

*“As for man, his days are like grass;
As the flower of the field so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
But the mercy of the Lord is
From everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him ...”*
(Psa 103: 15-17)

HOPE – ESSENTIAL AND ABUNDANT

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Thirty years ago, William Lynch lamented: “We human beings, who need hope more than anything else in life, have written little about it” (Lynch, 1974:21). To be sure, therapists and theologians, psychologists and philosophers have filled this gap since in some measure. Yet, a curious fact remains: a much larger body of literature exists on the liminal experience we call despair than on the life-engendering presence and function of hope.

While this focus on the pathology of hope leaves open the question whether a fuller understanding of the malaise will lead to better solutions, thereby expressing hope of sorts, these reflections owe their origin to a different frame of mind. Convinced of the necessity of hope, I propose to present a case for its abundant availability for all who earnestly seek it, at a time when violence—the homicidal progeny of hopelessness—fills our TV screens morning, noon and night.

I shall first reflect on the nature of human hope, its object, pathology and limits arguing that the failure of human hope is symptomatic of the crisis of our time. Next, I shall attempt to show how Christian hope differs from human hope and how the Gospel subverts as well as redemptively transforms the human condition and brings abundant hope. In closing, I shall briefly comment on implications for the life of faith.

TO HOPE IS HUMAN

The Nature of Hope

Human nature is restless. Something keeps reaching out from within us towards the future, towards that which is not yet. We keep striving, vaguely as with a blind passion, not knowing what and how satisfaction of this longing will come. Unlike such primordial drives as hunger and self-preservation, this inarticulate longing seeks to engage us at a deeper level. In our quest for the 'not yet' we give ourselves to utopic ideas, to visions and objects of hope, believing that through their fulfillment our inner urging will be stilled.

The opening lines of Ernst Bloch's encyclopedic work *The Principle of Hope* read like this: "I move. From early on we are searching. All we do is crave, cry out. Do not have what we want. What is ours slips away, is not yet here." (Bloch, 1986:21). Another writer, Gerald O'Collins, captured the idea of our insatiable reach towards the 'not yet' in similar words: "Man's existence seems to be defined by the notion of 'I will be' rather than by the assertion 'I am' ". He then adds: "Man is an animal with a sense of the future, a being in quest of reality. He is threatened by fear and encouraged by hope, as he reaches beyond himself for that which is yet to come" (O'Collins, 1996:21).

On first glance, we may define human hope then as an inner striving towards a distant, even unattainable object that seems presently out of our grasp. Whether in each instance this hope is attached to a personal goal, to an ideology or to a belief system, is for the moment less important than the perception that hope is a phenomenon peculiar to human existence. However, there is more to human hope than this inarticulate striving for the 'not yet'.

When speaking about hope, the French language offers an illuminating nuance that cannot be easily reproduced in English. The French, at the level of common language, distinguish between two kinds of hopes [*espoirs* and *espérance*] suggesting the perception that human hope may be of a lower or higher order. Lower order hope has to do with matters of convenience rather than with matters of existential significance, like "I hope, it won't rain tomorrow". By contrast, higher order hope is hope that has been tested by adversity. It provides a special capacity for suffering, an aspect well known from clinical practice. Research in nursing science, for instance, has observed that patients who had access to adequate sources of hope exhibited a more enduring attitude to life and thus were better able to transcend their status quo than those who lacked such a capacity. As an attitudinal construct, their hope depended on inner resources consisting of an ability to adapt, which in turn combines with a rational process by which people are able to forge meaningful links between what is subjectively desirable with what is objectively possible. Importantly, this ability also depended on

a relational openness that allowed these patients to receive another's love (Farran et al., 1995:5-10).

Purveyors of Hope

In his *Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch expounds the thesis that human beings have to grow up and move into a future that brings about our realization and completion. By drawing on projections of our own ideals and utopias as reflected in literary and cultural expressions as sources of hope, Bloch identifies human hope as "utopian hunger" (Bloch, 1986:8). In his view, it is our passion for self-transcendence where human hope finds its source. While, according to this thesis, our evolutionary restlessness and openness towards the future are indicators of our aliveness, they are also clear signs that we have not yet arrived. To support his argument, Bloch draws extensively on biblical and prophetic imagery. From a Christian perspective, there is much in Bloch's basic thrust one can agree with (1 John 3:2). For instance that the realization of our true image is still future, that humanity as a whole is involved in this project, and that it is a common future towards which we are moving. In this regard, the dialogue between Bloch and eschatological theologians, notably Jürgen Moltmann, has been very fruitful. But in the end, this exchange must acknowledge that their perceptions of hope are irreconcilable in terms of foundations and objects (see also C. Morse, 1979).

Other interpretations of human hope have been tried. Because human existence and history are conditioned by freedom and decision, evil is possible, and evidence of humanity's ability for destruction confronts us daily. Our aggressive instincts cannot be rationally controlled, claimed Konrad Lorenz (Lorenz, 1966). Nevertheless, we place our trust in our genetic potential and in the evolutionary process for our historical future. So we hope in the development of higher ethical powers to change us into peaceful beings as Teilhard de Chardin assumes. He projected that evil will eventually recede to a minimum and that neither disease nor deprivation will remain. As humans approach the "omega point" of their ultimate transcendence, spiritual harmony will increasingly prevail (T. de Chardin, 1970).

Despite humanity's extraordinary status as a cosmic phenomenon, are we really justified to view with such optimism our ability to perfect our condition and realize all the possibilities inherent in our historical existence as Ernst Bloch and Teilhard de Chardin have suggested? Are their assertions not open to critique, for if we must rely only on the evolutionary process with its distant possibility of perfectibility, what practical hope is there for our contemporary condition? Moreover, the violent process of natural selection as a path to cultural development creates untold numbers of victims, thus conspiring with the very forces that suppress hope.

Enemies and Limits of Human Hope

It was 17th century cynicism, this sign of a "deep distrust in the surrounding world" (Lynch, 1974:78) in the wake of almost a century of confessional wars in central Europe, that coined the popular adage "God helps those who help themselves". It spoke of shattered dreams and lost hope. In other words, hope—this essential element of human existence—has its own antithesis: hopelessness. While hope includes confidence, hopelessness thinks that nothing can be done and is worth doing.

Since not every disappointment leads to despair and often, by delivering us from illusions, leads to greater maturity, we can ask what it is that must be relinquished so that hope is lost? Is there a hope that is so vital to human existence that its surrender leads to loss of existential cohesion?

While the social sciences have taken a growing interest in the bewildering speed of change that has engulfed our lives and outpaces our ability to cope (Toffler, 1970), it was a philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, who foresaw what was coming. Already fifty years ago, he pointed to the high incidence of psychosis in technologically advanced countries and linked it with increasingly utilitarian self-appraisal. He diagnosed the symptoms that began to surface as indicators of a more serious and deep-seated malaise. Boredom, sexual immorality and drunkenness, he concluded were signs that "humanity itself, not just the individual, is dangerously tempted to commit suicide" (Marcel, 1954:7). Not even improved social and organizational skills seem to guarantee a reversal of this tilt. On the contrary, the more we congregate for the sake of improved production, the greater seems to become our sense of alienation.

Despite the undeniable benefits of technological achievements, this self-directed homicidal tendency seems to accompany us like a shadow. The more the pace of change keeps blurring the distinctions between past, present and future, between the essential and the trivial the more our ability to gain a clear grasp on possible objects of hope becomes impaired. What was valid and valued yesterday is being destroyed by the progress of today. This confusion, according to Marcel, becomes a distinct cause of despair, especially when it occurs at the center of our being where it causes the loss of active and creative human agency (Marcel, 1954:84-85).

The Crisis of Our Time

Despite such ominous signs, we keep clinging to the idea that life is just a biochemical process, which humanity will soon master. However, as we project upon our world the image of a technological conception of life, we are bound to live by its typifying power and its dehumanizing effects. Let me illustrate: to keep peace in the world, the nations rely on a "balance of terror", this

uneasy and deceptive alliance with the powers of mass destruction, closing our eyes to the disturbing reality that ever since Hiroshima the future of the human race is threatened. Yet, we keep on trusting in technical solutions without realizing that the logic behind this hope in technology is driven by an insatiable will to power, or with Girard, by the inherent desire to win in the game of “mimetic rivalry” that operates at the root of our culture’s fascination with violence (Girard, 1987:93).

A society saturated with violence, a society that venerates homicidal imagery as mass entertainment, is a society in crisis. Because of the socially contagious and intoxicating nature of violence, outbreaks of endemic violence are dangerously possible as people seek to transfer their own violence of randomly chosen scapegoats (Girard, 1987; Bailie, 1995). While such outbreaks may be accompanied by a quasi-religious experience, this catharsis is no remedy. What is needed, according to Christian understanding, is the experience of real transcendence at the center of the human being, that is, an encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ who chooses to suffer violence rather than sponsor it. Yet, a society whose processes of civilization conspire with the forces of hopelessness is likely to look in another direction. Consequently, we face the frightening prospect of massive technical power combining with the spiritual surrender to nihilism as modern society deliberately refuses to look in the only direction where true hope may be found. With this conclusion, the limits of human hope have come into view, or in John Pieper’s words, “as long as man hopes, he considers the vanity of his hopes as unthinkable” (Pieper, 1969:19).

CHRISTIAN HOPE

In light of this analysis, what is the shape of things to come, and what is it specifically that Christian hope has to offer beyond the limits of human hope? Christian hope is more than wishful thinking or naive optimism that refuses to acknowledge the inevitable consequences of human frailty and sin, nor is it the proclamation of utopias of the philosopher, of the revolutionary or of the scientist who relies on evolutionary genetics (O’Collins, 1969). Rather, Christian hope is the foundation of a purposeful existence in the here and now that allows this and coming generations to engage the world’s sense of futility with courage, trusting in God’s promises and help. Heil makes a similar point when he defines Christian hope as an “act or attitude of confident expression for God’s future salvific activity that arises from faith in what God has promised and already accomplished on our behalf” (Heil, 1987:6).

The Objective Basis of Christian Hope

In Heil's terms, Christian hope derives its enduring and living quality out of the historical accomplishment of God in Christ on our behalf. In the incarnation, God entered this world of suffering and death in loving solidarity. In the crucifixion, Christ experienced this world in its sin and suffering reconciling it to the Father who, in the resurrection, inaugurated a historical process that moves the world towards the fulfillment of the eschatological promise. This consummation of God's creative activity envisages the deliverance of the entire creation from the corruption of sin and brings it into communion with the trinitarian community of the Godhead (Baulkham, 1995:6). Thus understood, Christian hope claims to be grounded in an objective historical reality beginning with God's saving acts in the history of Israel and culminating in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Subjective Reality of Christian Hope

Christian hope is actualized in the world when believers appropriate this objective reality by faith, which presupposes their prior obedient submission to the claims of Christ. This surrender results in a confident disposition towards God and God's future, especially in trials.

This dynamic structure of Christian hope produces its own effects, steadfastness and proven character, which in turn engender greater openness to the working of God in personal life and in the community of faith. Such hope, as St. Paul writes, "will not disappoint us, because of the love that God has poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:15). God's present operation in the midst of a groaning and travailing creation through his self-giving love carries the individual Christian and the Church through every circumstance that contradicts the reality of God's rule in the world.

The Goal of Christian Hope

Christian hope not only claims to be grounded in an objective historical reality, but also that it possesses a future object as its goal. Admittedly, this hope is directed towards an invisible future. However, this expectation attains its specific character as hope precisely because it is beyond sight and particularly beyond suffering. What is invisible now will be revealed as "glory" in the believer, who now groans with the creation in the futility of the present order, which is understood to be in labor with the birth of a new creation (Rom 8:18-39). Such hope "de-individualizes" those who have put their trust in Christ and places them in a communal relation with the whole creation, whose first fruits they are. The invisible object of this hope is the glory of God, the liberty of the creation

from decay, and the state of eternal and inseparable son-ship of those who are in Christ (Rom 8:23). Thus, these future saving acts of God, promised but already enacted in the resurrection of Christ, form the distant *telos* of Christian hope. Since God raised Christ from the dead, the powers, which presently masquerade as rulers of this world, who had repudiated and slain Jesus Christ, are unmasked as ultimately powerless. Christian hope, therefore, differs significantly from human hope. Christ belongs already to the new order foreseen by prophets and seers. By faith in him, others may enter this new order through grace. Christian hope in its expectations and visions, as it awaits this eternal transformation, leaves the temporality of human reference points behind and “touches on the infinite” (Kelly, 1991). Christian hope, while it is objectively real because of the historical reality of the Christ event, is subjectively experienced as confident expectation through faith, ‘underwritten’ in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Where such an experience is absent, we can rightly speak of hopelessness at a profound level that manifests as loss of future direction and as present day confusion about the beneficent application of human powers (Abbott, 1966:202). Because of society’s unbelief in the God of hope, humans extend their powers in many directions, often failing in directing them to their global welfare. This paralyzing directionslessness is largely the fault of a “non-eschatological, bourgeois Christianity”, which only plays at “trifling possibilities that end in boredom” (Moltmann, 1975: 24).

However, there is more to be said. Christian hope works in dual manner. While it is this-worldly and progressive, Christian hope is also other-worldly and revolutionary (Macquarrie, 1978:106). At the first level, it looks to the worthwhileness of human endeavor in cooperation with God’s purposes in creation; at the second level, it expects a total transformation of the created order, particularly of human existence beyond anything we can imagine. This hope, which is for the “here and now”, must embrace communion with God as its fundamental prerequisite, as well as the community with God’s people, leading to a transformed existence and to a foretaste of eternal life even in the present. Since God himself is the ground of this hope, the promise of the Scriptures allows us to see in it realizable possibilities for the world. Such a vision implies serious engagement with the human condition and with the world as it is. Therefore, when Christians speak about human cooperation with God, they admit into the process frailty and uncertainty which render hope the vulnerable element that it is, for “genuine hope is always vulnerable” (Macquarrie, 1978:110).

The Abundance of Hope

Since history is moving towards its real future in God, one of the presuppositions of Christian hope is the passage of time towards God’s promised end, an end that was already present in the world in the resurrection of Christ. However, when we bring the resurrection into correlation with history, we

find that the outworking of the eschatological element inherent in the Christ event calls every human construct and achievement of history into question. At the same time, according to Moltmann, this eschatological presence liberates us from the compulsion of seeking an achievement-based self-definition in the world (Moltmann, 1975:62), for the ultimate datum of history is no longer what humans can accomplish, but the coming Kingdom of God that was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Since the Christ-event occurred in history and is now a constitutive element within the historical process, it offers a super-abundance of hope even in the here and now. Consequently, those, whose imagination is filled with the horizon of God's future that knows no death, are no longer captives of the culture of death, which persists in the present order of things (Alison, 1996). Under the progressive influence of the gospel fear, rivalry and victimage—the foundations of this culture—crumble giving way to a hope that is not of this world.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We began this reflection with the nature of human hope, as a striving for the “not yet” driven on the one hand by a desire for more (whereby “desire” may even be understood as life itself) and by an often inarticulate longing for self-transcendence. Taking a hint from the French, we saw that human hope could be of a lower and higher order. We also saw how higher order hope produces endurance in adversity and an enhanced capacity for meaningful adaptation to life's often painful circumstances.

According to Bloch's thesis, human hope depends on man's utopian hunger and his passion for the common future towards which the human project is moving. However, given the dehumanizing effects of our technological age with its tilt towards annihilation through mass destruction, we questioned whether an optimistic view of humanity's future was justified regardless whether it was based on Bloch's neo-Marxism or on Teilhard de Chardin's combination of evolution and scientific positivism.

In our critique of *human* hope, we noted with the help of René Girard's theory that the cause of our cultural crisis is to be sought in “mimetic rivalry”. This anthropological phenomenon locks humans into conflictual reciprocity and a deep-seated fascination with violence. We concluded that the limits of human hope are exposed in their very denial. Left to our own devices, we cannot but rely on a “balance of terror” as our ultimate source of hope. As a result, the human project finds itself trapped in an unacknowledged conspiracy with the forces of hopelessness that subverts the prospects of a beneficent human future.

In the second part, I examined the nature of Christian hope, which in its reliance on God's saving activity (past, present and future) lays claim to historical foundations. I argued that Christian hope envisages nothing less than the total transformation of the created order and that it depended in its actuality on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while its subjective experience was a function of personal communion with God.

In short, Christian hope implies for the believing individual and community sufficient inner resources of hope for a serious engagement with the world as it is. Through the offer of unconditional forgiveness and eternal life in personal encounter with the risen Christ, temporal human activity is redeemed through Christ who is the guarantor of our eternal destiny and the living promise of the ultimate consummation of God's purposes for the world. In other words, the resurrection releases into the world its own abundant life whose vitality is not derived from merely biological categories, but from the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. Thus, Christian hope relies on the approaching Kingdom of God, whose proximity exposes the flawed foundations of human hope, replacing it with genuine and abundant hope.

In conclusion, a few remarks about the pastoral and visionary application of these thoughts are in order. Those, who live in confident expectation of a future that is determined by God's saving activity in the world have a foundation "that cannot be shaken" and "hope as an anchor for the soul" (Heb 12:38; 6:19). By faith, they have left behind temporal objects of hope and now move as a pilgrim people towards God himself as their only future and hope. They believe that God's saving activity in the here and now deals creatively and redemptively with the human crisis (including its failure to bring genuine hope) through the offer of unconditional forgiveness, which they themselves have appropriated and carry into the world. In their communion with the risen Christ, in the hearing of the Word and in the Eucharist, their past is healed while through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit their desires are transformed into Christ's own. In them, a new pacific personality takes shape in place of the old that once was trapped in mimetic rivalry.

Because Christ has apprehended them in the midst of life, they have grasped in this encounter the totality of Christian hope that no human hope can match. Christ not only redeems their past, and transforms their present desires, but he also assures them of their eternal destiny. This hope does not depend on human theories about life after death, but on the unimpeachable faithfulness of God. The guarantee of their destiny is the expectation of the return of Christ, the final resurrection and ultimately the consummatory transformation of the entire creation in complete fulfillment of God's purpose—the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Just as God has taken up the humanity of the incarnate Son in Christ's ascension, so the believer hopes that God will take up the entire cosmos into the trinitarian unity of his own person so that in the end God will be "all in all" (Eph 1:22-23).

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