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For What May We Hope? Karl Barth's 'Theology of Hope'

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'There May Be Hope. But None For Us'

There is a certain oddness in the question in my title. We can hope for many things, depending on who is doing the hoping and in what situation her hope arises. However, the contexts of many Western people are not amenable to hoping for, or speaking positively of, an ultimate, absolute, and universal future. Such hoping is largely dismissed as, at best, absurdly arcane, and at worst, dangerous, distracting from the everyday business of living.

Even hopes for our contingent futures have been touched by pessimistic and despairing moods. Three years after the Cuban missile crisis William Lynch could write of the contemporary attraction to hopelessness. Yet to come were the disasters of Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the AIDS fear of the 1980s, the consciousness of ecological 'disaster' of the 1990s, and the occasional apocalyptic hysteria generated by calendars' changing of millennia.¹ George Steiner's apocalyptic consciousness summarises this mood: "Kafka's stark finding that 'there is abundance of hope but none for us' may prove to be sober reportage" of the history of the twentieth-century.²

'All Will Be Well...!' Asking Difficult Questions of Hope

Steiner argues that when there is no hope all, one is left with is the desire for non-existence or early extinction. These options, of course, do not cover the full range of possible responses, most notably the various forms of escapism that contemporary Western society advertises with the growth of superficial and hedonistic diets of narcotics and/or commercial and material indulgences. Steiner's comments, however, do correctly apply to the situation in which *all*, and not merely meta-hopes (hopes for ultimate things), are dissolved.

One's perspective on the hopelessness of one's situation can be transformed in subtle, yet sometimes significantly real ways, with the development or strengthening of certain forms of meta-hope. That is something recognisable in Karl Marx's famous reflections on the role of religion – people in otherwise hopeless situations are able to bear their predicaments because of their 'illusory' belief in, and hope for, a compensating heaven, for example. Moreover, in the early work of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, it is argued that 'illusions' are of the essential fabric of precarious human living in a world facing the void.

However, not merely any sort of hope is valid. After all, contemporary pessimism is partially fuelled by increased disillusionment with previously dominant optimisms concerning human progress. As well as ruling out this 'myth of progress', Nietzsche came to regard Christianity as life-denying. It was a similar mood that animated Marx's oft-cited complaint that Christianity was the "opium of the masses". Christian hope, he believed, was inappropriate for dealing with the various alienations that Marx felt characterised living.

Christians, along with others with strongly held beliefs, would naturally be extremely reluctant to even entertain the notion that their theological hope is illusory, prone to ideology, and/or generative of various forms of alienation. Of course, the enthusiasm with which one believes and/or hopes is no guarantee of the truth or validity of those beliefs and/or hopes. Christians, as with all those who have any hope(s) in general, need to retain a certain self-critical spirit. Why this is so, and also what it is that Christians are able to hope for, is a subject dealt with in the writings of Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (1881-1968), although this aspect of his work is rarely appreciated by his commentators.

Where Hope Can Find its Home?

What is Christian hope for Barth? A further oddity is detectable since the question asks about *things* hoped for. Perhaps these could be eternal life, Kingdom of God, the millennium, the beatific vision, heaven, and the like. For Barth, however, these themes must be put into their proper perspective. Eschatology cannot be simply the study of the *eschata* (the 'last things') as such, but rather the *eschatos*, he who is our End. As Karl Rahner importantly argues, "*Christ* himself is the hermeneutical principle of all eschatological assertions. Anything that cannot be read and understood as a christological assertion is not a genuine eschatological assertion."³ Barth was engaged in defining and applying such a theological hermeneutic from the mid-1920s in Göttingen, culminating in his treatment of Jesus Christ as 'Electing God' and 'Elect Man'.

Eschatology, Barth had discovered, is about Jesus Christ in his threefold *parousia* ("effective presence") of resurrected life, presence in the Spirit, and consummating coming. Therefore the hope that takes its rise from this perspective is that which hopes in (i.e., from his resurrection) and for his coming. That is why Barth emphasises that "Jesus Christ is our hope"⁴ In his obedient life and death, Jesus fulfilled that which humanity had not done, the covenant fellowship ('you will be my people') with the electing God ('I will be your God'). As the true human being (and true God), indeed the prototypical human being, Christ is the eschatological One raised to eschatological/new life for the world. From this basis, Christian faith, love, and hope spring and take shape. Hence Barth argues, hope's "final and decisive basis lies in the fact that the prophetic action of Jesus Christ, and therefore ... the kingdom of God come and the will of God done in Him, ... while it is complete in itself, is only moving towards its fulfilment, i.e., not to an amplification or transcending of its content or declaration ... but to a supremely radical alteration and extension of the mode and manner and form of its occurrence"⁵

These statements raise a certain puzzle in the interpretation of Barth. If everything is finished then has not Barth prematurely foreclosed the future, and undermined time after Jesus' resurrection ('our time')? Is this not what Barth means when speaking, for example, of Christ's consummating coming as the "unveiling"/"revelation" of that which has been accomplished?⁶

Yet, note Barth's claim that that which is "complete in itself" (in Christ's Person) is "only moving towards its fulfilment" (for us, our "supremely radical alteration" in Christ). This time of eschatological provisionality (the 'not yet' in us that moves from Christ's 'already') is what characterises Barth's discourse on the 'Prophetic work' of Christ in *Church Dogmatics* IV.3, and his emphasis on mission. It is in this time that hope is generated, being shaped by the resurrection event,

sustained by Christ's contemporary presence in the Spirit (pneumatological contemporaneity), and moving toward his consummating coming. Despite the continued presence of sin and suffering, which still have to be driven from the field, hope receives a confidence appropriate to a faith that sin will be defeated by the risen Christ, hope for a Future that will be analogous to, albeit with a universal referent, Christ's having come. The hope is the "still awaited redemption of the world reconciled in Him".

It is in this context that Barth qualifies language of the future being 'open', when referring to the Absolute Future. It is not 'open' in the sense of being *neutral* or indeterminate, a nothingness waiting to be filled by human acts. Barth rather speaks of time's having been determined in Christ, a future 'filled' by Christ, although its precise shape and *details* remain unknowable to Christians living in hope (consequently Barth explicitly rejects universal salvation as a doctrine).

Christ, then, is the world's universal and Absolute Future. It is to him that biblical images of eternal life, Kingdom of God, etc., refer and not to confidently blue-printable assertions about the shape of future history (illegitimate Christian futurology). Barth, thereby, rejects self-grounded hopes as illusions, based in, for example, desires or needs, or hope for the divine blessing on our activities as such. Moreover, Christian hope disrupts thoughts of the continuity of life through death, as expressed in doctrines of the soul's immortality, and the belief that our agency can or "must laboriously build the road to" the Future.⁷ These are all merely sanitised, and therefore ultimately idolatrous, versions of the radically iconoclastic critique of sin provided by a properly configured hope in Christ as the coming One.

Hope's Strange Kind of Waiting: Acting in Hope

Essential to this account of hope is the fact that the Future casts its shadow over all con-

temporary contexts. Marx recognised hope's regulative function. His hope for the communist society played an important part in determining the nature of his critique of modern capitalist societies, and he had noted how Christian belief/hope operated in performing the task of redirecting the vision of those alienated from the products of their labour, each other, and themselves.

Mentioning Marx here is highly appropriate when it is remembered that Barth, when pastor in Safenwil (1911-1921), became actively involved in the social and political affairs of his parish, joining the Social Democratic Party in 1915. Barth the 'red' pastor crusading for justice was to 'mature' into the theologian of freedom – divine freedom and its mirroring in social, political, and personal affairs. As a consequence of these practical engagements, and his developing theological perspective, Barth learned that hope cannot legitimately be that which Marx and others claimed it to be if it is 'Christian' – a shying away from the practical processes of engaging with the world's injustices.

Barth insists that eschatology, and the fragile hope (since it is a human act of response to grace) that it inspires, cannot be motivated by idle curiosity or speculative knowledge. In applying these themes to a non-escapist ethic he claims that the hope for Christ's coming (for God's being all in all, redemption of the world in Christ, and sin's destruction), necessarily determines the shape of hope's active expression in "our whole life".⁸

Eschatology, then, "the rude incursion of God's kingdom" in Christ, provides an image (or rather a 'Reality') that shows the present to be a 'virtual' reality corrupted by sin, and yet the place created, sustained, and reconciled by God's love in Christ. In this sense, then, Christian hope has ethical dimensions, both interrogative/critical and creative/liberating. In other words, hope seeks to liberate humanity from all things that de-humanise it, act against needless suffering, and participate in God's "de-demonising" of

the world (on saying that, however, guidelines for human acting depend on actual concrete circumstances).

Conclusion: Developing Habits of Hoping

A Christian may not be able to give suitably demonstrable reasons for her hope such that would convince all antagonists to transfer their own allegiances and perspectives. A Christian may also, in a world still suffering in sin and alienation from God, not 'possess' a hope that will enable her to successfully overcome all personal and social alienations and illusions. But, in the risen Christ, our Future, the Christian does have a hope that can fragiley (since it is perennially prone to failure, weakness, and ideology) and humbly (no thoughts and actions are identical with, while they may have a certain analogy to, those of God) live even through and after the horrors of the twentieth-century. This hope directs Christian communities to engage in prayerful practice of actively, albeit provisionally and revisably, reflecting in its own liberating way the divine redemption of the world in Christ. In other words, Christ's coming to reveal history's eschatological fulfilment, unveiling the world's place in his resurrection life, creates a regulative perspective through which to imaginatively critique and creatively reconceive all other hopes, thereby fashioning a hope that is bound up with the daily process of worship. Christian hope for Christ's coming, then, is in intrinsic alliance with life, the life of this world, creating communities whose ethically significant practice of worship can keep such hope, in its "perilous passage", alive.

In recognising, explicating, and influencing twentieth century theology on this, it is the name of Karl Barth that deserves a certain prominence.

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- ³ Karl Rahner, 'The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions', *Theological Investigations* 23 volumes (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961-1992), 4:326-46 (342f.).
- ⁴ Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed*, trans. James Strathern McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 120.
- ⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.2, 903.
- ⁶ For the details of the charge, and responses from Barth's *oeuvre* I would refer the reader to John C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth's Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy* (Ashgate, 2000).
- ⁷ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 133.
- ⁸ Citation from *ibid.*, 154.

For Further Reading

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