

# REMEMBER THE FUTURE: CONTENDING SEMANTICS OF HOPE AND THE NORMATIVITY OF THE FUTURE

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## *Abstract*

In the face of polycrisis, contemporary societies are experiencing a profound need for hope. Yet, there is a lack of consensus among scholars on how to define hope. The simultaneous societal demand for hope and the ambiguity surrounding its definition create opportunities for ideological exploitation. This paper proposes a solution by focusing on a Christian interpretation of hope, which it defines as the normativity of the future. This form of hope is characterized by a positive attitude towards historical progress and an imperative to perform the divine vision for creation amidst the realities of the present. This paper concludes that the embrace of Christian hope, understood as the normativity of the future, should be the central objective of religious education.

*Keywords:* Hope, future, eschatology, religious education

## 1. *The social need for hope*

Today, the world finds itself in the midst of a polycrisis, an unprecedented confluence of several different crises – ecological, geopolitical, and socio-economic,<sup>1</sup> In times of crisis, the need for – and the lack of – hope is often invoked. Hope, it is thought, serves as a source of resilience, allowing individuals and societies to better endure and ideally overcome adversity<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> A. TOOZE, *This Is Why ‘polycrisis’ Is a Useful Way of Looking at the World Right Now*, *World Economic Forum*, March 7, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> A. SCIOLI, *The Psychology of Hope: A Diagnostic and Prescriptive Account*, in S.C. VAN DEN HEUVEL (ed.), *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, Cham, Springer International, 2020, 137-164.

Hope is also seen as an important motivational driver sustaining social and political engagement.<sup>3</sup> The discourses of prominent socio-political reformers like Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Malala Yousafzai bear witness to this power of hope.

## 2. Contending semantics of hope

Theology and psychology are two academic disciplines with vested interests in the phenomenon of hope. Theologians assert that hope constitutes the very heart of Christianity<sup>4</sup>. Clinical psychologists, on the other hand, emphasize that hope is crucial for the effectiveness of psychotherapy.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, society often looks at theologians and psychologists in their various functional roles as professionals with a particular responsibility for the provision of hope. But, one may ask, are they really talking about the same thing?

The term “hope” is used with such a degree of polysemy that different notions of hope seem to be incommensurable, a matter of apples and oranges. This is not only true across different academic disciplines, notably theology and psychology, but also within these disciplines.

In psycho-medical research, one literature review identifies forty-nine different definitions of hope, and thirty-two different tools to measure it<sup>6</sup>. Among psychologists, some of the most influential hope theories conceptualize hope as a combination of disposition, goals, and agency<sup>7</sup>. Some schol-

<sup>3</sup> J. MOLTSMANN, *Theologie Der Hoffnung*, München, Kaiser, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., e.g., A. DILLEN, *Hope, the Motor of Life and of Faith*, in A. DILLEN - S. GÄRTNER (eds.), *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring Boundaries*, Leuven, Peeters, 2020, 221–243; MOLTSMANN, *Theologie Der Hoffnung* (n. 3); N.T. WRIGHT, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, New York, NY, Harper Collins, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> I.D. YALOM - M. LESZCZ, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 6th ed., New York NY, Basic Books, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> B. SCHRANK - G. STANGHELLINI - M. SLADE, *Hope in Psychiatry: A Review of the Literature*, in *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 118 (2008), no. 6, 421–433.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., J. GROOPMAN, *The Anatomy of Hope*, New York NY, Random House, 2004; K.L. RAND - K.K. TOUZA, *Hope Theory*, in C.R. SNYDER ET AL. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021. C.R. SNYDER ET AL., *The Will and the Ways: Development and Validation of an Individual-Differences Measure of Hope*, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60 (1991), no. 4, 570–585. “publisher”: “Random House”, “publisher-place”: “New York NY”, “title”: “The Anatomy of Hope”, “author”: “[“family”: “Groopman”, “given”: “J.”]”, “issued”: “[“date-parts”: “[“2004”]]]”, “prefix”: “Cf., e.g.,

ars consider hope the product of goal importance and the probability of its achievement<sup>8</sup>, while others regard hope as an emotion<sup>9</sup> or mood.<sup>10</sup> Based on cross-cultural lexical analysis, Lomas counts hope among the ambivalent emotions<sup>11</sup>. Oettingen uses the broad category of “future thought”, distinguishing between the subcategories of expectations and fantasies.<sup>12</sup> Important distinctions in psychology are drawn between “fundamental” and “ultimate” hope<sup>13</sup>, “active” and “passive” hope<sup>14</sup>, “state” and “trait” hope<sup>15</sup>, “generalized” and “particularized”<sup>16</sup> or “situational”<sup>17</sup> hope.

A recent conference volume that provides a comprehensive snapshot of the state of art of theological reflection on hope illustrates also here the elusiveness of an agreed definition of hope.<sup>18</sup> Some theologians take recourse to Aquinas’ treatment of hope as a theological virtue.<sup>19</sup> Although strictly speaking, in this view hope is not a genuinely human quality, but a virtue “infused” by God<sup>20</sup>, this religious view of hope has been broadly received as compatible with, if not fully equivalent to, psycho-medical conceptualizations of hope as

“},{“id”:8052,”uris”:[“http://zotero.org/users/local/e0KhNmiX/items/4GPE4XM4”],”itemData”:{“id”:8052,”type”:”chapter”,”abstract”:”Hope is defined as the perceived ability to produce pathways to achieve desired goals and to motivate oneself to use those pathways. Definitions and explanations are given for the core concepts of Snyder’s (1994a

<sup>8</sup> E. STOTLAND, *The Psychology of Hope*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> J.R. AVERILL - G. CATLIN - K.K. CHON, *Rules of Hope* (Recent research in psychology), New York, NY, Springer, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> S.R. STAATS - M.A. STASSEN, *Hope: An Affective Cognition*, in *Social Indicators Research* 17 (1985), no. 3, 235-242.

<sup>11</sup> T. LOMAS, *The Value of Ambivalent Emotions: A Cross-Cultural Lexical Analysis*, in *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2017), 1-25.

<sup>12</sup> G. OETTINGEN - A.T. SEVINCER - P.M. GOLWITZER, eds., *The Psychology of Thinking about the Future*, New York NY, Guilford Press, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> SCIOLE, *The Psychology of Hope: A Diagnostic and Prescriptive Account* (n. 2),.

<sup>14</sup> M. MICELI - C. CASTELFRANCHI, *Hope: The Power of Wish and Possibility*, in *Theory & Psychology* 20 (2010), no. 2, 251-276.

<sup>15</sup> V. CARSON - K.L. SOEKEN - P.M. GRIMM, *Hope and Its Relationship to Spiritual Well-Being*, in *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 16 (1988), no. 2, 159-167.

<sup>16</sup> K. DFAULT - B.C. MARTOCCHIO, *Hope: Its Spheres and Dimensions*, in *Nursing Clinics of North America* 20 (1985), no. 2, 379-391.

<sup>17</sup> S. FOLKMAN, *Stress, Coping, and Hope*, in *Psycho-Oncology* 19 (2010), no. 9, 901-908.

<sup>18</sup> M. LICHNER, ed., *Hope: Where Does Our Hope Lie? International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology (August 2019 - Bratislava, Slovakia)*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> A. PINSENT, *Hope as a Virtue in the Middle Ages*, in S.C. VAN DEN HEUVEL (ed.), *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, Cham, Springer International, 2020, 47-60.

<sup>20</sup> D. ELLIOT, *Hope in Theology*, in S.C. VAN DEN HEUVEL (ed.), *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, Cham, Springer International, 2020, 117-136.,

a spiritual disposition or character trait that supports resilience in adversity and adaptation to the social order<sup>21</sup> Pastoral-theologians often embrace psychological notions of hope<sup>22</sup>, especially with a view to post-secular contexts of intercultural pastoral and spiritual care, where Christian and non-religious worldviews and vocabularies intermingle in a co-creative process.<sup>23</sup>

For many theologians, however, Christian hope primarily refers to shared, biblically mediated visions of God's ultimate transformation of reality.<sup>24</sup> For some post-war theologians, such eschatological hope provides a compass for ethical orientation. God's dream of "comprehensive shalom", a "just and inclusive community for all creation" provides normative guidance for life in the present.<sup>25</sup> Bieriinger calls this approach to hope the "normativity of the future". While his work is mostly hermeneutic, Moltmann<sup>26</sup> worked out the systematic, Baldermann<sup>27</sup> the didactic, and H. Luther<sup>28</sup> the poimenic implications of Christian hope. What they hold in common is that the Christian vision of the future provides a critical measuring stick for the assessment of reality, which, marked by suffering, evil, and death, inexorably falls short of the eschatological vision. This shortfall creates a painful longing for a better world and thus inspires social and political activism. Henning Luther is adamant that rather than an analgesic for existential pain, hope is the loyal sister of grief.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>21</sup> E.g., H.G. KOENIG, *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*, San Diego, Elsevier Science & Technology, 2018; E. OLSMAN, *Hope in Health Care: A Synthesis of Review Studies*, in S.C. VAN DEN HEUVEL (ed.), *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, Cham, Springer International, 2020, 197-214.

<sup>22</sup> DILLEN, *Hope, the Motor of Life and of Faith* (n. 4).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., C. DOEHRING, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, Revised and expanded edition., Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2015; M.G. CHRISTOFFERSEN - A.H. ANDERSEN, *Post-Secular Negotiations in Pastoral Care: Models in a Danish Podcast Series*, in *Pastoral Psychology* 72 (2023), no. 5, 737-752.

<sup>24</sup> M. VOLF - W.H. KATERBERG, eds., *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> R. BIERINGER - M. ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach: Its Roots, Development, Current State and Challenges*, in R. BIERINGER - M. ELSBERND (eds.), *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 61), Leuven, Peeters, 2010, 3-25, pp. 11.

<sup>26</sup> MOLTSMANN, *Theologie Der Hoffnung* (n. 3),.

<sup>27</sup> I. BALDERMANN, *Einführung in die biblische Didaktik*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> H. LUTHER, *Die Lügen der Tröster Das Beunruhigende des Glaubens als Herausforderung für die Seelsorge*, in *Praktische Theologie* 33 (1998), no. 3, 163-177.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. H. LUTHER, *Tod Und Praxis: Die Toten Als Herausforderung Kirchlichen Handelns: Eine Rede*, in *Zeitschrift Für Theologie Und Kirche* 88 (1991), no. 3, 407-426, pp. 423.

Among the numerous, contending variants of Christian eschatology, distinctions can be drawn between, for example, individual or cosmic, embodied or disembodied, continuous or discontinuous, and terrestrial or other-worldly visions. Although an inter-religious perspective on eschatological hope can be fascinating,<sup>30</sup> the scope of the present discussion is limited to the Christian tradition due to given limitations of available space.

In summary, both psycho-medical and theological scholarship is marked by the absence of a singular and stable shared understanding of hope. The lack of an agreed subject obstructs interdisciplinary dialogue and threatens to make hope discourses susceptible to ideological manipulation.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. *Divergent assessments of hope*

Although most scholars in theology and psychology have considered hope as something positive and virtuous, there have always been voices warning that hope can also be a negative force that obstructs realistic situational assessments and detracts from active problem-solving. For example, hope discourses of total victory may prolong military conflicts and thus increase human suffering and deaths. In public as well as in private life, hope may delay or prevent necessary actions. The German systematic theologian Ingolf Dalferth groups and categorizes various philosophical and theological critiques of hope under seven claims, namely that hope was irrational, paralyzing, dangerous, self-deceptive, ignorant, illusionary and uncritical, redundant, and unworthy of the wise.<sup>32</sup> In psychology, C.R. Snyder distinguishes three types of “false hope” criticism by their concern with the maladaptive use of either illusory expectations, inappropriate goals, or poor strategies.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude this first section, it is important to understand the extent to which scholarly treatments diverge. As a result, many hope discourses suffer from some incoherence due to an unstable subject. More fundamentally, some scholars cannot even agree whether hope is a good or potentially a bad thing.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., e.g., V.-M. KÄRKÄINEN, *Hope and Community* (A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world 5), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Cf., T. EAGLETON, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London, Verso, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> I.U. DALFERTH, *Hoffnung*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> C.R. SNYDER ET AL., “False” hope, in *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58 (2002), no. 9, 1003-1022.

#### 4. *Christian Hope and the Normativity of the Future*

Against the previous section's conclusions regarding the contending and incommensurable conceptualizations of hope, the following section will focus on the more specific notion of Christian hope. When exploring the nature of Christian hope, it is important to carefully distinguish the notions of future, hope, and eschatology.

The term "future" is both a commonly used word in everyday language and a grammatical concept. However within the context of biblical narrative, it holds a unique theological significance. The god depicted in the Bible is a god of promise. God repeatedly promises a future that stands in sharp contrast to current reality. This envisioned future is described through various images, such as the kingdom of God, the city of God, new creation, new Jerusalem, or a new heaven and earth.

Similarly, the word "to hope" is often employed casually as a synonym to "to wish." However, the Christian notion of hope has a clearly defined object. Christian hoping is a human reaction to God's promises. Christian hope means living in anticipation of God's promised future. When Christians hope, they make God's future already a tangible force in the present.

Finally, the term "eschatology," unlike "future" and "hope," is rarely used in everyday conversation. Its use is primarily limited to theological discourse. It refers to the branch of systematic theology that explores the nature of hope and speculates on how God's future will differ from current human experience.

In 1964, German systematic theologian Jürgen Moltman lamented that eschatology had become a mere annex to systematic theology, largely ignored by most Christians. Although doctrines concerning Christ's return, judgment, resurrection, and eternal life are professed in the Creed in every Sunday mass, these doctrines received little attention in church life, theology, or religious education.

Against this widespread neglect of eschatology by most Christians, Moltmann argues that

«Christianity is eschatology in its entirety and not just in the appendix, it is hope, a prospect and orientation towards the future, and therefore also a departure and transformation of the present. The eschatological is not something about Christianity, it is in fact the medium of the Christian faith, the tone to which ev-

everything in it is tuned, the color of the dawn of an expected new day, in which everything here is immersed.»<sup>34</sup>

The most central topic of Christian theology, according to Moltmann, is the future. God is the God of the future. Especially the Exodus narrative and the texts of the biblical prophets depict God as the one who meets his people in God's promised future.<sup>35</sup>

Importantly, for Moltmann this future orientation is by no means understood to serve as a sedative or as cheap comfort. It is not meant to be what Karl Marx called 'opium for the people', something that numbs the senses and distracts people's attention away from the challenges of the present. On the contrary, Christian hoping for God's future makes believers critical of, and often opposed to, the reality that we find in the present world of suffering, evil, and death. Christian hope instils a restless longing and stimulates believers to change the world. Hope in God's future is a driving force of social transformation.<sup>36</sup>

Flemish practical theologian, Annemie Dillen, also emphasizes the inseparable linkage between Christian existence and hope. In her discussion of hope, she enters into critical dialogue with various disciplines (esp. psychology) and their views of hope (a trait or attitude). Dillen recognizes the importance of Moltmann, and deplores that "his theology has long remained unexplored in dialogue with pastoral practices".<sup>37</sup>

The biblical exegete, Reimund Bieringer, has elaborated a hermeneutic approach which he calls the "Normativity of the Future."<sup>38</sup> His quest touched on fundamental theology as he sought to identify "the locus of authority in our revelatory texts."<sup>39</sup> Bieringer based his approach on the hermeneutic theories of Hans Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Sarah Schneiders

<sup>34</sup> MOLTSMANN, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (n. 3), p. 12. Own translation.

<sup>35</sup> See MOLTSMANN, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (n. 3), p. 127.

<sup>36</sup> See MOLTSMANN, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (n. 3), p. 304-312.

<sup>37</sup> A. DILLEN, *Hope, the Motor of Life and of Faith*, in A. DILLEN - S. GÄRTNER (eds.), *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring Boundaries*, Leuven, Peeters, 2020, 221-243, pp. 238.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. R. BIERINGER - M. ELSBERND, eds., *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 61), Leuven, Peeters, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *Interpreting the Signs of the Time in the Light of the Gospel: Vision and Normativity of the Future* (n. 38), pp. 50.



on the one hand, and on Vatican II's theology of revelation on the other.<sup>40</sup> For Bieringer, the alternative world projected by the text becomes "the real referent of the text, the truth claim of the text"<sup>41</sup> and thus the locus of revelation. Later, Bieringer extended the *Normativity of the Future* approach into a general hermeneutical approach that is no longer limited to the interpretation of texts, but of life itself.<sup>42</sup> The meaning of "future" has evolved from literary projection to a theological understanding of "the eschatological in-breaking of the future into the present."<sup>43</sup> In this later conception of the *Normativity of the Future* approach, texts no longer merely project their own futures, but "create conditions of possibility for the in-breaking of the vision of an alternative world, a just and inclusive community."<sup>44</sup> Bieringer argues that the *Normativity of the Future* approach can be employed as an "approach to life itself."<sup>45</sup> For him, the future enjoys a "*hermeneutic privilege* over the past and the present."<sup>46</sup>

### 5. Christian Hope as an Attitude Towards the Future

In some of my own prior work, I have offered some reflections on the *Normativity of the Future* approach, and ventured to claim that for Christians, a hermeneutics of hope, an orientation towards the future, is indeed strongly supported by the Christian tradition. This claim can be supported with a philosophical and a theological argument.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup> R. BIERINGER, *Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation According to Dei Verbum 12*, in M. LAMBERIGTS - L. KENIS (eds.), *Vatican II and Its Legacy* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 161), Leuven, Peeters, 2002, 25-58; R. BIERINGER, *Dialogical Revelation? On the Reception of Dei Verbum 12 in Verbum Domini*, in *Asian Horizons* 7 (2013), no. 1, 36-58.

<sup>41</sup> BIERINGER, *The Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology* (n. 38), pp. 42.

<sup>42</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach* (n. 25), pp. 8.

<sup>43</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach* (n. 25), pp. 9.

<sup>44</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach* (n. 25), pp. 10.

<sup>45</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach* (n. 25), pp. 8.

<sup>46</sup> BIERINGER - ELSBERND, *The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach* (n. 25), pp. 12 Italics in the original.

<sup>47</sup> The following arguments have been previously outlined in A.M. KUMMER, *Men, Spirituality, and Gender-Specific Biblical Hermeneutics* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 78), Leuven, Peeters, 2019, p. 78-82.



### 5.1. Future Orientation in Philosophy

Human life is often perceived as a temporal journey, with the human being inherently historical. Conversely, historicity can be regarded as integral to the human condition. Thus, defining one's relationship with history is crucial for the formation of human identity. In public discourse, particularly in political contexts, two primary approaches to history emerge: Embracing the future or attempting to relive the past. Consequently, motivations, both personal and social, are anchored either in the past or the future. A forward-looking, hopeful orientation is typically linked with sociopolitical progressivism, while a nostalgic, past-oriented attitude is often associated with sociopolitical conservatism.

Backward-looking rhetoric is easily identifiable in political slogans featuring terms like "back" and "again," such as "Make America great again" or "I want my country back."<sup>48</sup> These slogans share a linear view of history, where the past is viewed as superior to the present. This perspective portrays history as a slippery downward slope, a descent from an imagined golden age. Here, normativity is rooted in the past, and the future, representing change and deviation from this idealized past, is to be avoided. The ethical implication of this view is to halt historical progress and ideally, to travel back in time.<sup>49</sup>

A forward-looking perspective, on the other hand, embraces the future and welcomes novelty and change. This outlook views the future as a source of hope and creative potential. History, in this view, promises improvement and is depicted as a steady upward trajectory. Normativity is not based on an ideologically constructed past but on the open-ended possibilities of dreams and visions. The ethical drive of this future-oriented perspective is to advance forward.

In public discourse, political debates are frequently framed within this binary. Political rhetoric often implies a choice between moving forward and going back, between accepting historical change and reversing it. However, philosophers would ask whether these alternatives are truly

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump during the U.S. Presidential campaigns 2016 and 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Woody Allen depicts this worldview beautifully in his 2011 movie „Midnight in Paris“. A great proponent of such cultural pessimism was O. SPENGLER, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 23rd ed., München, Beck, 1920.

viable. Can anyone truly turn back time and relive the past? Heraclitus aptly noted “*πάντα ῥεῖ*” (everything flows), asserting that “you cannot step into the same stream twice”.<sup>50</sup> Given the inexorable flow of history and the inevitability of change, turning back the clock is not a feasible option. Resisting the forward pull of history is an absurd proposition, ultimately leading to a form of nihilism. Along these lines one can formulate the philosophical argument against backward-looking worldviews.

### 5.2. *Future Orientation in the Biblical Tradition*

One can also formulate a compelling biblical-theological argument for a future-oriented perspective. One could observe that nostalgia finds no endorsement in the scriptures of the Jewish and Christian traditions. The past is never depicted as normative. Instead, normativity is consistently situated in the future.

In the Hebrew Bible, divine vocation of human beings always involves a forward movement towards a better place. For instance, when God calls Abram, his ancestral home in Haran is not depicted as the ideal place for human flourishing. Similarly, when God calls Israel out of Egypt, the exodus of God’s people represents a journey towards a better future. Although the Exodus narrative acknowledges the possibility of nostalgia, as seen when the Israelites long to return to the fleshpots of Egypt<sup>51</sup>, it never endorses such sentiments.

Arguably, the key biblical narrative concerning retrospection is the story of Lot’s wife. Lot and his family are the only ones saved from the destruction of Sodom, and they have been warned not to look back. Lot’s wife, unable to resist her nostalgia and backward-looking instincts, turns into a pillar of salt—a powerful metaphor for the calcifying, life-denying consequences of nostalgic nihilism.

In prophetic literature, the ethical message is never about returning to a superior life of a golden past. The prophetic call is always towards an alternative future. Even the experience of exile, while it can evoke tearful memories of a place, never amounts to a nostalgic longing for the past. The

<sup>50</sup> See L.D. CRESCENZO, *Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie I: Die Vorsokratiker*, Zürich, Diogenes, 1985, p. 85.

<sup>51</sup> See Ex 16,3 (KJV, NRSV).

theological message in the Old Testament is that God acts in and through history towards a better future. This rules out any desirability of turning back the clock.

The New Testament offers its own, distinct hermeneutics of hope. Throughout the gospels, Jesus never expresses a longing for the past. In Luke 17:32, He uses the story of Lot's wife to caution His disciples. His teachings focus on the imminent future, the reign of God, and the eschatological gift of the Spirit. Jesus' parables often illustrate progress through agricultural metaphors, depicting slow but inevitable growth. The Johannine Jesus inspires His followers to look forward to a future that exceeds the present, asserting that "they will do even greater things than I have done."<sup>52</sup>

In his letters, Paul reflects on his own past, and considers it literally as rubbish.<sup>53</sup> For him, the past holds no normativity. Instead, the Spirit-filled future shapes the lives and perspectives of God's children.<sup>54</sup>

Emphasizing the future as the locus of normativity does not mean that the past has no value. Collective commemoration clearly differs from nostalgia. The narrative traditions of the Hebrew Bible testify to Israel's collective memory. Walter Brueggemann notes that "Israel characteristically retold all of its experience through the powerful, definitional lens of the Exodus memory."<sup>55</sup> To this day, Jews annually celebrate the Exodus memory with the Passover festival. However, Passover does not commemorate a golden past to which anyone wishes to return. The festival's central event is the Haggadah, a family ceremony culminating in the hopeful declaration "Next Year in Jerusalem!" This is not an expression of nostalgia but a collective hope for a better future. In fact, the purpose of biblical memory is to provide historical depth to our hope.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> καὶ μείζονα τούτων ποιήσει. Jn 14:12

<sup>53</sup> Phil 3:8 (NRSV)

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Ro 8; Gal 3:26-4:7

<sup>55</sup> W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1997, p. 177.

<sup>56</sup> This is also how I understand J.B. Metz's notion of 'dangerous memory': 'It is precisely because Christians believe in an eschatological meaning for history that they can risk historical consciousness.' See J.B. METZ, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, J.M. ASHLEY (ed.), New York, NY, Paulist, 1998, p. 40.

## 6. *Christian Hope and Education*<sup>57</sup>

Several scholars of religious education underscore the centrality of Christian hope in their field. In his textbook on biblical didactics, German scholar Ingo Baldermann posits that hope is the overarching theme of the entire Bible.<sup>58</sup> He argues that theology's purpose is to equip individuals to combat despair, necessitating a pedagogical approach that empowers every believer to confront it.<sup>59</sup> "Under all conditions and circumstances, [...] a responsible pedagogy today must see to it that it enables students to grasp something like a sustainable hope on their own."<sup>60</sup> Echoing Moltmann, he emphasizes that hope is only sustainable if it does not merely anticipate a future turning point but demonstrates how to act hopefully in the present and live in the spirit of this hope.<sup>61</sup>

In his 2016 Presidential Address to the Religious Education Association in Pittsburgh, Bert Roebben from Bonn University contends that fostering hope is the foremost responsibility of educators.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Mary Elizabeth Moore from Boston University maintains that the effectiveness of teaching is measured by the extent to which it fosters hope for a transformed world.<sup>63</sup>

## 7. *Christian Hope as Performance*

Christian hope is not merely a passive attitude. It combines an attitude, future orientation, with a call to activism in the realities of the present. The British Dominican theologian and philosopher Herbert McCabe shows how both elements are fundamental for Christian religious education:

<sup>57</sup> This link between Christian hope, performance, and religious education has been previously outlined in A.M. KUMMER, *What Hope for Children? Eschatology, the Normativity of the Future, and Christian Hope in Godly Play*, in *Yearbook of Contextual Biblical Interpretation* 1 (2024), no. 1, 57–76.

<sup>58</sup> See BALDERMANN, *Einführung in die biblische Didaktik* (n. 27), p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> See BALDERMANN, *Einführung in die biblische Didaktik* (n. 27), p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> BALDERMANN, *Einführung in die biblische Didaktik* (n. 27), p. 14. Own translation.

<sup>61</sup> BALDERMANN, *Einführung in die biblische Didaktik* (n. 27), p. 10. Own translation.

<sup>62</sup> Bert Roebben, "Generating Hope: The Future of the Teaching Profession in a Globalized World," *Religious Education* 112, no. 3 (2017): 199–206.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, "Teaching Christian Particularity in a Pluralistic World\*," *British Journal of Religious Education* 17, no. 2 (1995): 78.

«There are many groups whose purpose is to ensure that something of the past is made real for the present, (whether it be the Glorious Revolution, the taking of the Bastille, the smashing of the Van); this indeed is the purpose of any group that seeks to preserve the historical identity of a people. Such remembrance is a very large part of the business of education - to recognise and realise our past is to discover ourselves. Now the business of the church is to remember the future. Not merely to remember that there is to be a future, but mysteriously to make the future really present».<sup>64</sup>

McCabe emphasizes that the very essence of Christianity lies in the inspiring normativity of the future. This involves both remembering the future, and actualizing it in the present. Similarly, Reimund Bieringer and the British exegete Nicholas T. Wright illustrate how the church engages in this dual process of remembering and performing the future.

Bieringer argues that “the reading community has the task of reading and internalizing the ancient text as the first chapters of a chain novel of which they have to write the next chapter.”<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, he points out the continued activity of the Holy Spirit in the church: “It inspires people and communities of any age to write their own “fifth gospel.”<sup>66</sup>

Wright suggests in similar fashion to understand the biblical narratives as four acts of a five-act drama. The fifth act is still being written: “The church would live under the “authority” of the extant story, being required to offer an improvisatory performance of the final act as it leads up to and anticipates the intended conclusion.”<sup>67</sup>

This insistence on performance is something the *Normativity of the Future* approach can fruitfully contribute to religious education. The challenge for religious education is to do more than just lead students through the museum of church tradition. Instead, religious education should rather be understood as performance under the creative curatorship of ancient narratives and rituals. The *Normativity of the Future* approach invites Christians to be not only spectators, but to become the actors in the performance of God’s eschatological promises.

<sup>64</sup> H. MCCABE, *Law, Love and Language*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1968, p. 141.

<sup>65</sup> BIERINGER, *Texts That Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today* (n. 38), pp. 110.

<sup>66</sup> BIERINGER, *Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation According to Dei Verbum* 12 (n. 40), pp. 52.

<sup>67</sup> N.T. WRIGHT, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, 1), London, SPCK, 1992, p. 142.

*Conclusion*

Late modern societies, shaken in their intellectual foundations by poly-crisis, are in urgent need of hope. However, there is little agreement among the scholarly disciplines about how to define hope. The concurrent societal desirability and conceptual uncertainty opens the doors to ideological misuse of the hope discourse. This paper offers a possible solution. It concentrates on a specifically Christian understanding of hope, and conceptualizes it as the normativity of the future. As such, Christian hope is both a positive, forward-looking attitude towards the flow of history and a call to action in the realities of the present moment. This conceptualization of hope serves as a societal inoculation against ideological capture. This paper argues that Christian hope, understood as the normativity of the future, constitutes a supreme objective of religious education.