological perspective. Human beings are, rather than the center of an organized reality, one of the outcomes of a cosmic process that started without them and probably will end without them. On the other hand, cosmological projections maintain that the future of the universe is neither static nor harmonic, and its current process of increasing expansion will reach some kind of end — the universe either will collapse under its own weight or will continue expanding itself indefinitely. The cosmos depicted in these terms, therefore, clearly challenges the parousia. Many ideas theologically associated with Christ's coming seem not to be in harmony with the theories concerning the end of the universe — for instance, the gathering of God's people and the fulfillment of creation. In this context, even the idea of Christ "coming" at some point of the cosmic history seems extremely incredible.

Most of these challenges were already addressed in the previous section dedicated to the Christological interpretation — in particular through the lens of the resurrection — of the

cosmological theories of the end of the universe. As Christ was raised from the dead by God through the Spirit, believers are invited to hope in the continuity of creation precisely within the most radical discontinuity, namely the end of the universe. Besides this, chapter five explored the role of human beings in the fulfillment of creation. Rather than be responsible for the eschatological future of creation, human beings are invited to participate in God's fulfilling action over all things. The context of the fulfillment of humanity is the fulfillment of the whole of the universe. Both Rom 8:19-22 and Col 1:15-20 hold this idea when affirming personal fulfillment in the context of God's eschatological action. This is why, and despite the infinite and incomparable differences between humanity and creation, personal eschatological responsibility is neither abolished nor diluted. The future of humanity and creation are closely linked because they will receive their accomplishment by God as part of a common destiny and a common principle, namely Jesus Christ's resurrection when he comes again. He is the principle of continuity of what was created, is sustained, and will be fulfilled by the Father in the Spirit. This is why Christ is the omega of both the transformed cosmos and renewed humanity.¹⁵⁸ In this narrative that embraces the universe from the beginning to the end, Christ is the hermeneutic principle of both the whole process and every single being within it.

In this context, Christ's return is a suitable image for an eschatological narrative that simultaneously narrates the cosmic and personal fulfillment in terms of continuity and discontinuity. In other words, it is the Christological narrative, as was highlighted in the overview of Col 1:15-20, that is the principle narrative by which all other narratives — either cosmic or personal — receive their real and full meaning. Besides the reasons already asserted for sustaining this claim, it is possible to highlight the following ones. First of all, the image of

¹⁵⁸ For Christ as alpha and omega of creation, see Rev 1:8, 17-18; 21:6-7; 22:13. For Christ as principle of new creation for believers, see 2 Co 5:17; Gal 6:15.

Christ's return recalls, in narrative terms, that God is the goal of creation. It is not "something" that will happen to creation at the end of time, as if the transformation of all things is their upgrade or renewal; even the resurrection should not be conceived as "something" that will happen to creation. Rather, the eschatological goal is "somebody" who, in his encounter with creation, will accomplish all things both in cosmic and personal terms. The coming of Christ, as the coming of the Spirit in the resurrection, shows that God-self is the source of new life for the cosmos and every single thing. Second, the parousia illustrates this coming of God precisely in the paradox of the discontinuity, namely the death. The continuous presence and fidelity of God to all things occur not only at the moment of their creation or their current existence, but also in the discontinuity of their non-existence — the end of creation and personal death. This is why the resurrection is a model for imagining God's fulfillment, and the parousia a good image for illustrating it.

Finally, the parousia is a symbol that gathers, in a single narrative, the expectation of the transformation of creation and the fulfillment of human beings by framing the latter within the former. Maybe the images used in the New Testament for describing these two events — the coming of Christ from heaven to fulfill creation and to judge the living and the dead — no longer apply for the contemporary imaginary of the universe and the role of humanity within it. However, this symbol still has its original narrative function because it reminds believers that they do not have the leading role in this story because the future is a fruit of God, and that they are not the central role of this story because the divine activity includes the whole of the universe. To put it in positive terms, the parousia can inspire a personal narrative that, based on faith in Christ's coming, is possible only within the narrative framework of a transformed cosmos.

This idea may become clearer by addressing the third of the narrative challenges: the

relevance of the cosmic eschatological narrative, and the pertinence of this all-embracing narrative for the faith and concrete life of believers in the present. With regard to this issue, this last chapter has particularly highlighted Lyotard's philosophical stance. According to him, all narratives derive from a specific context and promote, therefore, a particular way to understand reality. This is why no discourse can legitimate itself with reference to a metadiscourse that intends to explain, in an omni-comprehensive way, what is reality. Any narrative that claims universal validity, in Lyotard's view, immediately falls under suspicion because of its presumption of totalitarianism. It is important to notice that this totalitarian risk is based not only on the tendency of universalizing a vision of reality by the use of the language as if it objectively describes what is the reality, but also on the inclination to conceive this metadiscourse as a closed narrative that offers an explanation for all things. Therefore, and given that the perception of reality is not possible without a narrative that offers an explanation of it, it is important to be aware of the risk by which a singular vision of reality becomes universal and omni-comprehensive.

Confronted by this criticism that calls into question the universalistic claim of Christian eschatology, two ideas must be highlighted. On the one hand, and against the criticism of the particularity of all narratives, Christian eschatology must underline that its all-embracing narrative is fully aware of the particularism on which it is based. As mentioned, the hope in the fulfillment of creation is exclusively rooted in Jesus Christ as its normative principle. His life and the way the disciples experienced it — especially his resurrection from the dead — is the basis of the eschatological claim of a transformed creation at the end of time. A good example of how this particular experience gave a full comprehension of reality is Col 1:15-20.

Despite the fact that the hymn, in narrative terms, illustrates the whole cosmic process as something started and transformed by Christ, this universal claim is made possible by an event

that, in the hymn, appears as only a moment of this entire process — the cross and resurrection of Christ. But this claim is not an abstract principle that can be applied independently of the experience from which it originated. In other words, the eschatological universal narrative received its meaning not only from the particular experiences of the disciples, but also from the present experiences of believers with the source of this narrative, namely the risen Christ. This is why the eschatological narrative, rather than an explanation of the future, is a particular invitation to hope in God as the goal of creation. And against the claim of closed totalitarianism, eschatology must recall that its narrative is neither static nor closed. In fact, Scripture, instead of describing how reality will be in the future, offers an interpretation of reality as a whole, providing a narrative context that orientates human beings as individuals and as a collectivity in their dialogue with God. On this particular issue, the duality continuity/discontinuity of the parousia plays a key role. In fact, this notion shows that the eschatological narrative, although it illustrates the continuity between this reality and the new creation, is permanently open to the discontinuity of God.

As already stated, one of the main difficulties of the contemporary eschatological imagination is the abstract character of its images and narrative. And the parousia is not exempt from this risk. This theological symbol can justly be accused of abstraction. In fact, Christ's return illustrates something extremely speculative (God's fulfillment of the whole of the universe) by referring to a paradoxical rationale (the duality continuity/discontinuity) which uses an imaginary and narrative basically in hyperbolic terms. If the parousia is merely an abstract image, this symbol not only shows its incapacity to be more inspiring than the other current images, but also contradicts the reality it tries to show, namely the concrete and physical coming of Christ to fulfill the whole of reality. In this context, the parousia and the ideas contained in this image find their visual and concrete realization in the sacraments. They illustrate the coming

of the one who is already present within creation. Because the sacraments realize the salvific action of God in Christ through the action of the Spirit, these ecclesial celebrations narratively gather, in the same moment for those who participate in them, the individual and cosmic fulfillment in Christ as something both realized in the present and to be accomplished in the future. The continuity and discontinuity of the eschatological fulfillment have their concrete and visual expression in the sacraments.

This principle of narrative simultaneity between the personal and cosmic fulfillment within the sacramental celebration is possible because the sacraments partake of the paschal mystery of Christ.¹⁵⁹ This is why all the sacraments reflect, although in different ways, the eschatological hope in God as the goal of creation. Among the sacraments, the Eucharist has always been highlighted for its eschatological tone. In historical terms, the different eucharistic celebrations refer explicitly to God's future. While the Eastern rites pointed to the parousia and the final judgment as a key element in the conclusion of the institution narrative, the Western rite attached the word "heavenly" to various aspects of the celebration — for instance, the heavenly table for the heavenly banquet in which heavenly gifts are the signs of the heavenly mystery.¹⁶⁰ This original eschatological character of the Eucharist — in particular the explicit expectation of Christ's coming — changed in the seventh century because of the increased valuing of God's judgment in the theological reflection and liturgical celebration.¹⁶¹ In fact, this liturgical shift can be traced by the use of the image of Christ which changed from the risen Lord who will return to

¹⁵⁹ The interpretation of the sacraments as participation of the assembly in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection was an idea revived by Odo Casel at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (New York: Crossroad, 1999). Some decades later, this liturgical principle became particularly accepted thanks to theologians of the Liturgical Movement such as Louis Bouyer. See Louis Bouyer, *Le mystère pascal* (Paris: Cerf, 1950). Finally, this principle is part of the Christian official teaching in the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican II (SC 5, 7, 9, 61).

¹⁶⁰ See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 51.

¹⁶¹ See Bruce Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 200; Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 211.

the crucified Jesus who died for sinners.¹⁶² In the present, most of the eschatological references in the rite are implicitly affirmed. For instance, the only two explicit reference to the parousia are at the end of the consecration after the epiclesis over the wine and bread,¹⁶³ and the prayer before the sign of peace.¹⁶⁴ However, and because of the renewed interpretation of the sacraments through the lens of the paschal mystery, the eschatological approach of the eucharistic celebration has received new perspectives in contemporary theology.¹⁶⁵

Without claiming an exhaustive review of this issue, it is possible to recognize at least two different tensions in the eschatological interpretation of the Eucharist. First, the tension between *anamnesis* and *prolepsis*. Metz particularly stresses that the Eucharist is a moment of memory not only of Jesus Christ's Passover, but also of all the victims of history. He calls this memory an "anamnetic solidarity."¹⁶⁶ Thus the memory of Christ's death and resurrection is a double source of eschatological hope: on the one hand, the hope that all victims will receive life, justice, and vindication from God as Christ did; on the other hand, the hope that all those who celebrate this mystery receive the power of the Spirit for transforming the world as God wants. In this sense, therefore, the ethical responsibility of the believer who participates in the Eucharist is inspired then by the memory of God's action in Christ who will not let anything or anybody be

¹⁶² See Joseph Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), 1–8.

¹⁶³ "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again." On this point, the eucharistic ritual makes reference to 1 Co 11:26.

¹⁶⁴ "Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil... as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

¹⁶⁵ See, for instance, Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*; Don Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 81–92; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 27–48; Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God. The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 85; Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue*, 194–204; German Martinez, *Signs of Freedom: Theology of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 174; Dermot Lane, "The Eucharist as Sacrament of the Eschaton," in *Keeping Hope Alive: Stirrings in Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 194–210; Ratzinger, *Eschatology, Second Edition*, 6–8; Thomas Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology: Toward Recovering an Eschatological Imagination* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

¹⁶⁶ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 184.

lost. But the Eucharist is not only memorial of Christ. It is also expectation of Christ. As previously discussed in the chapter consecrated to the parousia, the first Christian communities awaited Christ's return, and therefore their daily life and their weekly celebration were expressions of this expectation. The ethical responsibility received its inspiration from the future which is somehow anticipated in the eucharistic celebration, namely that Christ actually comes when they are gathered by the action of the Spirit who sanctifies both the offerings and the assembly. It is precisely because of this necessary balance of *anamnesis* and *prolepsis* that the notion of parousia becomes inspiring. The community is gathered to celebrate, in continuity with the risen Christ, the return of the Lord. Put differently, the community participates in both God's past action and God's future coming within the present of the celebration.

And here is where the second tension appears. In fact, the Eucharist as moment of active expectation in Christ's coming can be understood as hope in Christ who either brings "the kingdom of God" or fulfills "heaven and earth." As seen above, the eucharistic celebration is directly associated with the eschatological, heavenly banquet in which all nations are gathered for worshipping God. The *anamnesis* and *prolepsis* of the celebration is basically conceived in terms of memory of the paschal sacrifice of Christ and expectation of the messianic banquet of God's kingdom. In this context, the Eucharist is realization of the kingdom already present and expectation of the kingdom which is still to come. For believers, the eschatological expectation of participating in the table of God's kingdom is what inspires and motivates in believers their commitment to caring for the environment and the social justice. The Eucharist then celebrates that Christ will come to bring the kingdom already inaugurated in him.¹⁶⁷ Without diminishing

¹⁶⁷ The II Vatican Council stresses this relationship between the Eucharist and eschatology. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes* argues that the eucharistic celebration is "a meal of brotherly solidarity and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet" (GS 38). For some theologians who underlines the Eucharist as signs of God's kingdom, see Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*; Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*; John Baldovin, "Pastoral

this link between the Eucharist and God's kingdom, there is a broader frame to understand this sacrament as the moment for expecting Christ's coming, namely the transformation of the whole of creation. In this regard, the tension between the anthropological and cosmic perspective explored in the fourth and fifth chapter has here its sacramental version. If the Eucharist is the eschatological sacrament through which believers participate in God's future looking forward to the parousia, this celebration cannot be reduced to God's full rule over planet Earth when Christ comes again. Rather, the sacrament expresses the expectation in the transformation of all things – the new heavens and the new earth – and therefore the hope in the continuity, within the discontinuity, of the current universe and its eschatological transformation in Christ. This cosmic perspective of the Eucharist does not diminish at all human beings' responsibility with the environment or the social justice, but it frames the human actions in their concrete cosmic context. Thus the community gathered for celebrating the sacraments are invited to await, in the present by the help of the Spirit, that Christ will return to fulfill all things created in him.¹⁶⁸

3. Conclusions

By way of conclusion of this dissertation, it is possible to affirm the following ideas. This work started showing two major shifts in eschatological reflection before and after the Vatican II: the shift from the discussion on the *eschata* to the reflection on the *eschaton*, and the

Liturgical Reflections on the Study,” in *The Awakening Church: 25 Years of Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Lawrence Madden (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); Philip Rosato, “The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God,” *Studia Missionalia* 46 (1997): 149–69. For different approaches to the link between the Eucharist and the practice of justice, see Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); John Haughey, *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

¹⁶⁸ For some theologians who highlight the cosmic aspect of the Eucharist, see, for instance, Teilhard de Chardin, “The Mass on the World”; Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 100–101; Dorothy McDougall, *The Cosmos as the Primary Sacrament; The Horizon for an Ecological Sacramental Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

understanding of individual eschatology within the context of the collective, social, and cosmic aspect of God's fulfillment of creation. These two main changes in the way of conceiving the Christian future are two common theological presuppositions in most of contemporary eschatologies. Despite this positive approach, the second chapter underlined that eschatological stances entailed three related consequences or biases which are important to balance: first, an excessive temporalization of God's future over its material reality; second, a tendency to reduce the scope of eschaton because of the humanization of creation; third, a loss of eschatological imagination, and, therefore, of its consequent visual narrative. In this sense, this second chapter ended by offering the notion of parousia as a theological symbol to balance these biases and, therefore, to reaffirm both the unavoidable physical, cosmic scope of God's fulfillment and the necessity of a narrative consistent with it. In other words, Jesus' return was presented as an illustrative and dynamic image that, including all the highlighted elements in contemporary eschatology, allows a reflection on God's future in terms of physical and cosmic fulfillment.

This Christological symbol, widely present in Scripture and Christian tradition, conveys the elements just mentioned. In fact, the parousia entails, among other things, the expectation of God's public lordship over all things and their transformation in accordance with Christ's resurrection. When Christ returns, he will transform the whole of creation, bringing it to fulfillment. This event is waited for believers as a real return because Christ will transform, with his coming, not only their lives, but also all things. This is why the New Testament eschatological images and signs do not intend to predict the end nor to explain it. Rather, they are images that, inspired in the Jewish background of the Christian communities, both portrait their hope rooted in Christ's resurrection and provoke expectation in the transformation of all things by the Father in the Son through the Spirit. The coming of the risen Lord is not a symbolic representation of the hope in God, but an event eagerly waited. He will come as he promised.

The fourth chapter explored the parousia from the point of view of the fulfillment of the whole of creation, in particular its material, physical aspect. This approach was done by using the biblical notion of “new heavens and new earth.” In fact, the latter is one of the ways Scripture and subsequently theological reflection illustrate the expectations of God’s coming and the fulfillment of creation by Christ’s return. This biblical notion entails the transformation of all existing things, and therefore neither excludes the transformation of the material reality nor limits redemption solely to humanity. Christ’s return will fulfill God’s creation including all its aspects. The only thing that will be overcome is evil. Thus, the coming of Christ will bring salvation to the whole cosmos. Matter is good and its intrinsic goal is not its destruction either its replacement. Rather, the goal of matter is its fulfillment by God because it is — as all things are — created in accordance with Christ. Put differently, the whole of creation is aimed, since its absolute beginning in God, to become a “new heaven and a new earth” when Christ returns.

This Christological perspective of the fulfillment of creation offers a renewed framework for illustrating the role and responsibility of human beings in this transformation. In a context where both sciences show that the evolutionary process exceeds by far the factual possibilities of humanity, and theology states that creation was started by God, is led by God, and will be fulfilled by God, it is necessary to reframe the classical eschatological bond between humanity and the rest of creation. In the light of Rm 8:19-23, it was stated two main things: on the one hand, humanity is not capable of condemning creation to a situation not sought by God; on the other hand, humanity is not capable of saving either creation or themselves. Rather than humanity’s responsibility, both fulfillments will occur as different complementary aspects of the same event depicted in Christ’s coming. Only God fulfills God’s creation. This perspective, however, does not except human beings from their own responsibility *vis-à-vis* the dimension of

creation which they inhabit. Human efforts have an eschatological value, but as part of God's fulfillment of the whole of creation.

Taking into account these reflections, the sixth and final chapter highlighted five main ideas. They will be presented in a way that summarizes the theological issues worked through in the chapter. First, images and narratives are an essential part of eschatological reflection. While they are capable of representing something otherwise absent, they have the capacity to bring together things within a wider context of relationship that is not necessarily given by reality as it is currently represented. In this sense, the images and the narrative enable human beings to call to mind a set of situations and circumstances different from the prevailing ones. Imagination gives human beings the capacity for counter-factuality, and therefore either the deliberate refusal or the alternative proposal of reality such it is now. These aspects of images and narrative are fundamental for eschatology inasmuch as they depict something that has not yet happened — the new creation — by using images which include elements in paradoxical contradiction. Thus the eschatological narrative offers a vision of the future that calls believers to deconstruct and reconstruct reality in accordance with the imagined *eschaton*.¹⁶⁹

Second, the duality continuity/discontinuity offers a good approach to understand the role of the images and the narrative for eschatological reflection. As mentioned, there is no single image that can illustrate God as the goal of creation in an accurate way. God's future is a mystery. However, there is no possibility to say anything about God's future without images. This analogical role of the eschatological imagination puts in evidence the radical discontinuity and the indispensable continuity between the images and the reality they try to depict. This idea was particularly illustrated by the references to Christ's resurrection and parousia in this chapter.

¹⁶⁹ See Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God: Hope, Promise, and the Transformative Power of an Imagined Future," 54–59.

In the first case, the resurrection was used as a model for imagining the continuity/discontinuity of the cosmic process and the new creation; in the second case, the parousia was proposed as a symbol for narrating the continuity/discontinuity of the whole eschatological process, in particular the transformation of human beings and the reconciliation of the cosmos when Christ comes again. Besides the continuity and discontinuity of the eschatological images, this duality has been classically used for describing the material, physical aspect of God's fulfillment of all things. In this chapter, however, the duality was useful in the illustration of the temporal reality of the *eschaton*. As argued, the reflection on God's future requires a coherent narrative because this is how the imagined future can be associated with the past and the present. In fact, this characteristic of narrative is even more essential for eschatology since the latter links the immemorial past and the absolute future. The two biblical texts reviewed in this chapter — Rom 8:19-22 and Col 1:15-20 — are good examples of this temporal narrative that shows the continuity and discontinuity between the current reality and the new creation. The eschatological narrative shows, on the one hand, that the *eschaton* has continuity with both the past and the present. If not, the expectations are empty and the action is driven by nothing. Yet this narrative has, on the other hand, significant levels of discontinuity. It is precisely imagination which allows human beings the opportunity to think beyond the limits of the given, and to be genuinely open to what will be given by God. For all these reasons, the eschatological narrative is not a closed system that explains everything in reference to an abstract principle, but an open process that receives its meaning in the experience of the one who promised his return, namely the risen Christ.

Third, the irreplaceable role of the eschatological narrative does not lead, however, to arbitrary statements about the future of reality. As already argued, a renewed eschatological thought must take into account what other disciplines affirm about current reality and its future,

in particular the depiction of the universe offered by biology and cosmology. Thus an eschatological narrative must illustrate God's action within an almost unimaginably large and almost incomprehensibly old creation — as well as being perplexingly organic and dynamic — in which human beings are very far from being its center. The importance of an inspiring eschatological narrative in dialogue with cosmological discoveries lies in the theological conviction that God's creation is consistent, and therefore all descriptions of reality should have some coherence between them inasmuch as they reveal aspects of God's will for creation. It is possible to affirm, therefore, that a coherent eschatological narrative, at the same time faithful to revelation and to what human beings currently know about reality, should be rooted in three main ideas: first, the whole evolutionary process — not only human history — must be theologically understood as history of salvation inasmuch as God is the Creator and Redeemer of the whole of the universe; second, theology must reaffirm its grand narrative but recognize that this narrative receives its real, full meaning from a particular event in a specific time and space, namely Jesus' resurrection as revelation of the origin, rationale, and goal of the whole of creation. Finally, the human role in the fulfillment of all things by God must not be either overvalued or minimized. Rather, human responsibility must be framed in the context of God's action within creation in Christ through the Spirit.

With reference to this last point, it is important to stress that a renewed eschatological narrative must embrace all single narratives within the cosmic narrative of God's fulfillment of the universe in Christ. This is the eschatological context in which each personal narrative is not only inscribed, but also must be understood. It is important to point out, however, that although both narratives — the cosmic and the personal — clearly differ in their scope, they receive their value and meaning in relation to the same principle — Jesus Christ — and have the same notion as their final and conclusive narrative end — the risen Christ who will come again. Thus Christ

is the hermeneutical key of an eschatological narrative that goes from the creation of all things to their fulfilment at the last day, and that illustrates the future transformation of the whole cosmic process, including all individual existences within it, in accordance to him. This is the reason why the parousia is an inspiring notion for a renewed eschatological narrative. In fact, this notion grounds all eschatological statements about Jesus Christ — in particular the current real, physical presence of the risen Lord within creation — broadens the interpretation of God's fulfilment to a fully transformed cosmos, offers an illustrative and dynamic image of God's future action upon creation, and can inspire believers to recognize and embrace their role in God's fulfilment of the whole universe.

Fourth, the eschatological narrative remains abstract if it does not offer new light for the celebration of the sacraments. The latter are the ecclesial moments in which the community celebrates the paschal mystery. In this sense, therefore, the sacraments participate in the eschatological fulfilment of creation. Among the sacraments, the Eucharist stands out as the celebrative instance in which several eschatological statements, at least in liturgical terms, find their concrete realization: the people of God asking for the coming of the Lord; the gathered members of the pilgrim church in tune with the members of the heavenly church; the concrete presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the community in the offerings of wine and bread by the action of the Spirit; and the invitation to the assembly to proclaim, with its life, the mystery celebrated with the help of the Spirit. Thus the Eucharistic celebration is not only *anamnesis* of the past, but *prolepsis* of the future. This is why it is so important that a renewed narrative of God's future take into account this sacrament as the moment in which the community, gathered in the present, celebrates in expectation the content of its hope, namely the transformation of the whole of the universe at Christ's return. In other words, believers are gathered to ask, in hope, for the concrete coming of Christ.

Finally, the renovation of the eschatological imagination in tune with the sacraments has ethical and practical consequences. Without a visual narrative of God's future as the horizon of every single action, the *eschaton* loses its influence in the present. The imagined future empowers and guides ways of being in the present in tune with the hoped future. However, the question is not whether images and narrative have disappeared from the contemporary reflection of God's fulfillment of the whole of creation or not. Any eschatological reflection is full of them. Rather, the question is the theological and practical consequences of having an eschatological reflection which, influenced by the contemporary criticism of images, tends to highlight the nonfigurative aspect of God's future. This is why the parousia offers a visual illustration of God's fulfillment that, concretized in the sacraments, allows believers both their orientation in the cosmic history of creation and their participation in the divine action over it. In other words, the eschatological narrative based on the parousia is an invitation to trust in the power of God who will transform creation in love and justice, and to actively participate in God's action who will come. This is an eschatological imagination that invites believers to live their personal lives as hope in the face of the uncertainty of the future and as trust in the finally transformative action of God. The eschatological narrative is still in progress because Christ has not yet come. The expectation of his coming is characterized by both the certainty of his coming and the uncertainty of the moment. The power of the future to transform the present lies in the narrative that captures the imagination, opens the present to new possibilities, and inspires the action in accordance with this hoped-for reality.

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