

HOPE AND OPTIMISM IN STRAITENED TIMES

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In a late modern world that has grown disillusioned and cynical about utopias, let alone about humanity's ability to solve its own and the planet's problems peacefully, societies and churches no longer share the assumption that hope is clearly a Good Thing.¹ The great twentieth-century utopian ideologies all collapsed in a pile of ruins. And the current crisis of North Atlantic capitalism signals global future which, whatever it holds, no longer self-evidently promises the triumph of the West. Life in reduced circumstances, indeed in old-fashioned poverty, is on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. Europe's public social spending teeters on the brink, while one in six Americans struggles to secure enough food. And after the Pyrrhic War on Terror, what scope remains in the politically and economically straitened electronic surveillance society for aspirations to life or liberty or justice? Certainly all of these now lie much less obviously in the gift of markets, of technology, of government, or of the individual pursuit of happiness.

Hope, in any philosophically or theologically serious sense, has largely disappeared as a topic of public discourse in Anglo-American societies. True, in 2008 America elected a president who campaigned on slogans like "the Audacity of Hope" and the inimitably American "Yes We Can"—themes that to outside observers could not fail to evoke the cultural placebo known as "the American dream." Not long after rap-

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1. Early versions of this material were presented at the Tantur Ecumenical Centre in Jerusalem, the Friday Forum at St. Andrew's Church, Holborn (London), and Asbury Theological Seminary. I am grateful to all three audiences for feedback and suggestions.

turous celebrations of a meteoric rise to office, his persistent failure to deliver palpable “change you can believe in” entailed approval ratings bumping along among the lowest levels of recent presidential memory. European and Canadian politicians, by contrast, generally do not campaign on a platform of “hope” in the first place—whenever they do try that theme, the effect is awkward and cringe-making. The UK’s Tony Blair famously came to power in 1997 on a cheesily recycled campaign song entitled *Things Can Only Get Better*. Looking back on the social and fiscal debris left by his party’s thirteen-year rule, Britain became cynical about politicians of all stripes, whether the cutting or the spending sort—not least about their slippery preference for power over principle and buck-passing over promise-keeping.

More alarming for readers of this journal, perhaps, is that once we set aside the mythmaking of secular politics, even for the Christian churches the *theological virtue* of hope is today strikingly absent from either evangelism or catechesis. A quarter-century after the Cold War’s conclusion in the ill-heralded End of History, little remains of the efforts of an earlier generation of philosophers and theologians to revive that theme.² In these pages I wish to shine a light on the question of what has happened to hope and optimism as cultural topics, and to ask what a reconsideration of the scriptural footprint might contribute to a theologically grounded rediscovery of the promise of Christian hope.

BAD NEWS FOR OPTIMISM

If hope is culturally in trouble, things are looking gloomier still for “optimism.” This newfangled term seems to have entered the English language only in the course of the eighteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers several positive definitions, of which the first is historically the most influential: “The doctrine . . . that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds.” This is the definition influenced by the logical gymnastics of the seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Leibniz’s rather contorted optimism, famously, was as follows. If there is a God, we must be living in the best of all possible worlds; for if we were not, it would mean that God either (1) could not imagine a better world, or (2) was unable to make it, or else (3) did not want to make

2. See esp. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967); Josef Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). Cf. more recently Richard J. Bauckham and Trevor A. Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

it. Therefore, if there is a God, the world could not be better than it is: we live in the best of all possible worlds because this world is the one in which the most good could be obtained at the cost of the least evil.³

This notion that the world could not be any better than it is soon proved crushingly absurd in light of the catastrophic events in Lisbon on All Saints' Day 1755, when up to one hundred thousand people were killed by a massive earthquake followed by a tsunami and subsequent fires raging out of control. The French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) mercilessly satirized popular versions of Leibniz's idea in his 1759 novella *Candide*, which features the unraveling of a certain Dr. Pangloss's constantly repeated theory that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." After experiencing every horror of recent European history, *Candide* concludes that instead of all that philosophizing perhaps it's better to just get on and do the gardening: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. (Does this sentiment show that *Candide* was really an Englishman in disguise, belonging to that island tribe known to prefer pragmatic muddling through over the ideological exigencies of being *sérieux*, and to put the kettle on where others chase elusive *grand progrès*?)⁴ The effect was instantly to expose Leibniz's optimism as wholly incongruous.⁵

Ambivalence about optimism and even about hope is clearly not just a question of cultural or personal temperament, although that may come into it. Nor is it simply the result of disillusionment with the forward march of capitalism, whose failure to deliver either global prosperity or peace or jus-

3. From a less philosophically rigorist perspective the famous English satirical poet Alexander Pope held a similar view of cosmic optimism. See his *Essay on Man* (1734), end of Epistle 1:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see
All discord, harmony not understood,
All partial evil, universal good:
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

4. Though, *nota bene*, the English famously do not come off too well in *Candide* when their navy executes an insufficiently violent admiral at Portsmouth solely *pour encourager les autres!*

5. In an interesting twist to this tale, however, recent philosophers of science have tended to suggest that a more modest version of the "best of all possible worlds" theory may in fact have remarkably good scientific support, since if the world were even slightly different it could not sustain complex organisms, let alone life. Among the key points frequently noted are the following: (1) Four dimensions of space and time may be essential for life-enabling structure and order to emerge; key quantum and structural constants are also required to render such order possible. (2) Life on earth could moreover have evolved only because of a dramatically unusual and finely balanced set of factors in the solar system and the nature of the planet. Had the value of these constants and variables differed by a slight margin, the universe could not have sustained complex macrostructures or microstructures, let alone intelligent life. Allowing for these points, on the other hand, does not of course remove the theodicy problem of why elements of chaos and destruction should still remain systemically intrinsic to the human experience.

tice has caused it to fall on hard times. No, Christian opinions both for and against optimism have in fact been around for a long time, and pessimism has a distinguished pedigree both inside and outside the churches.

Two further examples, this time from nineteenth-century England, may illustrate this. Edward Pusey (1800–1882), a leading Oxford cleric and professor of Hebrew, wrote in 1832, “A true Christian can be the only real Optimist, for he alone can feel that happen what may, it must be best since it comes from a Father’s love.”⁶ By 1860, however, the influential Victorian literary journal the *Saturday Review* insisted, “A man who seriously maintains that the New Testament is an optimist book . . . is beyond the reach of argument.”⁷ Such blatant contradictions may also attest to an important development of Victorian cultural pessimism in educated circles between 1830 and 1860: the combined challenges of industrial capitalism, Darwinian science, and continental biblical criticism had persuaded an elite of previously idealistic liberal intellectuals to give up on their Christian faith—a moral and intellectual capitulation of immense consequence.

As early as 1851, such Victorian pessimism famously came to expression in Matthew Arnold’s poem about the demise of faith, penned on his honeymoon (*sic!*), which concluded with the words,

For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.⁸

That Victorian gloom was subsequently echoed in English writers like Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) and H. G. Wells (1866–1946), as well as in successive Malthusian prophets of social, environmental, and economic doom. Analogous (and importantly different) stories could be told about France or Germany, where the disillusionments of the late nineteenth century and the First World War encouraged more thoroughgoing developments like the twentieth-century spread of totalitarian ideologies as well as Nietzschean nihilism and existentialism.

6. Henry Parry Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey* (London: Longmans, Green, 1893), I. x. 224 (as cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

7. *Saturday Review*, 11 February 1860, 176/2, cited in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

8. *On Dover Beach*. On the subject of Victorian pessimism also cf. BBC Radio 4 *In Our Time*, 10 May 2007 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007d9k6>, accessed 3 March 2011).

All this has continued to take a painful cultural toll on both sides of the Atlantic, following a century that began with a Great War “to end all wars” and ended with a Cold War whose successful conclusion temporarily encouraged delusions about the decisive and unstoppable triumph of democratic capitalism.⁹ Even the very first decade of the twenty-first century amply exposed such imaginations as absurdly fanciful in the light of spectacular Islamist terrorist attacks, disastrously inconclusive responses in Iraq and Afghanistan, renewed fears of man-made environmental catastrophes, and perhaps the West’s worst economic crisis for a hundred years.

For believers in the Abrahamic traditions, it is as so often the Holy Land that yields some of today’s most tragically subverted accounts of hope. Thus there has long been something historically iconic and *déjà vu* about the rekindling over a century ago of a conflict of global significance in which each side’s truth seems conceived to deny the other’s hope—or, differently put, in which one party’s fondest hope is the other’s worst nightmare.¹⁰ Twenty-five miles from Jerusalem, nineteenth-century Eastern European refugees founded a village in the coastal plain that gave expression to their aspirations for national renewal. They called it “The Door of Hope” in allusion to a prophecy of Hosea about the restoration of Israel (Hos 2:15). Today that village of Petaḥ Tiqva has ballooned to accommodate a population of nearly two hundred thousand; and by the mid-twentieth century the fledgling state of Israel had come to adopt a secular Zionist poem called “Hope” (*Ha-Tiqvah*) as its national anthem. But the intervening 130 years have done little to dispel the disturbing impression that one people’s hopes have too often exacted the price of another people’s tragedy. So too the flip side of that Zionist hope is that in the first decade of the present century, the democratic majority of Palestinians elected a governing party whose constitution affirms, “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.”¹¹ One knows of course that bloodcurdling rhetoric seems invariably to set a necessary and reassuring tone for Middle Eastern mood music. Yet one cannot help but wonder what happens to hope in the face of the persistent reality both of rockets raining down on Israeli villages and

9. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

10. Cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, “False Prophet, False Messiah and the Religious Scene in Seventh-Century Jerusalem,” in *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. M. Bockmuehl and J. Carleton Paget (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 296 on the contested eschatologies of seventh-century Jerusalem: “In the intense revival of competition for the holy places (and in particular for the Temple Mount) between Jews and Christians, what was a Messianic hope for some represented the threat of eschatological nightmare for others.”

11. Preamble of the Hamas Charter of 1988; online, for example, at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp, accessed 3 March 2011.

of a twenty-seven-foot security wall throttling the formerly Christian city of Bethlehem (let alone the teeming hive that is Gaza).

In that sense the beginning of our present new millennium has brought remarkably little change since the beginning of the last one. Jerusalem remains inescapably “iconic” for the hopes of all three Abrahamic religions,¹² and for each of them the periodic attempt to deny this is an attempt to deny a part of themselves. As such, Jerusalem is perhaps also the classic test case for the extent to which both our deepest hopes and fears may require transformation before the courage of peace can come. Be that as it may: all in all we seem today rather less prone to Leibniz’s error of thinking this the best of all possible worlds.

It has sometimes been claimed that a deeply rooted pessimism tended primarily to characterize *European* views of the late modern world, whereas a strong strain of mainstream *American* culture remained profoundly optimistic about the future, and about humanity’s ability to shape it through the advance of technology and democratic institutions.

The truth of that perception has become increasingly questionable. It is without doubt a generalization that conceals complex realities and harbours often-problematic exceptions. Among the latter, many twentieth-century icons of upbeat American culture were of course wildly popular throughout Europe. Indeed, one might argue that the “Obamania” of 2008–2009 was another such iconic import, culminating in Berlin’s massive, quasi-messianic preelection rally of July 2008 and the astoundingly aspirational award of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize just eight months after the new president took office.

While pollsters have noted pessimism’s substantial inroads in American culture during the recent economic crisis, many observers continue to suppose the persistence of an almost proverbial transatlantic cultural divide between *soi-disant* “serious” dispositions of gloom and “realism” on the one hand and allegedly “frivolous” ones stressing potential and transformation on the other.¹³ Among the chatterati populating European editorial columns and academic common rooms, few condescending put-downs are as sweeping as that which designates an intellectual position “optimistic”—especially when associated with Americans!

On the other hand, scholarship on this matter has noted the extent to which American optimism’s seeming resilience in fact owes much to its quality of being surprisingly repackagable in a variety of seemingly contradictory expressions: Manichaean or sacramentalizing, rationalistic

12. So rightly David B. Burrell, “Jerusalem after Jesus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. M. Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 257–59.

13. The reflective comments of Thomas L. Friedman, “The Quiet Americans,” *New York Times*, 27 May 2007, on the undeterred optimism of U.S. college students may be less persuasive after the tenacious housing equity and employment crises.

or religious, technocratic or tree-hugging, militaristic or narcissistic. On that latter note, Christopher Lasch influentially showed America's characteristically Emersonian confusion of hope with innovation and progress to be deeply problematic.¹⁴

At one level Europe's cultural pessimism has long found plenty of echoes in America. Henry Kissinger, who escaped Nazi persecution of the Jews in 1938, expressed the views of many postwar observers on *both* sides of the Atlantic when he famously wrote in his senior thesis at Harvard, "The generation of Buchenwald and the Siberian labor camps cannot talk with the same optimism as its fathers. The bliss of Dante has been lost in our civilization."¹⁵ And shortly before the Obama election victory an editorial in the *New York Times* expressly eulogized "The Power of *Negative Thinking*," which it saw exemplified in the dour and sober-minded Calvinism of the early European settlers.¹⁶

All this certainly now problematizes received clichés of a facile American cultural optimism. The fog of 9/11, of Iraq and Afghanistan, of climate change and the global economic crisis have done much to ensure that both politically and intellectually the optimists in most Western countries have fallen on hard times.

Both sides of the Atlantic, then, bear testimony to hope's patent demise, deliberate rejection, or fraudulent imitation—and indeed to post-modernity's sheer ignorance of hope. The world we inhabit no longer understands what constructive sense hope could possibly have. Alexander Pope's famous phrase "Hope springs eternal" has its currency today mainly on the tongues of cynical wags, keen to reinforce a sense that hope's unredeemed season is rather like Narnia's, "always winter and never Christmas."¹⁷

SO WHAT ABOUT CHRISTIAN HOPE?

Social commentary is of course an invariably ephemeral business, and the cultural crystal ball soon makes a fool of most observers. What matters for my purposes here is simply to raise amid the cultural clamor the most

14. E.g. in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

15. Henry Kissinger, "The Meaning of History: Reflections on Spengler, Toynbee and Kant" (Undergraduate Honor Thesis, Harvard University, 1951), as quoted in "Quotations from Kissinger on His World View," *New York Times*, 5 April 1976, 20.

16. *New York Times*, 23 September 2008.

17. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle 1.9. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, ch. 2.

pressing question of all: what place remains in all this for the message of *Christian* hope?

In our situation it is clearly vital to revisit the sources of our faith if we are to recover any understanding of Christian hope. In the remainder of this study I will gradually focus on this question by way of two concentric circles around the scriptural witness: first generally, and then more particularly by consideration of three texts in Paul's letter to Rome.

SCRIPTURE ON HOPE

The Psalmist writes, "For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken" (Ps 62:5–6; cf. 31:24). This link between hoping in God and waiting for God is deeply inscribed on the Old Testament witness, and it continues in the New. For the prophets, too, the living God of Israel is the only reliable object of hope: God is addressed as "the hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble," whereas false deities cannot deliver what they promise (Jer 14:8, 22).¹⁸ He sent the Old Testament prophets to warn and to comfort Israel and "delivered them with confident hope," as the Book of Sirach puts it (49:10).

The God of Israel is the only ground of hope in the *New Testament* too, which uses a rich diversity of pertinent images to bring this to expression.¹⁹ The theme of hope is developed especially strongly by the apostle Paul: about half of all New Testament references to hope are found in his letters. New Testament faith is still in the same "God of hope" who will "fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom 15:13). Indeed for the New Testament, as we will see, the forefather and exemplar of faith is none other than Abraham, the Old Testament saint who "believed in hope against hope" (Rom 4:18; cf. Heb 11²⁰) and whose hope was not "put to shame" (cf. Rom 5:5).

More specifically, Christian hope is rooted in the objective reality of Christ and especially in his Resurrection (so 1 Pet 1:21; 1 Cor 15:19–20).

18. For treatments of hope in the OT see, for example, Walther Zimmerli, *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 2.20 (London: SCM, 1971); and Mamy Raharimanantsoa, *Mort et espérance selon la Bible hébraïque*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 53 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2006).

19. Daniel J. Harrington, *What Are We Hoping For? New Testament Images* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), offers a popular survey of such images.

20. Cf. also Markus Bockmuehl, "Abraham's Faith in Hebrews 11," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. J. Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

Christ is the hope of all believers in his first and now in his second coming (Tit 2:13); as Paul puts it, since Christ among us is the “hope of glory,” so also Christian hope is “the hope of the gospel” (Col 1:23, 27). The ascended and glorified Christ assures a hope “laid up in heaven” (Col 1:5), which is another way of saying that it is certain and not subject to be challenged by human beings or circumstances. In the end the most concise formulation may be one drawn from the opening words of the first letter to Timothy: “Christ Jesus our hope” (1:1).

As a result, where classical Greek words for hope tended to be about an ambivalent expectation or at best about a cycle of time in which a golden age eventually returns, the New Testament uses these same words consistently of a positive expectancy that has as its object the fulfilment of God’s promises in Jesus Christ.

Most fundamentally, Christian hope is encouraged and underwritten by the resurrection of Jesus: Paul’s core conviction in the Acts and the Epistles is that this alone guarantees both hope for this life and hope for the life to come (cf. Acts 23:6, 26:7; 1 Cor 15:19; Rom 5:2–11; Tit 1:2; 3:7; Heb 7:19, etc.). It is the reality of the Resurrection that causes us to be born again to “a new and living hope,” as 1 Pet 1:3 puts it. This hope set before us, says Hebrews (6:18–19; 7:19), is a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul, which enters freely into the innermost presence of God; that theme of access to God is for Paul articulated in terms of justification (Gal 5:5; Rom 4:17, 5:9). Hope takes as its object the promises of God (which is why, as one concise account puts it, hope “is confined to this life and to purgatory, and has no place either in heaven or in hell).”²¹

The singular focus on “Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim 1:1) also gives rise to an important *ecclesial* dimension of hope: the unity of hope in Christ points to the unity of the body of Christ, a point made especially strongly in the later Pauline correspondence (“there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc.” Eph 4:4–5; cf. 1:18).

But biblical hope is never to be confused with a feeling that things are going well, or even that they might turn out well. It is properly a habit of obedience—indeed the praxis of a *theological* virtue, that is to say, a virtue concerned with the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, and with the First Commandment: “I am the LORD your God; you shall have no other gods before me.” Like love and faith, hope is both received as a free gift of God and expressed as a deliberate attitude and disposition in the face of that commandment, an indispensable condition without which neither faith nor love are possible (and vice versa).²²

21. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.), 790—a view also reflected in Dante.

22. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2090f.

What is more, Pauline and other discussions of hope suggest that the New Testament's account of that virtue is theologically triangulated, or indeed *Trinitarian*, in orientation.²³ This is in part because it is grounded variously in the work of the eternal Father, the risen and ascended Son, and the present power of the Spirit. But, as many exegetes have noted, on the human side too hope is for Paul closely integrated into a triad of theological virtues. Faith, hope, and love are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable. Each is impossible without the others; each achieves its significance and meaningful expression by way of the other two. Faith, hope, and love are in the end the only three abiding human qualities (1 Cor 13:13; cf. e.g., 1 Thess 1:3, 5:8).²⁴ For the writer of Hebrews, faith gives present reality to the objects of hope; you might say it is faith that makes hope both possible and real (11:1).²⁵ At the same time, hope finds its fulfillment in love as embodied in Christ. This is in fact what faith believes and what hope expects; this is why in 1 Cor 13 love is the greatest of the theological virtues.²⁶ The greatest object of hope and love is the coming of the one in whom Christians believe: Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Tit 2:12–13; cf. 2 Tim 4:8). As Augustine put it, faith “active in love” (Gal 5:6) cannot subsist without hope: “God’s right hand, stretched down to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, is to be grasped by us with firm faith, expected with sure hope, longed for with ardent love.”²⁷

But hope for the life to come does not for the New Testament authors mean an otherworldly preoccupation. Instead, it is precisely the divine source that fuels hope in the concrete realities of daily life. So for Paul the hope of glory directly contributes to the formation of patience and character in the midst of suffering; hope, he says, “does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:2–5; cf. 8:23, 25 and in 2 Cor

23. John Webster, “Hope,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. G. Meilaender and W. Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 293–96.

24. Most fully discussed in Thomas Söding, *Die Trias Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe bei Paulus: Eine exegetische Studie*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 150 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992); cf. previously Emil Brunner, *Faith, Hope, and Love* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957); Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Die Einheit der theologischen Tugenden,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift ‘Communio’* 13 (1984): 306–14; also Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. R. Winston et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

25. Cf. also Hans Weder, “Hoffnung: II. Neues Testament,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 15 (1986): 486–87. As Chrysostom characteristically puts it (*Hom.* 21.2), “faith gives reality [ὑπόστασις] to objects of hope, which seem to be unreal, or rather does not give them reality [ὑπόστασις], but is their very essence [οὐσία].”

26. Weder, “Hoffnung,” 486.

27. *Enchiridion* 2.8. *On Free Will (De Libero Arbitrio)* 2.54, “porrectam nobis desuper dexteram dei, id est dominum nostrum Iesum Christum, firma fide teneamus et exspectemus certa spe et caritate ardenti desideremus.” Similarly, *Sermons* 4.1: “to hope what one cannot yet hold, to believe what one cannot yet see, and to love that to which one cannot yet cling” (“sperans quod nondum tenet, credens quod nondum videt, amans cui nondum haeret”).

1:22, 5:5, the idea of the Spirit as the present deposit and guarantee of the promised redemption). It is precisely steadfastness in the midst of earthly challenges that is most characteristic of Christian hope (1 Thess 1:3). Such hope also finds its concrete manifestation in the here and now in both joy and confidence rooted in Christ (Rom 12:12; 2 Cor 3:12).

The New Testament's hope is rooted in the Resurrection. At one level it looks forward to the life of the world to come. To reduce it to human programs or even utopian agendas is inevitably to dissolve it into its opposite, despair or presumption: as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15:19, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."²⁸

But at the same time, it is precisely this transcendent, theological resurrection hope that in turn undergirds concrete human plans and aspirations: for example, Paul "hopes" to send Timothy to Philippi and "trusts in the Lord" to be able to follow soon (Phil 2:23–24; cf. Rom 15:24). Christian hope may indeed find expression in concrete plans or expectations concerning human relationships (e.g., 2 Cor 5:11, 10:15, 13:6) or even apostolic travel plans (1 Cor 16:7; Phil 2:19, 23; Phlm 22, etc.). Despite or perhaps because of its focused expectancy about participation with Christ in the world to come, Christian hope engenders a view of the past and the future, of faith and indeed of ethics, which is intensely concerned with the world of the present.²⁹

In other words, Christian hope claims the reality and relevance of God's future for the transformation of the here and now. It will not acquiesce passively, let alone bless or sanctify a deformed status quo of humanly construed false identities or imprisoning circumstances. After all, to trust in Christ was from the earliest days of the church to pray *Maranatha*, "Our Lord, come!" or as the Book of Revelation has it, "Amen, come Lord Jesus."³⁰

HOW HOPE IS LOST

But what happens in the absence of hope? It is appropriate at this point to interject a brief detour to ask how Scripture and tradition envisage

28. Cf. similarly, Gérard Siegwalt, "Die Zukunftshoffnung der Kirche," in *Gott lieben und seine Gebote halten: Loving God and Keeping His Commandments. In memoriam Klaus Bockmühl*, ed. M. Bockmuehl and H. Burkhardt (Giessen: Brunnen, 1991), 280.

29. Weder, "Hoffnung," 487, "Die christliche Hoffnung ist, so sehr sie auf das Endgültige gerichtet ist, intensiv auf das Jetzt und die Welt bezogen. Sie ist eine Zukunftseinstellung, die nicht in die Zukunft flieht, sondern das Zukünftige ins Jetzt hereinholt und also den Menschen einläßt in das, was jetzt an der Zeit ist." Cf. C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope: A Biblical Exposition with Concordance*, Facet Books, Biblical Series 5 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 57, who seems somewhat to overstate this point in an anticontemplative direction: "Christian hope is simply false to itself if it does not express itself at every stage in political and social action."

30. 1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20.

hope's demise. Where hope is lost, its place is taken by one of two false and perverse substitutes. There is despair, a determined anticipation that hope will not be fulfilled, or there is the counterfeit quality of presumption, the arrogant anticipation of hope as no longer necessary because it has *already* been fulfilled or its outcome is somehow under our control.³¹ Which of these substitutes is the greater threat depends on various personal and circumstantial factors. At one time or another, even the major biblical figures of hope may be said to have succumbed to *both* of these errors in the course of their pilgrimage. One thinks here of the stories of Moses or David, Peter or Paul.

Biblically speaking, despair is not an emotional state into which one falls unwillingly due to the force of temperament or external circumstance, but a deliberate decision of the will and intellect. It may even take the form of an ideological view of the world that approaches misanthropy. By contrast, the experience or feeling we may *colloquially* call "despair" is in fact often the mark of the poor in Spirit, those to whom (as in the Psalms of lament) life has dealt a hard deck of cards but whom Christ in the Sermon on the Mount assures that theirs is the kingdom of Heaven, they shall be comforted, they shall inherit the Land, they shall be satisfied (Matt 5:3–6). There is a subtle but important difference between Simon Peter's bitter remorse and Judas's unmitigated despair.

Theologically, despair as the denial of hope is a frame of mind and an act of will, rather than a feeling. It is a comprehensive rational and emotional determination that is intrinsically a denial of redemption and a decision not to hear the gospel. We may therefore say quite categorically that regardless of circumstances, the road of discipleship does not run this way: despair has no foot on which to walk the way of Christ.³² Even the prophet Ezekiel already linked Israel's loss of hope with absence of resurrection (Ezek 37:11). For the New Testament, the rejection of hope is in fact what characterizes *unbelievers*, "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12; 1 Thess 4:13). The Christian tradition sees resolute despair as a kind of sin against the Holy Spirit.

What this means is that despair as denial of hope never just suddenly happens, but one thing leads to another. We may begin with a certain moral and intellectual indifference or stagnation, what the desert Fathers and medieval tradition call "sloth" or "acedia."³³ This is

31. Cf. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 113–23; also Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 23 (premature anticipation of fulfillment or of unfulfillment).

32. Paschasius Radbertus (785–865), *On Faith, Hope and Love* 2.4.1 (PL 120, 1443), writes that despair is literally the absence of hope (de-speration), because it "has no foot on which to walk the way that is Christ" ("eo quod desit illi pes in via, quae Christus est, gradiendi"; also cited in Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 115).

33. Famously Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), *Praktikos* 12; also John Cassian (360–433). Cf. Garbriel Bunge, *Akēdia: La doctrine spirituelle d'Évagre le Pontique sur l'acédie*, *Spiritualité orientale* 52 (Köln: Luthé-Verlag, 1991), with the critique of Julia Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009, 7–8).

to acquiesce in a loss of confidence that our thoughts and actions really matter or can make a difference: spiritual sloth quietly accepts and routinizes discouragement, both of oneself and others. Acedia means to stop doing the things that show we care and to cease to care whether they turn out well or badly. This precursor to hopelessness, in other words, is succumbing self-indulgently to a sense of pointlessness.³⁴ It is like Chaucer's languid cat that wants fish—but not enough to wet her paws.³⁵

Conversely, a further expression of sloth (and indeed of pointlessness) can be unstable hyperactivity, the bored or nostalgic or angry pursuit of distraction and excess, wishing constantly that things were other than they are or that I were in a place other than I am. Regardless of which forms it takes, before long acedia as the predecessor of hopelessness may lend itself to the development of full-blown pessimism, to the sense that things are not only pointless but irredeemably bad or will turn out to be so.

The second form of hopelessness is presumption, which is to take for granted an outcome either of human control or of divine action. This is not so much the opposite of hope as its fraudulent imitation: it is in some ways easier to identify and redress, though also easier to confuse with hope.³⁶ We can find plenty of evidence in antiscriptural mythmaking ranging from the "Left Behind" ideology all the way to the positive-thinking merchants of health and wealth. Far from Christian hope, they deliver secular despair. We all know spectacular illustrations of the destructiveness of this error, whether in religion or in politics.

HOPE IN ROME

As a final exegetical exercise after this unhappy detour, we turn once again to the hope of Paul. The apostle develops this theological theme especially in his letter to Rome, which is a great case study for the apostle's

34. For ancient and medieval views of *acedia* and *melancholia*, see Christoph Flüeler, "Acedia und Melancholie im Spätmittelalter," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 34 (1987): 379–98; Jean-Charles Nault, *La saveur de Dieu: l'acédie dans le dynamisme de l'agir* (Paris: Cerf, 2006); Michael Theunissen, *Vorentwürfe von Moderne: Antike Melancholie und die Acedia des Mittelalters* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996); Peter Toohey, *Melancholy, Love, and Time: Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); and, from the perspective of modern psychiatry, Robert W. Daly, "Before Depression: The Medieval Vice of Acedia," *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes* 70 (2007): 30–51. See also R. R. Reno, "Fighting the Noonday Devil," *First Things*, no. 135 (2003): 31–36.

35. *House of Fame* 3.1783–84. Also quoted in Reno, "Noonday Devil," 36.

36. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 124.

vision of hope in the face of serious concerns and challenges near the end of his own ministry (e.g., Rom 4:18, 5:1–5, 8:19–25, 12:12, 15:4, 13). Here we shall briefly highlight three passages in the first half of the letter.

1. Romans 4:18–21. In chapters 1–3 Paul has established his core theme of the justification of Jews and Gentiles alike by faith in Jesus Christ. It seems highly significant that for his chief illustration of this point Paul turns to the Old Testament and here especially to Abraham. Abraham's faith was expressed "in hope against hope." That is to say, against and beyond the limits and uncertainties of his own human hope, Abraham believed and hoped in the God whose very character it is to keep his promises. James Dunn provocatively comments, "Paul here plays the Hebrew concept of hope off against the Greek: against a hope characterized by uncertainty and fear of the unknown future, Abraham's faith was a firm confidence in God as the one who determines the future according to what he has promised."³⁷ And God's purpose here was, as the rest of the chapter shows, to make Abraham the forefather of faith for believers in *every* nation. Romans 15 makes very clear the role Paul assigns to the Old Testament Scriptures as the rich soil nourishing Christian faith and hope: "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (15:4). For Paul as for Hebrews and all other New Testament authors, Christian hope follows the example of Abraham and the Old Testament saints as our fathers and mothers in faith.

2. Romans 5:1–5 offers a transition to the next great section in the letter, in which the apostle turns from the doctrine of justification to the reality of salvation and life in Christ. "Therefore," begins the apostle, "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Faith in Christ implies joy in the hope of participating in God's glory, sharing in God's life and redemptive purposes for his world.

But Paul's account of hope is far from a Dr. Pangloss or Pollyanna view of the world. Experiences of trial, tribulation, and suffering are for believers not embarrassing setbacks but shape Christian character, which in turn produces and reinforces hope. Paul shares the view of Jesus and other first-century Jews that the final and authentic triumph of God's redemption of the world is necessarily preceded by a period of testing and of resistance by the forces of evil, but that these are merely the birth pangs of the new world to come.³⁸ Hope in the face of unredeemable disaster would indeed

37. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary 38 (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 1:219. Cf. already Augustine about pagan usage of "hope" in *Enchiridion* 2.8.

38. Note esp. Mark 13.8 parr.; cf. Col 1.24; Rev 6.10–11, and the like.

be bizarre and absurd, but in Christ, Paul knows both objectively and subjectively that the future in the midst of suffering remains unshakably in God's hands. The love of God in the cross and Resurrection has at the same time been, as Paul puts it, poured abundantly into our hearts. For this reason alone, such hope can hold its head high and is not put to shame.

3. Romans 8, finally, turns from the dispiriting reflection on humanity's enslavement to powers of sin and death in chapter 7 to a celebration of the freedom bestowed on the children of God in the new age of the Holy Spirit, who is even now already given to them as a deposit against the future glory to come. Here in chapter 8 the abundant gift of the Spirit causes the new freedom of the Resurrection to flourish in the believers' lives as adopted children of God, guaranteeing their hope and strengthening them throughout present weakness and suffering to their assured participation in the love of God.³⁹ Just as new "life" is here both present and future, so the object of "hope" in future eternal participation in God is already partly but genuinely realized in the Spirit's manifestation here and now. The Holy Spirit, you might say, is for Paul the present tense of hope.⁴⁰

Contrary to contemporary secular or neo-Gnostic accounts of hope, this new life is not a matter of developing our innate potential or divine spark: like the Resurrection of Jesus it can only be by the Creator's fresh act of creation. New creation is exactly that.⁴¹

Until the new creation appears, the present created order is itself groaning under the burden of the Fall because, as Genesis puts it, God subjected creation to Adam's dominion. At the same time, that groaning is filled with hope (8:20!) because both Adam and creation will find their common redemption in the new life that Christ's Resurrection has inaugurated. So creation's own intense longing shares in our own (8:19, 23), which is for the true freedom of God's children to be made visibly and bodily manifest—Paul talks explicitly about *bodily* redemption in verse 23.

This close link between the salvation of humanity and of creation as a whole has a particularly potent ring for us at a time of acute awareness about the extent to which our well-being is intimately connected with that of the planet we inhabit. Secular hopes for "life, liberty and the pursuit of [human] happiness" are at best a grotesque and evil caricature of the hope of the gospel, if they are delivered only in Boston and Berlin but not also in Baghdad or Beirut, or if they deliver prodigious wealth to some at the cost of poisoned wells for others. The hope of Christ must be a hope for the whole world or it is no hope at all. And precisely that is what Paul powerfully confirms here.

39. Cf. Dunn, *Romans*, 1:412–13.

40. So Moule, *Meaning of Hope*, 39–42.

41. So also, rightly, Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 130 *passim*.

The tension inherent in this Now and Not Yet of the gospel is brought to a head in Paul's striking and unusual assurance in verses 24–25: "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Salvation language is almost always in the present or future tense for Paul: we *are* being saved or we *will be* saved. Here, however, he says we *were* saved in hope. Hope concerns not just some rescue operation for a freeze-frame state of the world in the distant or not-so-distant future, but it expects a redemption that concerns our past and our present, the whole of who we are and what God has created.⁴²

In what remains of chapter 8, Paul famously brings this argument to a conclusion in a crescendo of celebrating the hope and confidence of the gospel. In Christ, God gives us nothing less than himself (8:31–32); in the midst of all possible challenges, therefore, we are "more than conquerors through him who loved us": "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:37–39).

THEOLOGICAL HOPE AND ESCHATOLOGICAL OPTIMISM

Our exploration of the biblical and especially the Pauline witness to Christian hope leads us back to the question with which we began. Does Christian faith have room for optimism as an expression of hope? The Bible of course has many words for hope, but none for optimism, and the qualities associated with Dr. Pangloss probably have most in common with those the Old Testament wisdom literature associates with a fool. Nevertheless, Christians cannot in my view simply dismiss the question entirely.

If the Bible spells out a view of the world's future as in the hands of a God who redeems what he has made, does that make Scripture in any sense "optimistic"? It does not of course do so in the sense that this world is already the best it can be, nor that the world to come is achieved without genuine struggle preceding it. The New Testament calls for greater humility and realism than that.⁴³

But as I intimated at the beginning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does in fact offer *two further definitions* of "optimism." One of these expatiates on the more trivial qualities of "hopefulness and confidence about the future or the successful outcome of something; a tendency to take a favourable or hopeful view." That is not what the biblical authors have in mind.

42. Cf. again Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 131–32.

43. For the necessary link of hope and humility, cf. also Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, although he remains skeptical of all optimism. See also Patrick J. Deneen, "Christopher Lasch and the Limits of Hope," *First Things*, no. 148 (2004): 26–31.

But the other envisages “a view or belief which assumes the ultimate predominance of good over evil in the universe.”

One could take this latter definition in a highly critical sense, and the illustrating quotations in the *OED* in fact despise the “saccharine” and “shallow” qualities that may characterize such views. This kind of contemporary criticism, along with deeper concerns about the dangers of both hermeneutical presumption and idolatry, makes me particularly reluctant about attempts to explain Christian eschatology by way of an appeal to “the imagination.” That is a concept to which biblical writers make no theological appeal and which tends easily to confuse apocalyptic “seeing” and “hearing” with an anthropocentric generation of images and their interpretation.⁴⁴ Even for a book like Ephesians, the theological “hope to which God has called us” is a matter comprehended not by fantasy and poetic extrapolation, but by “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” enlightening “the eyes of your hearts” to apprehend the abundant inheritance of the saints that comes to us by virtue of the resurrection (Eph 1:8, 17–18, 20).⁴⁵

Yet in the end there is a way of affirming this definition of “optimism” with utmost theological seriousness, in which in fact it finally represents the only valid view of the world that Scripture allows for. And that is the biblical conviction that God will surely redeem and save the world he has created, bringing hope in Christ where there is despair and peace where there is conflict, destroying injustice and wiping away every tear. As John Webster puts it, “To exist in Christian hope is to trust that in all its dissipation, complexity, and misery, human history is by the mercy of God on the way to perfection.”⁴⁶

Not long before the end of the Cold War, the Czech poet and later president Vaclav Havel gave a remarkable interview, in which he mused

44. Pace Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 84–88, 95–108 and *passim*. Even sympathetic reviewers have noted the enthusiastic but remarkably uncritical appropriation of “imagination” as an “incarnational” category of theological epistemology in David Brown’s robustly liberal account of Christian doctrine: e.g. John Macquarrie, “A Sketch of David Brown,” *Anglican Theological Review* 84 (2002), 768–69; and rather more trenchantly Kathryn Tanner, Review of David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 118–21. Cf. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). An analogous theological critique of appeals to “imagination” in eschatology is offered by Webster, “Hope, 301–2 (and cf. notes 45–46 below). See further Markus Bockmuehl, “The Conversion of Desire in St. Paul’s Hermeneutics,” in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. R. Wagner et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 498–513.

45. Cf. Webster, “Hope,” 302: “‘Imagination’ suggests something too projective or poetic, too little oriented to what has been accomplished and what is now being made known in the Spirit’s revealing work. . . . Imagination is oriented more to possibility than to actuality, and it can make hope’s envisaging of the future into a task to be undertaken, rather than the hearing of an authoritative divine judgement which has already been announced.”

46. Webster, “Hope,” 292. He goes on to stress (304) that while Christian action based on such hope will on the one hand set out to criticize and transform the present order in view of its openness to the Kingdom (citing Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 330), it also looks for the vindication of *present* hopeful actions of justice and charity.

about a politics of hope in terms that seem to capture something of this theological and biblical vision. Hope, he said,

is not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . . It is an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. . . . It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.⁴⁷

This form of optimism carries a subtle and powerful insight into significant aspects of the biblical vision of hope. Yet Havel spoke as one who is explicitly *not* a Christian, and he spoke in a sense about his own European situation in the dying days of communism. We must wonder, therefore, where exactly that transcendent object of hope can be reliably located for him.

Faith's hope, too, may be episodic in its grasp of what it hopes for, and in an important sense it is always apocalyptic, oriented toward God's own disclosure of his redemptive future that reaches out toward us—and which is never in the gift of human skill or power. As a ninth-century Benedictine monk put it, our mind "burns more ardently when it considers through faith what it already grasps in hope . . . and when it tastes by love what is being delayed longer than it wishes."⁴⁸ Such hope of course can only ever be grounded *in Christ*; and yet precisely because of Christ it may and must be hope "for Jerusalem" and *for the world*. Paul himself in Rom 11 expresses the Christian hope for God's people and God's world in words adapted from Isaiah's prophecy: "And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins'" (Rom 11:26–27, citing Isa 59:20–21).

Hope in Christ necessarily entails a hope for the world, and for God's new world. This is a hope despite and beyond the collapse of inherited cultural certainties. Christians therefore do pray and work for the peace of Jerusalem, and of the New Jerusalem, with hope—and with eschatological optimism.

47. Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizďala*, trans. P. Wilson (London: Faber, 1990), 181. For a survey of the secular apocalypticism of Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, and other twentieth-century secular philosophies of hope, cf., for example, Friedrich Kümmel, "Hoffnung: I. Philosophisch," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 15 (1986): 480–84.

48. Paschasius Radbertus, *On Faith, Hope and Love* 2.4.1 (PL 120, 1443), commenting on Prov 13:12: "ardentius mens aestuat, dum et ea per fidem inspicit quae iam in spe percipit, . . . et charitate degustat, quod differtur longius quam exoptat."