

ON HUMAN FINITUDE AND ETERNAL LIFE

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Abstract

There is an emerging consensus in contemporary theology that human finitude should be affirmed and that attempts to overcome the limitations of mortality, transience and finite human knowledge and power should be resisted. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has maintained its hope for eternal life in the presence of God. The question which this essay therefore addresses is which aspects of human finitude (if any) will be overcome if the hope for eternal life is affirmed. Section two provides a brief overview of theological debates on human finitude. Section three then offers a brief introduction to theological discourse on time and eternity. In section four the contributions to theological reflection on eternity from German theologians such as Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel are discussed. This discussion on eschatological assessment of human finitude remains inconclusive though. The question that requires further attention is: In what ways will human finitude be affirmed and in what ways (if any) will human finitude be transcended in and through eternal life.

Key Concepts: Mortality, eternal life, human finitude

1. Introduction: On Eschatology and Soteriology

There has been a tendency in some contemporary eschatologies to reduce the content of Christian hope to expectations that a better future may emerge here on earth through a process of societal transformation. Although such a view of Christian hope can easily degenerate into a theological legitimising of programmes formulated elsewhere, the soteriological core of such eschatologies may be affirmed. The Christian message of salvation is one in which God's responses to various concrete human needs are articulated on an ongoing basis. The Christian message of hope is that such salvation will lead to a sense of comprehensive well-being. While the suffering of the past cannot be undone and while the suffering of the present may be overwhelming, Christians may pray and hope that future suffering will be alleviated.¹ Christian hope is thus situated within a tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the realisation of God's salvation.

Nevertheless, such an eschatology begs the question whether there is any solace for the victims of the past. What about those who are not only poor, oppressed and victimised but who know that they will probably die as such. What about those who have been brutalised, raped, tortured and murdered? Once death intervenes the injustices of the past can never be undone. Moreover, if one has lost certain opportunities for good, if one's best years have been ruined through pain or injustice, this can never be given back. If one has lost one's house, home and roots through the group areas legislation under apartheid in South Africa, such homelessness cannot be reversed by obtaining a new house through restitution processes decades later. There will be a lasting sense of loss for the time that has gone by.

¹ I draw in this description of eschatology on categories employed by Klaus Nürnberger (see 1994).

The possibility of redemption is obstructed in these ways by the predicament of temporal human finitude – in the form of human mortality but also of transience.

These observations at least indicate that the temptation to justify past and present suffering with reference to future goals should be resisted.² Johann Baptist Metz maintains that the history of human suffering cannot have any goal, although it can have a future.³ Wolfhart Pannenberg also insists that the hope for the coming reign of God cannot expect salvation only for a last generation, since only those who live in it will be able to share in it. Any portrayal of a this-worldly utopia to be established through social action cannot fathom the Christian hope for the consummation of God's reign by God.⁴ The establishment of a just society on earth could therefore be a penultimate but never the final aim of creation.⁵

In response to such observations, Christian eschatology has traditionally been extrapolated from the hope for future redemption in order to address the predicament of human finitude. Accordingly, Christian hope has been expressed in the images such as the *final judgement* (where the victims of the past will be given a just verdict), the *resurrection of the dead* (where those who died as martyrs will be rewarded) and *eternal life* (where the years lost in suffering and misery will presumably be retrieved). In this mode, Christian eschatology is not only concerned about a better future, but also about the redemption of the past.

True, such eschatological symbols have often been interpreted in an escapist way. The modernist critique of religion (epitomised by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) has targeted the now proverbial hope for “a pie in the sky when you die” with particular vehemence. The sharp edge of such critique was and still is not merely aimed at religious escapism, but at the very faith in God. If God's existence (other than in the form of human constructions) and God's transcendence is denied, then the past cannot be redeemed and justice for the victims of the past would be impossible. Then there would remain no other obligation than to work for a better world that will hopefully be established somewhere in the future through ongoing processes of societal transformation. Any (escapist) hope for restitution in a dispensation beyond this life can only divert us from our responsibility to this life, this history and this earth.

An adequate theological response to such a critique of religion cannot be based merely on our human desire to transcend our own finitude. It cannot simply postulate the possibility of divine retribution because of the burning human demand for justice or vengeance either. It also cannot be based on metaphysical speculations about the finite and the infinite. I have argued elsewhere that the Christian hope for the resurrection of the dead is essentially a hope in Godself.⁶ It is born from the complex and diverse witnesses in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the promises and the everlasting faithfulness of the living and eternal God. It is an extrapolation and radicalisation of a trust in God the Creator who transcends human and cosmic finitude and who maintains an unconditionally creative relationship with the created order.⁷ More specifically, it is a confirmation of the Christian belief in Jesus Christ, the Risen One.⁸ It expresses the Christian hope in the power of the Spirit who makes all things new. This comes to fruition in the hope that in death we will

² See Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:586, Van de Beek 1996b:208.

³ Metz 1980:108.

⁴ Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:586.

⁵ See Van de Beek 1996:207f.

⁶ Conradie 2000, 2002.

⁷ See Schwöbel 2000:116, 122.

⁸ See Küng 1984:114.

meet not nothingness but Someone: the God of grace who raised Jesus Christ from death.⁹

Since I have offered a constructive proposal for a reinterpretation of the Christian hope for the resurrection of the dead in other contributions, this contribution will focus on the theme of “eternal life” (Apostolic Creed) or “the life of the world to come” (Nicene Creed). In addressing this theme, I will assume that the hope for eternal life with God is not simply an expression of the hope to overcome human finitude (mortality), but that it is, at best, born from a confrontation with the unresolved suffering of the victims of the past (see the discussion above). What is God’s final word to such victims?

At the same time, the very notion of *eternal* life begs questions about the relation between time (together with space) and eternity. More specifically: Does the hope for eternal life imply an overcoming of human finitude? Can such a transcending of human finitude be maintained or should finitude be affirmed as part of God’s good creation. In the next section I will address these questions briefly, drawing on and referring to some of my earlier contributions in this regard.

In the third section I will make some preliminary comments about theological discussions on time and eternity (and eternal life), showing how the predicament of human finitude has been addressed through two classic strategies to explain the difference between time and eternity. In the fourth section I will then offer a survey of reflections on time and eternity by twentieth century German theologians such as Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel. This survey will have to remain inconclusive here. It will at least indicate the complexity of current theological debates on time and eternity. At best, this contribution can lay some groundwork for a more constructive theological re-appropriation of the Christian hope for eternal life in the presence of the triune God.

2. On Human Finitude

- a) In several earlier contributions I suggested that at least three dimensions of human finitude can be identified, namely human mortality, human transience and the finiteness of human knowledge and power.¹⁰ I also argued that the scope of Christian hope has often been extrapolated from its soteriological core (see the discussion above) to incorporate a response to these dimensions of human finitude.

At least since the Persian period expressions of hope in the Jewish-Christian tradition included the hope for life beyond death (the problem of mortality). At a personal level this is expressed in the hope for the resurrection of the dead, at a historical level in the hope for a final judgement and at a cosmic level in the hope for a “new heaven and a new earth.” The scope of Christian hope has sometimes been extrapolated even further to incorporate a response to the predicament of finite human knowledge and power. This is usually expressed in the hope that reliable knowledge of God will become possible in the presence of God. In the presence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God, the limitations of human knowledge and power can be transcended. The hope and yearning of many is therefore to come into the presence of God. In the mystical traditions of Christianity, this is expressed in the quest for the beatific vision. In this dispensation we may only see in a mirror dimly, but in a next dispensation we will comprehend fully (1 Cor 13:12). We will see God face to face.

- b) In subsequent theological responses to the predicament of (human) finitude the

⁹ See also Jüngel 1971:149.

¹⁰ See Conradie 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002.

following routes have been followed to explain an eschatological overcoming of human finitude:

- i) Human finitude is sometimes regarded as the primary problem that has to be overcome in the eschaton. Accordingly, the finite existence of creation in time is the (perhaps necessary) shadow side of God's good creation. If finitude (and death) is a necessary function of time (and of life), it is argued, the eschaton has to involve an abolition of time (and of change). Eternity is thus understood as *timelessness*, implying an abstract opposition between God's eternity and temporality.¹¹ Such timeless eternity is the only possible solution if the primary problem of human existence is regarded as temporal finitude. Accordingly, it is supposed that God must be beyond time. God is not subject to temporal flux. Augustine, for example, maintained that God created time together with the world and that time was therefore distinct from God's eternity. There is no temporal flux in God's eternity.

Such a response to human finitude remains problematic for various reasons. Firstly, it cannot do justice to the involvement of the living God in history as portrayed in the biblical roots of the Christian tradition. God's eternity cannot be abstracted from God's temporality, as the second and third articles of the Christian faith clearly assumes. Secondly, such a notion of eternity, which is supposed to be the fulfilment of history, is actually a negation of history. History is supposed to transmute itself into eternity and to progressively devour its own finitude. Instead, the fulfilment of history should primarily be understood soteriologically as the overcoming of evil.¹² Thirdly, such a Hellenistic notion of the eschaton typically has a narrow noetic focus. The eschaton does not bring liberation from the effects of sin but only an illumination of the meaning of history. Finitude is overcome through abiding knowledge and wisdom (gnosis). The eschaton will provide an opportunity to see God face to face, to know God fully. Eternal life is a form of knowledge, not a form of life. At worst, it is a non-bodily form of consciousness in a dispensation (heaven) beyond the history of this planet. Such a view can scarcely do justice to the hope for the resurrection of the body. Niebuhr comments that, if finitude is regarded as the primary problem of human existence (and not evil), then gnosis (and not agape) is regarded as the appropriate medium for salvation.¹³ Fourthly, eschatological redemption is portrayed here as redemption from creaturehood. In the eschaton we will share in the eternal life of the trinity. Accordingly, consummation is conceived as absorption into the divine and not as loving fellowship with God.¹⁴ This is indeed how early church fathers such as Clement and Athanasius described salvation: "Christ became human in order that we might become divine." Participation in God's being (the ultimate deification of humanity) is therefore the true destiny of our creaturehood and to reach this destiny our creaturehood itself must be overcome.¹⁵ This can only be understood as an eschatological denial of creaturehood. Or, otherwise, Athanasius should have formulated it: "Christ became human so that we can become fully human."¹⁶ The only alternative to such an

¹¹ See Welker 1998:319f.

¹² Niebuhr 1943:3,47,246.

¹³ Niebuhr 1943:95.

¹⁴ Niebuhr 1943:307.

¹⁵ See Hall 1993:271.

¹⁶ Hall 1993:273. He comments: "The crown prince of creation, fallen from grace, is now restored to his rightful place – to mastery."

abstract opposition of God's eternity and the temporal flux of the world is to allow for a primordial differentiation within God's eternity. The eternal God has time, created the world in time and takes time for creation.¹⁷ Only in this way would it be possible to do justice to the Christian confession of a triune God who creates world history and who engages in our histories.

- ii) Another option may be to regard limited duration as the primary problem of human finitude. Human existence in time is therefore not itself the actual problem, even though time implies transience. The real problem is that death intervenes at the end of life. The eschaton is consequently understood in terms of life with unlimited duration. There and then we shall enjoy life *everlasting*. Eternal life therefore implies an *endless continuation of time*, from the unimaginable past to the remotest future, from before the mountains were born, throughout all the known human generations and until all eternity (see Psalm 90:2). The intuition underlying this view is that the temporal process cannot be conceived without a *finis*, while eternity cannot be conceived as having such a *finis*.¹⁸ This is also the way in which eternal life is often understood in popular piety, namely as "a very long time", as time without a beginning or end. The notion of time without end usually assumes a one-dimensional, linear notion of time. Eternity is infinite time stretching beyond the finite boundaries of my life, the existence of the earth and of the universe.

Eternal life is therefore viewed as a continuation of temporal life after death, not as life that includes but also transcends temporality as such. This reduces what is eschatological to what is futuristic.¹⁹ It also does not take the finitude of the planet and of the cosmos itself into account. The inadequacies of this model became evident with the emergence of Big Bang cosmology and its emphasis on the time-space continuum. How can we imagine the possibility of the resurrection of the dead if this is understood as "life *after death*"? Instead, the resurrection hope may be understood as a hope that includes the whole of life, the whole history of the earth and of the cosmos, past, present and future. It is the whole of life, and of time, that has to be resurrected.²⁰ It concerns the redemption of this finite, mortal life by the eternal and gracious God (Barth).²¹

- c) By contrast, many contemporary theologians have called for an affirmation of human finitude. The power of such an affirmation of human finitude should be recognised clearly. The following aspects may be mentioned in this regard:
- i) In general, finitude may be regarded as being part of God's good creation, not a predicament from which human beings need to be "saved". We are finite creatures who should not aspire to transcend our creaturely boundaries. As Douglas John Hall comments: "We are *creatures*. We had a beginning in time and we shall have an ending. This applies to each of us individually and in the psychosomatic unity of our being; and it applies also to the human species. Like all created life, we are mortal, finite, confined to material embodiment, subject to time and the elements, moving

¹⁷ See also Jenson *ST 2*, 1999:35.

¹⁸ See Niebuhr 1943:310.

¹⁹ See Tanner (2000) who suggests that the orientation towards the future (the predicament of human and cosmic finitude) is not necessarily decisive for Christian eschatology.

²⁰ See Pannenberg (*ST 3*, 1998:606-7) and Moltmann (1996:66) on the bodily resurrection as the raising into eternity of the whole temporal life that the dead have lived.

²¹ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:633.

inevitably from beginning to end.”²² The attempt to overcome our creaturely limits is best characterised as human sin (Niebuhr). The malaise of human existence is precisely our unwillingness to accept our own finitude. We live in revolt against our finitude and seek an unlimited expansion of the boundaries of our existence.²³ Salvation can only be an affirmation of the finitude of human nature, not an escape from it.²⁴ The limitations and givens of human existence and the created order should not be rejected as constraints, but accepted as enabling conditions for individual and social being.²⁵ We have to affirm a material and finite creation, with all the vulnerability that that entails.²⁶ Pannenberg adds a Christological rationale for such acceptance of human finitude: “Jesus, however, accepted his finitude, and with it the finitude of the human creature and of all creaturely existence in relation to God, by honoring God as his own Father and Creator, and as the Father and Creator of all creatures.”²⁷

- ii) Humans have to live within biological and planetary limits. However, the logic behind most industrial societies is one of sustained economic growth. Growth is seen as the key to creating sufficient wealth for a growing world population. The size of the proverbial cake must be enlarged or otherwise any discussions concerning the cutting and distribution of the cake will remain meaningless. The classic question about how to provide justly for everyone in the face of a basic scarcity receives a simple answer in this economic paradigm: by producing more and more. The famous “Limits to growth” report (1972) expressed the first public reservations about the feasibility of sustained economic growth. It analysed the availability of energy, the use of non-renewable resources and the increasing human population. Unlimited growth is simply not possible on a finite planet. A finite planet cannot sustain continuous, expanding demands on its renewable and non-renewable resources. The notion of “limits to growth” is indeed a function of spatial finitude.
- iii) The recognition of such limits to growth suggests the need to retrieve virtues such as asceticism, frugality, gratitude, hospitality, humility, moderation and restraint (*temperantia*). We need a new understanding of what it means to live within the limits of scarcity. Unlimited economic growth and consumption are bound to a culture of death and not to a theology of life. As Mahatma Gandhi rightly and famously said: The earth satisfies the needs of all, but not the greed of those bent on insane consumption.²⁸ This requires a sense of “satisfaction”, a sense of knowing when you have had enough (*satis*). We need to adopt a lifestyle that indicates that we do know when “Enough is enough” (the apt title of John Taylor’s study on simplicity).²⁹ This requires, especially for the affluent, an ethos of self-limitation: to live within the limits of nature – which are not ours to determine! We need to learn how to enjoy the simple things in life (which are there in abundance!) and to celebrate the gift of life in all its fullness. Such simplicity is crucial, especially since there have been few signs that the materialism and consumerism that pervades

²² Hall 1993:211.

²³ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:24.

²⁴ See Kelsey 1985:169-170.

²⁵ Vanhoozer 1997:164.

²⁶ Hall 1993:311.

²⁷ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:24.

²⁸ Quoted in Boff 1995:21.

²⁹ Taylor 1975.

industrialised countries will abate in the near future.³⁰

- iv) Many have called for a theological retrieval of a sense of place (and not only time) and for an earthly Christian spirituality. We should abandon the sojourner mentality reinforced by much of Christian piety and retrieve a sense of being “at home on earth”.³¹ We should resist the overemphasis on mobility in contemporary culture and retrieve a sense of rootedness.
- v) The need to come to terms with human finitude may also have implications for an assessment of human mortality. Most contemporary theologians have discredited any suggestion of human immortality (of the soul). This can only contribute to the separation of the human species from the rest of creation and perpetuate an image of the human as being above nature. Like other species and specimens, we human beings have no right to an endless extension of our lives. Rosemary Ruether, for example, argues that the relentless quest for immortality is related to the unwillingness of the male ego to acknowledge his own limitations. The female body symbolises corruptible bodiliness that one must flee in order to purify the soul for eternal life. In numerous classical theological texts (Ruether mentions those of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), female life processes (pregnancy, birth, lactation, indeed female flesh as such) are portrayed as vile and impure. They carry with them the taint of decay and death. She says: “The problem of personal immortality is created by an effort to absolutize the personal or individual ego as itself everlasting, over against the total community of being.”³² Instead, Ruether suggests that we as human beings should accept our own finitude, our own human scale and death as the final relinquishment of the individuated ego into the cosmic matrix of matter and energy. The earth is the womb out of which we arise at birth and into which we are content to return at death.³³ All the component parts of matter and energy that coalesced to make up our individuated self are not lost, but are taken up in the great matrix of being and thus become food for new beings that emerge.³⁴ Ruether concludes:

We can do nothing about the “immortal” dimension of our lives. It is not our calling to be concerned about the eternal meaning of our lives and religion should not make this the focus of its message. Our responsibility is to use our temporal life span to create a just and good community for our generation and for our children. It is in the hand of Holy Wisdom to forge out of our finite struggle truth and meaning for everlasting life. Our agnosticism about what this means is then the expression of our faith, our trust that Holy Wisdom will give transcendent meaning to our work, which is bounded by space and time.³⁵

- d) In addition to these arguments one may point out that temporal and spatial finitude are

³⁰ Hallman 1994:5.

³¹ See De Lange 1997:181.

³² Ruether 1983:257.

³³ See Ruether 1975:211.

³⁴ Ruether 1983:258. See Bouma-Prediger (1995:143-5) for an analysis of the development in Ruether’s thinking about individual eschatology.

³⁵ Ruether 1983:258. Moltmann has sharply criticised Ruether in this regard. He argues that Christian hope is thus turned into “a pantheistic omnipresence of the everlasting matrix of life.” He adds that “this eulogy on the good earth overlooks the fragility and destructibility of the earth’s organism and thus the earth’s own need of redemption” (Moltmann 1996:276). It cannot take account of the earth’s own finitude. Moltmann concludes: “And if we are allegedly in safe keeping in the bosom of the earth and its supposedly eternal cycles, what will happen when the earth dies in cold, or melts in the fierce heat of the sun?” (1996:276). This leaves the earth itself without hope. Ruether’s reluctance to allow for God’s transcendence leaves little room for more than a pantheist appreciation of the cosmic cycles of matter and energy.

indeed functions of life itself. No form of eternal *life* would be possible without such finitude. Firstly, finitude in *space* is a function and precondition of creation itself. The spatial restrictedness of material bodies (including the human body) is necessary to allow for the staggering *differentiation* and *individuation* that is so typical of the universe.³⁶ The incredibly rich diversity of life on earth (the “principle of plenitude”³⁷) is the source of awe and wonder, and is celebrated in myth and ritual. Every material object is distinct from others and can, only on that basis, interact in a network of relations with other objects. Such differentiation requires a delicate and creative interplay between randomness and determinism, novelty and stability. Although differentiation is a dynamic process in which boundaries are continuously adapted, shifted and broken, some form of stability and definition is required for differentiation. Every boundary that is drawn implies mutual reference: the boundaries that define anything also describes the existence of another.³⁸ Since any finite being is limited by other finite beings, the finite only exists as a plurality of what is finite.³⁹ Such differentiation is only regarded as a threat within a preconceived Parmenidean monism, a culture of homogeneity or imposed totalitarian structures.

Secondly, *temporal* finitude has to be recognised as a function of life itself. Life implies, per definition, the possibility and inevitability of *continuous change* and *movement*. Although living organisms require some stability, the joy of life is closely related to the possibility of responding to new impulses and of adapting to changing circumstances. This also implies that any state of relative equilibrium in a living organism has a limited duration. What is durable is of limited value in the life cycles of living organisms. Moreover, limited duration is necessary for the emergence of new life through the death of the old in a world where the basic building blocks of life and food resources remain finite. Temporal finitude in the form of both transience and mortality is therefore a necessary condition for life on earth. Such a limited duration is regarded as a threat only from a Platonic (?) view that what is true cannot be subject to change.

It should therefore be clear that there is no need for a final overcoming of such aspects of human finitude.

3. On Time and Eternity

- a) How, then, should we assess the human quest to overcome our finitude? Should we encourage ourselves and others to accept our own finitude? Or does the Christian hope for eternal life entail some form of a final overcoming of human finitude?

Any relatively adequate theological response to human finitude has to be based on a sophisticated understanding of the continuities and discontinuities between cosmos and consummation. This highly complex relationship is often understood in terms of the relationship between time and eternity (or the finite and the infinite). Pannenberg is probably correct to regard the relation between time and eternity as the crucial problem that has to be addressed in any eschatology.⁴⁰ Indeed, the way in which this relationship

³⁶ See Tillich *ST 1*, 1951:198f, Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:87.

³⁷ See Bruteau (1997:42f) on the value of finitude as a function of the relationship between discrete beings. It is possible to say of a finite being what it is not, whereas infinite being is the “fullness of being” and nothing can be denied of it (1997:54).

³⁸ See Bruteau 1997:47.

³⁹ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:61.

⁴⁰ Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:595-597.

is understood has ramifications for a host of theological problems relating to human creatureliness, sin, salvation and consummation. It is therefore not surprising that many of the leading classic and contemporary theologians have offered reflections on the relationship between time and eternity.⁴¹ This also provides ample caution against any pretensions to offer a definitive survey or a constructive theological proposal on the Christian hope for eternal life.

- b) In order to proceed with the discussion I will first highlight two classic theological strategies to account for the difference between eternity and the finitude that characterises our existence in time.

The first strategy emphasises the aspect of *simultaneity*, the “togetherness of temporal modes”,⁴² the simultaneous presence of what is separated in the sequence of time. It seeks to find a moment of stability amidst the always evasive flux of time. Whereas time implies an always flowing now (*nunc fluens*), an always stable now (*nunc stans*) would constitute eternity. According to Augustine, a degree of simultaneity may be experienced already within this life. Past and future things have no being, precisely as they are past or future, unless they can be somehow present. Through remembrance (*memoria*), the human mind is able to make the past present, albeit that the memory selects and reconstructs as it remembers the past. Through expectation (*expectatio*) the human mind makes the future present. Through attention (*attentio*) a person can experience the present as immediate presence. This simultaneity constitutes the experience of eternity in time, but does not exist independently of human observation; it can only be grasped through the ability of the soul, made in the image of the divine logos, to stretch out (*distentio*) the present to include past and future.⁴³ It is this “eternal now” (*nunc aeternum*) within the temporal now that stops the flux of time (Tillich).⁴⁴ It is an attribute of eternity (Augustine), an “atom of eternity” (Kierkegaard).

Such a sense of simultaneity is indeed powerful. The human experience of time is not simply linear in the sense that a point in time is added to another point, each touching the other. Such simultaneity allows for an interaction between past, future and present. Without remembrance, expectation and sensory experience we would not be able to hear a melody or perceive any movement in the present.⁴⁵ In this way we are able to confer a relative unity unto all times, to keep them present and to make them contemporaneous, albeit imperfectly because memory only represents and do not recall or relive the past.⁴⁶ The remembrance of the past in myth and ritual allows for its repeatability and redeemability. Likewise, the simultaneity of finite beings which are distinguished from one another in space allows for a creative interaction between the past, present and future of such finite beings.

⁴¹ In addition to the work discussed below, see especially the contributions by Gunton, Peters, Placher, Stoeger, Ward and Welker as listed in the bibliography.

⁴² See Stoeger 1998.

⁴³ See Jenson’s (*ST 2*, 1999:29-31) discussion of Augustine’s notion of time and eternity.

⁴⁴ Tillich *ST 3*, 1963:131.

⁴⁵ Pannenberg (1990:82f) observes that this simultaneity of time forms the impetus behind the transcendental philosophy of Kant and the phenomenology of Heidegger. Space and time as transcendental categories provide to the subject an intuition of the infinite whole. However, the unity of time is no longer provided by the wholeness of eternity, but by the unifying structures of the subject / *Dasein*. Pannenberg argues that, in order to grasp the unity of time, we must have recourse to an infinite unity that rises above the finitude of the subject. See the discussion below.

⁴⁶ Moltmann 1985:115, also Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:534.

This creative interaction is possible because simultaneity and presence is not only a category of time but also of space. To be present with one another is to be able to communicate with one another (even if this takes place “at a distance”, for example through telephones or the internet). The opposite of presence is indeed absence.⁴⁷ This simultaneity therefore accounts for the possibility of healing the past through the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. It also accounts for the possibility of planning for the future based on promises, covenants and contracts.⁴⁸ The eternal now therefore has eschatological significance – as Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and Barth recognised. It also has significance for existential decisions – as Bultmann and Tillich recognised. Bultmann famously observed that, “The meaning in history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning of history is realized ... In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.”⁴⁹

However, this simultaneity through recollection and anticipation in the present remains fragmentary. As Pannenberg observes, it is only partially and transitorily that we can retain as a simultaneous unity that which is separated in time. He says: “In contrast to the divine eternity, for which all things are always present, this extension is always divided and scattered, for we are subject to the march of time, and it is only partially and transitorily that we can retain as a simultaneous unity that which is separated in time. Nevertheless, the fact of the time-bridging present and duration in the life of creatures gives us a remote inkling of eternity and a form of participation in it.”⁵⁰ That over which we can no longer exercise control becomes irredeemably past while that to which we cannot yet react remains future. The fleeting now of our sense of the present corresponds only remotely to the lasting and abiding Now of God’s presence.⁵¹ The experience of any “now” has no duration. In the flux of time, each “now” is replaced by another “now”. Pannenberg adds that, “Hence in the march of time, as Plotinus already realized, we can only seek and hope for the totality of life from a future that will integrate the many moments of life into a unity.”⁵² This also limits our ability to heal the past and to structure the future. In a necessarily limited life span, one has to recall the past and imagine the future while continuing to live in the present. There is simply not enough time to heal the past and to live in the present. The past therefore becomes continuously more complex while the future becomes more limited. This also constitutes the challenge of aging. Our hopes, expectations and plans become increasingly limited and relative and their futility ever more apparent.⁵³ Moltmann expresses this desire for duration eloquently:

Because in historical time we experience fulfilled life only in the form of moment-like eternity, we develop a hunger for a wholly and completely unclouded fullness of life, and therefore for the life that is eternal. Out of this experience of present eternity arises the longing for an eternal present in which we can say to the moment, like Goethe’s Faust: “O tarry a while, thou art so fair.”⁵⁴

⁴⁷ See Moltmann 2003:112.

⁴⁸ See Hannah Arendt’s beautiful description, in *The Human condition* (1959:213f), of the role of forgiveness (healing the past), reconciliation (healing the present) and promises (enabling the future) in interpersonal relations.

⁴⁹ Bultmann 1957:154.

⁵⁰ Pannenberg *ST 1*, 1991:409.

⁵¹ Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:598.

⁵² Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:601.

⁵³ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:588.

⁵⁴ Moltmann 1996:291.

The second strategy seeks to account for the possibility of the *duration* that an “eternal now” lacks. Without such a sense of duration, Christian hope will be reduced to ciphers of inner self-consciousness only. Then Christian hope can offer nothing more than an enriched existential experience of the kairoic moment.⁵⁵ The possibility of such duration is usually postulated in terms of the realm of eternity. Such duration should not necessarily be restricted to temporal continuation although it may include that. Theologically, duration is best understood in terms of the enduring faithfulness, steadfast reliability and abiding love of the triune God.⁵⁶ In the famous definition of eternity by Boethius both simultaneity and duration is incorporated under the rubric of totality: eternity is the “simultaneous and complete presence of illimitable life” (*aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*).⁵⁷

- c) On the basis of this discussion it seems to me that what we need is a notion of the eschaton that can radically affirm that which is material, temporal, bodily and earthly. We need a notion of the eschaton that includes these aspects but that also allows for both a sense of *simultaneity* (and thus for healing) and for the *lasting presence* of that which has transpired in time. We need a notion of the infinite that can include but that would not obliterate that which is finite.⁵⁸ Moreover, we need to avoid the trap of a sterile totalisation and a rigid unification of time that leaves little room for temporality and subsequent change?⁵⁹ This calls for a number of important methodological cautions:

Although theological assumptions about eternity cannot be avoided and therefore call for reflection, theological discussions on eternity all too often tend to be highly speculative. And although eternity is supposed to be a predicate of the triune God’s mode of being, reflections on eternity seldom follow from the content of the God’s self-revelation.⁶⁰ They often simply articulate a negation of whatever humans consider to be the malaise of temporality.

Barth’s strictly Christological approach is probably appropriate as counter such theological reflections on eternity. For Barth, theological reflection on eternity has to start with Jesus, who is confessed to be the Lord of time, and more specifically with the time of the resurrected Christ. Easter time is the time of the appearance and presence of a God who created time and has time for us. This approach avoids constructions of time (and eternity) that are then imposed on God. Instead, Barth insists that there is no god called Chronos, no time in itself, rivalling God and imposing conditions on God.⁶¹ Eternal time is the time that God has for us.⁶² In an attempt to ground a notion of eternity in a thoroughly trinitarian way, Jüngel suggests that eternity is the mode of

⁵⁵ See Polkinghorne and Welker 2000:3.

⁵⁶ See also Jüngel 2003:351-352.

⁵⁷ See the discussion by Pannenberg (*ST I*, 1991:404-5) on the legacy of Boethius’ definition. Stoeger (1998) points out that Boethius based his concept of eternity on divine plenitude and absolute perfection. His emphasis on totality seems to rule out the possibility of any change, movement or dynamism. Such an abstract opposition of eternity and time cannot do justice to our knowledge of the actions of the triune God in history.

⁵⁸ See Shults’s (2003:24-25) comment on the notion of the infinite in the work of Levinas: “For Levinas the “in” of Infinity signifies both “non” and “within.” The infinite’s very in-finitude, its difference from the finite, is already its nonindifference to the finite.”

⁵⁹ See Welker 1998:321.

⁶⁰ See Jüngel 2003:345.

⁶¹ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:456; Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:462.

⁶² Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:462. *Contra* Barth, I would insist that it is not only the time that God has for us but also the time that God has for God’s whole creation, the time of the Sabbath, the time of God’s covenant, the year of salvation, fulfilled time.

God's triune existence (*opera trinitatis ad intra*) while space and time is the mode in which God's actions with creation takes place (*opera trinitatis ad extra*). The distinction between time and eternity is therefore analogous to, and follows from, the distinction between the economic and the immanent trinity.⁶³

It is also important to stress that God's eternity cannot be abstracted from God's temporality, as the second and third articles of the Christian faith clearly assumes. A trinitarian notion of eternity would suggest that time is incorporated "within" eternity.⁶⁴ Eternity is neither timeless identity nor endless time (i.e. permanent change).⁶⁵ It has neither the timelessness of absolute identity nor the endlessness of mere process. Eternity encompasses time. Eternity is the ground and the source of the temporal, standing over time on the one hand and at the end of time on the other (Niebuhr).⁶⁶ Barth's view on time and eternity remains helpful here. He says: "Thus God Himself is temporal, precisely in so far as He is eternal, and His eternity is the prototype of time, and as the Eternal He is simultaneously before time, above time, and after time ... and He is not non-temporal because His eternity is not merely the negation of time, but an inner readiness to create time, because it is supreme and absolute time, and therefore the source of our time, relative time."⁶⁷

It should be added that the relation between time and eternity is always a relation between time *including space* and eternity. A trinitarian notion of eternity would suggest that time is incorporated "within" eternity.⁶⁸ God's eternity implies neither timelessness nor spacelessness. Pannenberg observes that, "Time owes its continuity to its connection with space. Without space, time would only be a series of discontinuous moments."⁶⁹

4. Some Notes Regarding German Voices on Time and Eternity

On the basis of the above discussion I will explore, in the rest of this contribution, the views of some important German theologians on the relationship between time and eternity. As I noted above, the discussion will have to remain inconclusive but may at least indicate the complexity of the debate and open up the need for further explorations.

- a) In his discussion of time, eternity and human finitude Karl Barth stresses the significance of duration but in a very specific way. He emphasises that eternity should not be understood as timelessness and describes eternity as "the simultaneity and coinherence of past, present and future."⁷⁰ He says: "Even the eternal God does not live without time. He is supremely temporal. For his eternity is authentic temporality, and therefore the source of all time. But in his eternity ... yesterday, to-day and to-morrow,

⁶³ See Jüngel 2003:350.

⁶⁴ See Jüngel 2003:349, Moltmann 1996:281, Pannenberg *ST I*, 1991:403f, *ST 3*, 1998:595f, Peters 1996:264, Tillich *ST 3*, 1963:418.

⁶⁵ See Brunner 1954:54; Pannenberg 1984, Tillich *ST 3*, 1963:125, Ward 1996:249f.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr 1943:299.

⁶⁷ Barth *CD III/1*, 1958:67-68.

⁶⁸ See Jüngel 2003:349, Moltmann 1996:281, Pannenberg *ST I*, 1991:403f, *ST 3*, 1998:595f, Peters 1993:146-187, 1996:264, Tillich *ST 3*, 1963:418.

⁶⁹ Pannenberg 1990:89. To me, the value of Pannenberg's discussion of eternity in terms of the distinction between the infinite and the finite, is precisely his ability to show that the finite is incorporated in the infinite. See Pannenberg *ST I*, 1991:397f.

⁷⁰ See Barth *CD III/1*, 1957:608f, *CD III/2*, 1960:437f, 526f.

are not successive, but simultaneous.”⁷¹ The creaturely time willed and allotted to us by God is not characterised by an endless sense of duration. The present moment which we experience has no duration or extension.⁷² Barth suggests that the possibility for such duration may be understood in terms of the divine “now” (simultaneity) which has both duration and extension since, for God, there is no separation between present and future.⁷³ This divine eternity is not simply an abstraction but, for Barth, it is based on the divine Word spoken now, bridging past and future.⁷⁴ Likewise our time is not understood in abstract terms but as a response to God’s Word in which we have to step from the past into the future, leaving the past which is no longer and grasping for the future which is not yet.⁷⁵ That God is present to us fills our present and makes us content and satisfied with the time that God has allotted to us. It gives our experience of the moment a distinctive weight but also a distinctive lightness, a distinctive seriousness but also a distinctive radiance.⁷⁶ Without God’s presence in our present we may well rue the “unbearable lightness” of our being (Milan Kundera). More than that, Barth seems to suggest, cannot be known by human creatures before God. This also questions any human craving not only for a long, fulfilled life, but for time with unlimited duration. That we have an allotted life span is appropriate to human creatures in distinction from God. That calls for gratitude instead of rebelling against this limitation or to resign ourselves angrily or anxiously to its inevitability.⁷⁷ It therefore seems that, for Barth the duration, continuity and extension of our lives is grounded in God’s eternity and may be experienced in our lives through the eternal God’s presence, but that temporal duration are not allotted to finite creatures who can only long for it.⁷⁸

Barth’s trinitarian and Christological approach to the relationship between time and eternity is indeed helpful in order to avoid an abstract opposition of time and eternity. From our human point of view all times are confined to the three dimensions of past, present and future. Our times begin, they endure and they come to an end. The times of Jesus, the Lord of time, are different though. Although the life of Jesus has a beginning, Christians confess that Jesus was present with God before this time. Although the life of Jesus had duration and was once contemporary, the presence of his time has not become irredeemably past. His past is not a thing of the past. The resurrected Christ is as he was and will be. Likewise, the life of Jesus once came to an end. There was a moment when his time became past. But this end is such that it is always present and still future. Our time is the time of his renewed presence, the time of his new coming which remains open to the future.⁷⁹ On this basis Christians confess that Jesus is the Lord of time, the Pantokrator from whom our times are derived, the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and was and is to come (Rev 1:8). Barth’s reflections on eternity therefore constitute a reformulation of the Christological problem. It focuses on the core Christian conviction that Jesus is both truly human and truly God. It is this core Christian conviction of the abiding presence of the incarnated Word and of the resurrected Christ that

⁷¹ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:437.

⁷² Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:528.

⁷³ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:529.

⁷⁴ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:529.

⁷⁵ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:530.

⁷⁶ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:531.

⁷⁷ Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:566.

⁷⁸ See Pannenberg’s assessment of Barth’s views on eternity as duration (*ST 3*, 1998:597).

⁷⁹ See Barth *CD III/2*, 1960:463-464, 466-511.

requires both a sense of duration and a sense of simultaneity. This is the heart of the Christian hope for eternal life for the body of Christ in the presence of Jesus, the Christ.

- b) Wolfhart Pannenberg also describes duration as a “picture” or “image” of eternity. Eternity is for Pannenberg the entirety of temporality, the “undivided present of life in its totality.”⁸⁰ Eternity therefore does not stand in contrast with temporality but is the unity and the fulfilment of all time. It may be worth our while to investigate Pannenberg’s views in this regard in more detail.

The goal of creation, Pannenberg insists, is “to share in the life of God.”⁸¹ More often, Pannenberg describes the goal of creation as fellowship with God, that is, the sharing of finite creatures in the fellowship of the eternal Son with the Father through the Spirit.⁸² In this way, “creation will be renewed for participation in the eternity of God.”⁸³ Eschatological participation in eternity, that is in the life of the triune God, implies the integration of moments and events that are now contingent and therefore apart and separate in time.⁸⁴ Such an integration and completion of our lives has to be distinct from death that breaks off life and interrupts the future and any such sense of totality. Pannenberg says: “Only participation in the eternity of God can overcome the disintegration of human life that are sundered by the march of time and integrate such moments into unity and totality.”⁸⁵ Following Plotinus’ notion of eternity as the undivided presence of the totality of life, the simultaneous presence of the whole, Pannenberg suggests that such a totality does not imply an opposition to time but presupposes it and envisages its perfection. Time implies a dissolution of the unity of life into a sequence of separate moments that are brought together as a sequence by the totality of time (eternity).⁸⁶ The totality of time constitutes a reintegration of that which is distinct.⁸⁷

For Pannenberg, the value of Plotinus’ notion of eternity is that it includes temporality but also gives a priority to the future because the whole remains not-yet, at least from our human perspective. Pannenberg suggests that what is particular in time may be related to the totality of eternity. Since the part (time) can only be experienced and interpreted, proleptically that is, in terms of the whole (or *Gestalt*: eternity), eternity forms a presupposition for understanding time. For now, this totality is yet to be completed and therefore still future (and beyond human control): “The unity of life that we see only partially in the sequence of moments in time, and that can find actualization as a whole only in eternal simultaneity, can be attained in the process of time only from the future, which brings it to totality.”⁸⁸ With the completion of God’s plan for history, God will overcome the separation of the past from the present and the future that is a

⁸⁰ Pannenberg *ST 1*, 1991:403, *ST 2*, 1994:92, *ST 3*, 1998:601.

⁸¹ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:136, see also *ST 3*, 1998:554.

⁸² See Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:138, also 32, 135-136, 178, 180, 190, 200, 219-222, 224.

⁸³ Pannenberg *ST 1*, 1991:409, see also 410, *ST 3*, 1998:645.

⁸⁴ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:102.

⁸⁵ Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:601, see also 561. See Volf (2000:266f) for reservations regarding Pannenberg’s views on the notion of totality in this regard. Volf (2000:274) argues that, “...the problem of time for human beings is not the experience of the sequence of separate moments of time, not the absence of totality or of total simultaneity of past and future. Instead, it is the experience of the conflict of times in the overlap of times at any of our given presents. Our present is not at peace with our past and future.”

⁸⁶ Pannenberg *ST 1*, 1991:403-406.

⁸⁷ Pannenberg *ST 3*, 1998:600.

⁸⁸ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:102, also *ST 1*, 1991:408.

feature of cosmic time in distinction from eternity. This separation will cease when creation participates in the eternity of God.⁸⁹ We as human beings can attain the totality of our lives, despite the fragmentation of each moment, only in relationship with our Creator.⁹⁰ What this totality would be, can now only be anticipated proleptically, especially by following the clue provided by the resurrection of Christ. The future is the force field through which the Spirit operates and enters the temporal process. The goal of the Spirit's dynamic is to give finite creatures duration through a "share" in eternity and to protect them thus against the tendency towards disintegration.⁹¹ The work of the Spirit is to establish the life of creatures as participation in God that transcends their own finitude. Pannenberg concludes: "...continued creaturely existence is only possible by participation in God. For God alone has unrestricted duration. All limited duration derives from him. The creatures need participation in God not merely because their existence differs from that of God but also in their life's movement insofar as life finds fulfillment in transcendence of its own finitude. This life of creatures as participation in God that transcends their own finitude is the special work of the Spirit in creation..."⁹²

But in what way is this fellowship also a participation in God's eternity and what does this mean for human finitude? This is not entirely clear (to me). On the one hand, Pannenberg can describe our human destiny as an elevation above everything that is finite, including our own finitude.⁹³ The notion of participation in the life of God also seems to suggest that humans will somehow have access to the simultaneity and sense of duration that characterise God's eternity. On the other hand, Pannenberg acknowledges the distinction between the finite and the infinite. He says: "God gives existence to the finite as that which is different from himself, so that his holiness does not mean the abolition of the distinction between the finite and the infinite."⁹⁴ He maintains that the finitude of creatures, that is their distinction from God and one another, will continue in the eschatological consummation.⁹⁵ The creatures praise God in continuing to be finite, for in this way creatures are as God will them to be. They also praise God in their perishing, for that is part of their finitude.⁹⁶ He also wishes to correct his own earlier suggestion that openness to the world implies a transcending of the finite.⁹⁷ Instead, we give honour to God in accepting ourselves as finite creatures and therefore as distinct from God: "Only by accepting our finitude as God-given do we attain to the fellowship with God that is implied in our destiny of divine likeness."⁹⁸ Moreover, acceptance of our own finitude also implies giving the respect that is due to all other finite creatures that are distinct from us. Only thus the whole of creation can be acknowledged and included in the praise that we bring our Creator.⁹⁹ The fellowship with the eternal God will also not involve a total absorption of creaturely existence. Nor will the finitude that is part of creaturely life be set aside by participation in the divine life, although

⁸⁹ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:95.

⁹⁰ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:200.

⁹¹ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:102.

⁹² Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:33.

⁹³ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:260.

⁹⁴ Pannenberg *ST 1*, 1991:400.

⁹⁵ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:95.

⁹⁶ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:173.

⁹⁷ See Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:229 in response to his earlier work *What is man?* (1970:8ff).

⁹⁸ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:230.

⁹⁹ Pannenberg *ST 2*, 1994:231.

mortality will indeed be overcome.¹⁰⁰ This, Pannenberg suggests, is possible because the fellowship with God is characterised by a “participation in the wholeness that flows from God’s eternity.”¹⁰¹ This wholeness of existence is not possible for creatures who are still subject to the flow of time. As described above, the lack of integration of past, present and future prevents us from attaining the totality of our existence. It can only be anticipated proleptically. Moreover, the always imminent possibility of our eventual death threatens each moment with nothingness.¹⁰²

But how should the hope for the resurrection of the dead then be understood? More specifically, how should we understand the continuities and the discontinuities between creation and eschaton, between this earth and the new earth, between my body and the hope for the resurrection of the body? Pannenberg rightly argues that the hope for the resurrection is inconceivable as long as we think of personal continuity as temporal existence and as long as we think of resurrection as an extension of such temporal existence.¹⁰³ The hope for the resurrection cannot be understood apart from the hope for the consummation of God’s reign.¹⁰⁴ Such consummation cannot be understood in historical terms as a period at the end of history. After the completion of history, there will be no historical hereafter.¹⁰⁵ We can begin to contemplate the consummation, Pannenberg argues, only “when we consider that God and not nothing is the end of time. As the finite is bounded by the infinite, so are time and the temporal by eternity. What takes place in time can never be lost so far as God’s eternity is concerned. To God all things that were, are and will always remain present in the totality of their existence.”¹⁰⁶ Pannenberg concludes on this basis that, ‘In this light, the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of creation may be seen as the act by which God through his (sic) Spirit restores to the creatures’ existence that is preserved in his eternity the form of being-for-themselves. Herein the identity of creatures needs no continuity of their being on the time line but is ensured by the fact that their existence is not lost in God’s eternal present.’¹⁰⁷

The end of the temporal, of time and history in general, thus means “transition to eternity.”¹⁰⁸ But how should such a “transition” be understood? As absorption? Or as participation? If so, is human participation understood in a passive or active sense? Or as the “dissolving” of time in eternity?¹⁰⁹ Or as the entry of eternity into time, as this is epitomised by the resurrection of Jesus Christ?¹¹⁰ Does this transition from the temporal to the eternal take place outside history and time? This seems to be the case since Pannenberg suggests that “*beyond* the end of our span of life on earth there opens up for this earthly life participation in God’s eternity.”¹¹¹ However, Pannenberg does not provide any further clarification. He continues to discuss (rightly so) the eschatological

¹⁰⁰ See Pannenberg *ST* 2, 1994:271.

¹⁰¹ Pannenberg *ST* 2, 1994:272.

¹⁰² Pannenberg *ST* 2, 1994:272.

¹⁰³ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:606.

¹⁰⁴ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:585.

¹⁰⁵ See also Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:587.

¹⁰⁶ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:606.

¹⁰⁷ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:606.

¹⁰⁸ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:594.

¹⁰⁹ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:607.

¹¹⁰ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:603-604.

¹¹¹ Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:644.

themes of God's merciful judgment which is related to the return of Christ, reconciliation with God through Christ, fellowship with God and the glorification of God.

One is left to wonder whether the consummation is simply a truth that can be grasped noetically at the end of history when the meaning of the totality of history will be finally evident for the first "time", even though we may glimpse this hidden truth now already?¹¹² If so, his emphasis on totality would also imply closure since nothing new would be possible at the end of history (otherwise the totality would no longer be total).¹¹³ But then consummation (the fellowship with God) does not alter the impact of sin in history. Eschatological redemption is then reduced to a revelation of the meaning of history. Alternatively, does consummation perhaps imply a transformation of history into something else through a participation in eternity? The problem, it seems to me, is that Pannenberg does not clarify the distinction between the totality of the world process that will be completed at the end of history and the eschatological consummation. How should the fellowship with God and/or the participation in the eternal life of God (noting that fellowship and participation are different concepts)¹¹⁴ in the eschaton be understood? In what way is the totality of the world process incorporated or "taken up" (if this is the appropriate word) in fellowship with God and what difference does this make to the finite existence of creatures? If "creation will be renewed for participation in the eternity of God,"¹¹⁵ how is this renewal and the transition from the end of history to the participation in eternity to be understood?¹¹⁶ In other words, how should one distinguish between the completion of history, the totality of history, the eschatological consummation of creation (its fellowship with God or its "participation in eternity"), and God's own existence – which presumably transcends the eschaton itself. What characteristics of the infinite (and thus of God) are not applicable to the eschaton if creation participates in God's realm of eternity?

- c) Jürgen Moltmann's analysis of the duality of heaven and earth provides us with another clue to the relation between creation, eschaton and God. In *God in creation* Moltmann argued in favour of the duality of heaven and earth in God's creation.¹¹⁷ Heaven is a dimension of creation (not of God), a dimension that is open to God, where God dwells and where God's presence may be discerned (for example by the angels).¹¹⁸ Although heaven was originally probably conceived of in spatial terms, it soon became a symbol for the dwelling place of God, and therefore the presence of God throughout creation. There is a tendency in some biblical traditions to equate heaven with the divine, but the

¹¹² Pannenberg often uses the Gnostic categories of truth being hidden or being revealed. See, e.g. Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:604-605.

¹¹³ This criticism of Pannenberg's eschatology emerged from conversations that I had with Günther Thomas (Ruprecht-Karls Universität, Heidelberg).

¹¹⁴ See Zizioulas 1985:93-94. Participation suggests a creaturely dependence which does not apply to God. Zizioulas argues that God's own being is being in communion and that creatures may participate in such communion.

¹¹⁵ Pannenberg *ST* 1, 1991:409.

¹¹⁶ See e.g. Pannenberg *ST* 3, 1998:594,601. Tillich (*ST* 3, 1963:420f) adopted a similar view that he famously called "eschatological pantheism". Tillich adds that this being "in" God may indicate creative origin, ontological dependence and ultimate fulfilment.

¹¹⁷ Moltmann 1985:158-184.

¹¹⁸ Pannenberg (*ST* 1, 1991:402) also suggests that the notion of heaven expresses the thought that all times are present in God's eternity.

view that the heavens are created by God is more dominant. Heaven can be God's dwelling place even though the highest heavens cannot contain God (1 Kings 8:27-30). For Moltmann, heaven is the relative transcendence of the earth, while the earth is the relative immanence of heaven.¹¹⁹ Michael Welker uses the contrast between what is relatively accessible and what is relatively inaccessible to us instead: "The expression 'heaven' synthesizes the natural and cultural realms over which we cannot exert direct influence."¹²⁰ Yet, the heavens are created by God and remain part of created reality. Welker concludes that: "The heavens are a reality that is inaccessible to creaturely formative activity but that nevertheless can be perceived by the senses, a reality that is immune to manipulation but that determines life on this earth. The earth is the accessible realm of creation, the realm of creation that shelters life."¹²¹

In *The coming of God*, Moltmann introduces the patristic distinction between absolute eternity (the realm of God) and relative eternity (the *aevum*, the realm of creation in the eschaton). He says: "Whereas for heaven and 'all who dwell in it' there is an aeonic time, for the earth 'and all who dwell in it' there is a transitory time. The differentiation lies in death, which is only earthly, not heavenly."¹²² In his recent *Science and wisdom* Moltmann adds that the aeon is indeed temporal but that it is time filled with eternity. It is "the relative eternity of created beings who participate in God's Being."¹²³ Creation is thus transformed in the eschaton but does not become divine.

Moltmann also suggests that the Christian hope is not so much that that which is finite will be absorbed into the infinite. The temptation is to think that the world will become eternal if it can find space within God, if God is the dwelling place of the world. Instead, the Christian hope may be that God in God's infinite love will find a dwelling place amongst that which is finite. Consummation does not mean absorption into the divine being but joyous fellowship between the Creator and creation – if creation is understood not as a synchronic fixation of the cosmos in one particular moment (especially the final moment), but diachronically as the whole history of the cosmos, in all its bodily, material, earthly dimensions and all its concrete lived experiences, all of it together. The fellowship of creation with God in the eschatological consummation would need to imply the co-presence of all chapters in the history of God's creation. Such fellowship with the Creator suggests an ultimate affirmation of finitude but also an emancipation from the anxiety that characterises finitude.¹²⁴

This would give prominence to the theological question as to whether the earth in its finitude can become the dwelling place of the infinite One. The marvel of the Jewish notion of Shekinah and the Christian doctrine of the incarnation¹²⁵ points in this

¹¹⁹ Moltmann 1985:163.

¹²⁰ Welker 1999:15.

¹²¹ Welker 1999:40.

¹²² Moltmann 1996:282. Moltmann's further suggestion that aeonic time is somehow cyclical because it has no beginning and end, no before or after, is perhaps more confusing than helpful (1996:282, 295).

¹²³ Moltmann 2003:109.

¹²⁴ See Niebuhr (1943:322): "This self bears within it the anxiety and insecurity of finite existence on the one hand, and the capacity to touch the horizons of the eternal on the other hand. The hope of the resurrection affirms that ultimately finiteness will be emancipated from anxiety and the self will know itself as it is known."

¹²⁵ See also Bruteau (1997:39): "Just as the Trinity had this holding together of the One and the Many, so the Incarnation expresses the holding together of the Infinite and the Finite." She adds that the infinite does not necessarily "intervene" in the finite but may be present in the finite. Being has to be both infinite and finite, and if it were not, it would not be complete and true and real Being. (Bruteau 1997:57).

direction, namely that the infinite God finds a dwelling place in the finite creation.¹²⁶ Perhaps, as Moltmann suggests, “the presence of the infinite in the finite imbues every finite being and the community of all finite beings with self-transcendence.”¹²⁷

- d) The question remains whether such views on the relationship between creation and eschaton do not fall into the trap of a sterile totalisation and a rigid unification of time that leaves little room for temporality and subsequent change?¹²⁸ In particular, it is important to avoid neo-Platonic and Hegelian thought patterns where differentiation in time and space (that which is finite) emanates from a primordial undifferentiated unity (that which is infinite), leads to estrangement from the original unity and is then finally redeemed through a re-absorption and reintegration into the infinite, the One, the totality of being (which may be perhaps be enriched through such reintegration). The Creator is not necessarily to be associated with primordial unity instead of diversity, order instead of chaos, or totality instead of particularity. If anything, it is the devil’s work to impose rigid forms of unity, order and totality on all that God has allowed to flourish. Likewise, sin should not be associated with the process of self-differentiation.

Instead, the Christian story is one of a primordial triune fellowship from which an ever-increasing diversity emerges in time and space. Eberhard Jüngel’s formulation is helpful here: “Through God’s creative actions *ad extra* that which has been eternally together with one another and in one another become differentiated in space and time. Insofar as eternity is differentiated (but not disintegrated) in terms of space and time, the three temporal modi of past, present and future and the spatial modi of here and there become differentiated too.”¹²⁹ Such diversity is perhaps only possible through God’s creative employment of the forces of chaos.¹³⁰ The Christian story continues to describe the radical disintegration of such diversity, the reconciliation that became possible through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the restored and enriched fellowship that is the work of God’s Spirit.

Jüngel notes that the infinite (*unendlich*) importance of each human life does not imply that the human lifespan needs to be infinite (*unendlich*) too.¹³¹ As an unrepeatable moment in the infinite God’s history with humanity, every life has a beginning and a definite end. It cannot be prolonged endlessly. The beginning and end of each life does not imply that there is an absolute beginning and end of the Creator’s love for each creature though. This is the root of the Christian faith and hope in God’s eternal faithfulness to creation. Jüngel adds that this finite earthly life will remain finite as it participates in God’s eternal life.¹³² This does not imply a redemption from this finite life as lived but the redemption of this finite life as lived. God’s eternal life limits and saves (*rettend begrenzt*) and creatively eternalises (*schöpferisch verewigt*) each finite life that has been lived.¹³³ It implies a redemption of this guilty existence through a

¹²⁶ Moltmann 1985:149.

¹²⁷ Moltmann 1985:101.

¹²⁸ See Welker 1998:321.

¹²⁹ Jüngel 2003:350, translation – EMC.

¹³⁰ See the suggestive essay on “God and chaos” by Van Ruler (1972). The analogy of children being born from a marriage is tempting here. The birth of children, as all parents will be able to testify, brings unruly chaos to any household, highly complexifies relationships within the household but also creates the possibility of greatly enriching the life of the household.

¹³¹ Jüngel 1971:149.

¹³² Jüngel 1971:151-152.

¹³³ Jüngel 2003:317.

participation in God's glory. Jüngel tends to formulate this redemption in noetic terms as the revelation of that which Christ has accomplished for finite and mortal creatures.¹³⁴ He refrains from spelling out what transformation finite creatures may expect from having fellowship with the eternal God.

5. Conclusion

This discussion continues to beg the question whether Christian hope is more than the noetic disclosure of the meaning of history and God's judgment over sin. The question therefore remains whether fellowship with God will address the injustices of the past and the tragic violation or termination of so many species, lives, episodes and opportunities. If so, in what ways will human finitude be affirmed and in what ways (if any) will human finitude be transcended in the eschaton? Moreover, what difference can the hope of eternal fellowship with God make to the way in which we live our lives here and now?

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¹³⁴ Jüngel 1971:154.

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