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Hope

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Hope

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In Christian theology, hope denotes an attitude that evaluates one's present condition in relation to a desired outcome and the possibilities of attaining it. In ancient Greek literature, hope is not considered a virtue; rather, many classical works portray it negatively. It is only with the development of Christian theology that hope begins to be regarded as a virtue rather than a vice in Western thought. For Christians, the origin and object of hope is primarily otherworldly. The object of hope in the New Testament is distinctly theological, centred on Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of God's kingdom (Rom 8:22–25). As Western intellectual history progressed, particularly after the Enlightenment, discourses of hope shifted from the afterlife to human and cultural progress. From a secular perspective, Christian hope became suspect because it appeared to neglect worldly concerns. Moreover, contemporary secular critics see a potential danger in religious hope: it may lead people to act irrationally and harm others; it offers no concrete, viable means of improving our condition; and, generally, it is unintelligible to those outside the religious point of view. Contemporary theological discourses on hope seek to balance utopian, this-worldly hopes in some forms of liberation theology with more reserved forms of political realism.

Keywords: Hope, Christian theology, Eschatology, Heaven, Hell, Rationality

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1 Introduction

The concept of hope is both frustrating and awe-inspiring. On the one hand, self-help books and popular media are saturated with superficial discussions of hope, making one wonder whether a mature individual should abandon such seemingly naive imaginings. On the other hand, the resilience of extraordinary individuals who have survived unimaginable hardships evokes both admiration and curiosity. How did they sustain a hope that prevented them from giving up?

Theologically, hope is a complex phenomenon that takes on different characteristics in various historical and cultural contexts. In the broadest sense, hope is an attitude that evaluates our present condition in relation to a desired outcome and the possibilities of attaining it. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* [ST] I-II, 40.1) defines hope through four key criteria: (1) its object is something good, (2) it concerns the future, (3) it is difficult to attain, yet (4) still possible.

One starting point for thinking about hope is to ask what hope is for the one who hopes – that is, for the subject of hope. Another is to ask about the object of hope, whether it is something natural or something that exceeds the bounds of mere nature and probability. The first question is the following: what does it mean for me as an individual or for my community to hope for something? The second question is: what is the thing that is hoped for?

More specifically, theories of hope can be divided into agency-based and receptivity-based perspectives (Snow 2021). C. R. Snyder (2002) advocates for the ‘agency-pathways’ theory, which conceptualizes hope as an active process of goal attainment. In this framework, hope consists of two components: the sense of effective agency and the ability to formulate viable pathways toward achieving one’s goals. The necessary agency is generated through beliefs and desires, with a crucial factor being the individual’s perception of their own efficacy. Without this perception, hope cannot exist. However, one might question whether this definition captures the essence of hope, as concepts like tenacity, perseverance, or even optimism might better describe this phenomenon.

In another agency-based theory, Victoria McGreer (2004) defines hope as the recognition of and engagement with our own limitations – that is, an awareness of what we can and cannot do in the world. Her account of hope incorporates reflective attitudes about oneself as an agent, allowing also for an analysis of what she terms the ‘pathologies of hope’, which include wishful and willful hoping. Wishful hoping harbours unrealistic expectations or fails to recognize the limits of one’s own agency. Willful hoping is driven by emotions such as fear, and lacks the clarity to see the potential harm misguided hopes may cause.

In contrast, receptivity theories emphasize not so much an individual's agency but rather the proper receptive attitude. According to this perspective, hope is not something one generates autonomously but rather is something received from an external source; its origin is transcendent. Key figures in this tradition include Gabriel Marcel and Josef Pieper (Marcel 1962; Pieper 1997). Because hope's source lies beyond immediate human experience, it has the capacity to transcend human limitations and conditions. While receptivity theories have traditionally been theological in nature, there are secular interpretations that closely resemble religious ones. Thinkers such as Mara van der Lugt, Jonathan Lear, Terry Eagleton, Patrick Shade, and Ernst Bloch have explored secularized versions of hope (van der Lugt 2025; Lear 2006; Shade 2001; Eagleton 2015; Bloch 1986). Even in seemingly hopeless situations, one may hold on to a higher ideal that surpasses present circumstances – whether it be faith in the fundamental goodness of humanity or a more abstract conviction that all will ultimately turn out well.

A related distinction exists between otherworldly and this-worldly hope. In ancient Greek literature, hope is not considered a virtue; rather, many classical works portray it in a negative light (Sophocles, *Antigone*, 660; Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.23; Plato, *Timaeus*, 69b; Seneca, *Letters*, 5.7–8). Aristotle, however, introduces a more nuanced discussion by associating hope with the virtue of courage. According to this view, hopeful individuals exhibit bravery, while cowards succumb to fear and thereby lose their agency (Gravlee 2020). It is only with the development of Christian theology that hope begins to be regarded as a virtue rather than a vice in the Western tradition. For Christians, however, the origin and object of hope is primarily otherworldly. As Western intellectual history progressed, and particularly after the Enlightenment, discourses of hope shifted from being focused on the afterlife to being centred on human and cultural progress. From a secular perspective, specifically Christian hope became suspect, as it appeared to neglect worldly concerns (Elliot 2017: 95–96).

Nevertheless, an emphasis on this-worldly hope finds support in Christian scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. The ambiguity between this-worldly and otherworldly hope creates an ongoing tension regarding what we can and should hope for in this life. Should certain forms of suffering be endured, or should they be eradicated? Throughout church history, the insistence on integrating otherworldly hope into earthly existence has fueled various apocalyptic and revolutionary movements. Following the Enlightenment, this drive took shape in secular revolutionary philosophies, such as those of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx (Altizer 1997). One of the leading theorists of leftist utopianism, Ernst Bloch, encapsulated this vision of an earthly paradise with the adage *ubi Lenin, ibi Jerusalem* (where Lenin is, there is Jerusalem) – a phrase that now sounds rather ominous (Bloch 1986: 610).

Before delving into the historical development of different forms of hope, it is necessary to distinguish hope from other related attitudes, such as desire, expectation, and optimism, all of which are often intertwined with it. It is possible to desire something one does not realistically expect to attain, such as becoming a movie star or winning the lottery. Hope, by contrast, is accompanied by the belief that achieving its object is at least possible. Expectation, meanwhile, always pertains to a future good, whereas one can hope for something to have taken place in the past. Furthermore, one may expect or desire negative outcomes, but one cannot hope for anything that is inherently bad or evil. Expectation also differs from waiting: waiting implies a higher level of certainty and lacks the ambiguity inherent in hope – for example, waiting for a friend's visit entails a firm belief that the event will occur. It is also possible to lose hope in the sense of abandoning optimism while still retaining a more fundamental kind of hope in the face of adverse evidence. While these attitudes often accompany hope, none of them fully encapsulate it (Schumacher 2003: 64–85).

2 Biblical accounts of hope

2.1 Old Testament

In the Hebrew Bible, the earliest expressions of hope-like attitudes are associated with the root *yhl*, which primarily conveys the idea of waiting. This type of hope entails uncertainty about the outcome, yet it carries an expectation of something good – such as when Noah waits for the waters to recede (Gen 8:10). In the Psalms, the faithful are repeatedly encouraged to ‘wait for the Lord’ (Ps 31:25; 62:6), and those who place their hope in him receive blessings. Isaiah (40:31) declares: ‘Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.’

However, hope is not always portrayed in a positive light. A recurring issue among the Israelites is their tendency to place hope in the wrong things, that is, expecting good to come from sources other than God. The faithful are warned against putting their trust in people or idols (Ps 147:3). At times, hope can be irrational or even foolish, as Sirach cautions:

A man of no understanding has vain and false hopes, and dreams give wings to fools. As one who catches at a shadow and pursues the wind, so is he who gives heed to dreams. [...] For dreams have deceived many, and those who put their hope in them have failed. (Sir 34:1–2, 7)

Another Hebrew root associated with hope is *kvh*, which carries the connotation of a cord being stretched. This suggests a more intense and emotionally charged form of

hope. When directed toward God, it is seen as positive and enduring; but when placed in anything else, it leads to frustration and false hope.

Many Old Testament narratives, such as the stories of Noah's flood (Gen 6:1–8:22), the exodus (Exod 14–18), and Abraham's sacrifice (Gen 22), revolve around hope as a crucial element. For the biblical writers, hope is a defining aspect of life in the present, yet it is also oriented toward the future. An exception to this perspective is Job, who curses God and abandons hope entirely; his only remaining desire is death, the cessation of existence (Job 6:8). His friends interpret this as a loss of faith. However, despite forsaking hope, Job ultimately dies content, receiving a resolution he could not have foreseen or hoped for, yet one that was granted to him nonetheless.

In the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible, hope is primarily this-worldly rather than transcendent. Later sections introduce the idea of otherworldly hope, particularly in texts such as Daniel 7–8 and 12. Various perspectives emerge concerning the relationship between the hoped-for future and the present historical reality:

- (1) In passages such as Isa 7:14–17 and Amos 9:11, the messianic era is expected to emerge naturally from present events and is anticipated to arrive soon.
- (2) Other texts, such as Isa 24–27, present an eschatological vision in which divine intervention occurs suddenly and is not organically connected to historical developments.
- (3) Some traditions interpret history itself as the unfolding of eschatological reality, suggesting that the messianic age is already present in some form (Isa 2).
- (4) Another perspective introduces the role of human agency, proposing that the people of the covenant can hasten the arrival of the kingdom through their actions (Isa 62:6–7; see also Sir 36; Bar 4–5; 2 Pet 3:11–12).

Rabbinic Judaism places greater emphasis on the hope of the afterlife than the Hebrew Bible, yet it continues to exhibit similar ambiguities regarding the immediacy and nature of the messianic kingdom. Even with the inclusion of afterlife salvation, future-oriented hope remains closely tied to the expectation of a this-worldly messianic era (Mittleman 2009).

2.2 New Testament

The New Testament contains numerous references to hope, many of which use the term in its ordinary sense as a form of rational expectation. However, its theological applications are far more distinctive. In Hebrews (6:18–19), hope is described as a sacramental entity that unites believers with the risen Christ, functioning as a medium of participation. Similarly, the well-known passage in Hebrews (11:1) states: 'Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.' This verse is particularly challenging to interpret and has been the subject of considerable debate (Ratzinger 2006). The author of Hebrews acknowledges that hope, as a mental state, pertains to things not

yet present and is therefore inherently uncertain. Faith, in turn, is the force that grants hope its assurance and certainty. Thus, hope is understood both as a present reality and as something toward which believers are meant to strive in this life.

Notably, the object of hope in the New Testament is distinctly theological, centred on entities such as Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of God's kingdom (Rom 8:22–25). Earthly wellbeing does not appear to be among the primary promises of hope. The passage describing the groaning of creation (Rom 8:22) does not, for instance, suggest any natural process that will restore the fallen world.

A crucial New Testament reference to hope appears in Paul's discussion of Abraham's faith (Rom 4:18), where he describes how Abraham 'hoped against hope'. Here, Paul introduces a radically new kind of hope, one fundamentally distinct from earthly expectations. Unlike ordinary hopes, which rely on the natural course of events, this hope is grounded solely in God's promises. This redefinition becomes the defining characteristic of Christian hope, leading to Paul's assertion that pagans 'have no hope' (Eph 2:12; 1 Thess 4:13). A similar theme appears in the Old Testament, particularly in Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezek 37:11–14), where hope is directed toward what seems utterly impossible.

Perhaps the most frequently cited passage on hope is 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul lists the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Of these, only love endures, which is understandable given that these virtues represent different modes of participation in the ultimate object of desire. Once this object – divine love – is fully realized, faith and hope are no longer necessary, as their purpose has been fulfilled.

3 Hope in the history of theology

3.1 Eschatological hopes in the early church and beyond

The early church viewed a profound continuity between this world and the world to come. This belief underscored the church's emphasis on the bodily nature of resurrection, the significance of material sacraments and liturgy, and the pursuit of a moral and sanctified life by believers. At the heart of this hope was the presence of God in the risen Jesus Christ, in whom the future, glorified state of human nature was made visible and through whom the divine became an active part of human history (Wright 2007).

According to Brian Daley, early Christian theologians shared several core convictions about eschatology and ultimate hope: history was understood as linear; resurrection involved the body as well as the soul; there would be a universal judgment with corresponding retribution; and even the dead participated in the life of the church. Over time, a belief developed that individuals would be judged immediately upon death. However, significant debates persisted regarding the timing of the end of the world, the

exact nature of the physical resurrection and the relationship between body and soul, the scope of salvation – including discussions on *apokatastasis* (universal reconciliation) – and the possibility of postmortem purification or progress (Daley 2002; Beilby 2021).

A central theme of Christian eschatology has always been the hope that justice will ultimately prevail for all, and this issue has been discussed typically in relation to heaven and hell. Broadly speaking, the Bible presents two perspectives on eschatological salvation. On one hand, certain passages suggest that God desires the reconciliation and restoration of the entire cosmos to its original harmony (Ezek 18:23; John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Col 1:20). On the other hand, other texts indicate that some parts of creation will be excluded from salvation (2 Thess 1:9; Matt 25:46). Scripture does not attempt to reconcile these two visions, and one of the few conciliar statements addressing the matter is the Second Council of Constantinople's (553) condemnation of Origen's universalism, albeit in a somewhat vague formulation.

Throughout the history of Christian theology, strong support has existed for a traditional doctrine of hell, which holds that (1) some people will be consigned to hell, (2) once there they cannot leave, (3) they will suffer for their sins, and (4) their punishment will be eternal. Augustine, for instance, affirms that damnation is

estrangement from the life of God – [it] will therefore abide without end, and it will be common to them all, no matter what some people, moved by their human feelings, may wish to think about gradations of punishment, or the relief or intermission of their misery. (Augustine, *Enchiridion* 113)

This strong view is also affirmed in the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (article 17) and reiterated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1033).

However, Augustine was aware that many opposed this strict interpretation. He writes:

It is quite in vain, then, that some – indeed very many – yield to merely human feelings and deplore the notion of the eternal punishment of the damned and their interminable and perpetual misery. They do not believe that such things will be. Not that they would go counter to divine Scripture – but, yielding to their own human feelings, they soften what seems harsh and give a milder emphasis to statements they believe are meant more to terrify than to express the literal truth. 'God will not forget,' they say, 'to show mercy, nor in his anger will he shut up his mercy.' (Augustine, *Enchiridion* 112)

Among these 'gentle-minded' figures were several church fathers, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who believed that universal salvation was at least possible (Ramelli 2013).

The hope of universal salvation naturally arises from the very nature of God. As the almighty and merciful Creator, God is the ultimate reason for existence itself. According to the Augustinian tradition, salvation is entirely a gift from God, in which human beings cannot participate meritoriously. In other words, God bestows saving faith on whomever he wills. Thus, he could grant faith to all, yet the strong view of predestination holds that he does not. The Calvinist tradition acknowledges this openly, affirming that God does not will to save everyone. Lutheran theology arrives at the same conclusion but hesitates to state it outright. Instead, Lutherans appeal to mystery, emphasizing that human understanding cannot fully grasp how God's justice relates to human conceptions of justice. The Lutheran doctrine of justification presupposes a vision of God's righteousness and love that surpasses human love without contradicting it. However, the doctrine of predestination, rooted in the bondage of the will, implies that divine justice may stand in tension with human notions of fairness.

Over the course of theological history, the traditional view of hell as a place of divine punishment has increasingly given way to an understanding of hell as the result of free will. In this perspective, eternal separation from God is not due to divine judgment but rather to the individual's own refusal to be reconciled with God. As C. S. Lewis (2002: 419–420) famously put it, the doors of hell are locked from the inside. While this view may seem more palatable, it is not without difficulties. For it to be meaningful, it must be possible to explain how a person could knowingly and eternally choose separation from God. Genuine choice requires awareness of the consequences, yet it remains unclear how this is possible for most people (Walls 2015).

Both the strong view of hell and the doctrine of annihilation ultimately deny the full realization of cosmic justice and hope. If either is true, then at least some of the goodness God originally created – though corrupted by sin – will never be restored to his kingdom.

Among contemporary defences of universalism, David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved* (2019) stands out as particularly rigorous. However, in his review of the book, another prominent Orthodox thinker, Andrew Louth, critiques Hart's argument for universalism as being as rigidly logical as Calvin's case for double predestination. Louth suggests that perhaps such an ironclad approach is not the best way to understand the hope of eternal life (Louth 2020).

Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton takes a different approach to universal hope, stating: 'To hope for all souls is imperative; and it is quite tenable that their salvation is inevitable. It is tenable, but it is not specially favorable to activity or progress' (Chesterton 2006: 152). He observes that many religions and philosophies operate within a mechanistic worldview, where events unfold in a predetermined manner. In contrast, Christianity sees life not as

a deterministic system but as a journey, an unfolding narrative whose conclusion remains unknown. Chesterton argues that

Christian morals have always said to man, not that he would lose his soul, but that he must take care that he didn't. In Christian morals, in short, it is wicked to call a man 'damned': but it is strictly religious and philosophic to call him 'damnable'. (Chesterton 2006: 152)

On a practical level, the question of salvation and divine justice is closely tied to the issue of assurance. According to Hart, only universalism offers true assurance of salvation. Even 'hopeful universalism' – the belief that we may hope for the salvation of all but cannot proclaim it as certain – falls short in his view (Brotherton 2015). However, the absolute and infallible assurance of salvation that Hart seeks is more characteristic of Protestant theology, particularly within certain Reformed traditions. Historically, this has been a minority position. In both Western and Eastern Christianity, the more common stance has been what could be called *conjectural certainty*: one cannot be absolutely certain of one's salvation, but one can nonetheless trust in God's goodness (Vainio 2024; Schreiner 2011).

3.2 Medieval accounts of hope

In his *Enchiridion* (II.7), Augustine discusses hope, positioning it between faith and charity – yet it receives the briefest treatment of the three theological virtues. This reflects the historical difficulty of giving hope its due place alongside faith and love. For Augustine, hope is inherently directed toward the future, whereas faith may also relate to past events, such as the crucifixion and resurrection. Additionally, while hope is always oriented toward something good, faith can also acknowledge negative realities, such as the consequences of sin. Faith, hope, and love mutually reinforce and perfect one another, making it impossible to have true faith without hope and love.

Augustine also highlights how the Lord's Prayer reflects an attitude of earthly hope, particularly in its petitions for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation. However, in *The City of God*, he expresses a deep skepticism toward worldly affairs, emphasizing that earthly hopes are often frustrated by forces beyond human control. Consequently, Christians should not expect that things will turn out well in this life but should instead direct their ultimate hope toward the heavenly city, where their deepest aspirations will be fully realized. That said, earthly hopes can serve as signposts toward their ultimate fulfillment, while heavenly hope can inspire ethical action in this world (Elshtain 1995; Lamb 2022).

The Latin terms *securitas* and *certitudo* provide a useful parallel to the concept of hope, as both words carry a dual meaning. A soul is said to be secure when it can withstand life's uncertainties, just as a city is considered secure if it hopes it can defend itself against external threats. However, security can be misplaced – there is such a thing as foolish

security or false hope. In later theological thought, *securitas* became associated with a vice linked to reckless presumption, whereas *certitudo* (certitude, assurance) was understood as the proper, faith-filled confidence in hope (Schrimm-Heins 1991; 1992).

While Christian hope is primarily directed toward salvation, many medieval theologians insisted that this hope could never be absolute. For instance, Gregory the Great (590–604) argued that Christian life must balance hope and fear, as moral vigilance requires the awareness of possible loss. The hope of salvation, he taught, is based on merits accumulated through good works, which can lead to a ‘certainty of hope’ (*certitudo spei*), though this hope remains fallible and must always be distinguished from false hopes and carnal security (*Moralia* XXIV, XI, 62; *Epistles* XII, 2).

For Thomas Aquinas, hope (*spes*) functions on two levels. First, as a natural passion common to all human beings, hope arises when an individual perceives a desired goal as attainable – whereas if the goal seems impossible, despair takes hold. As a virtue, hope exists as a mean between two extremes: despair, in which one believes the object of hope is unattainable, and presumption, in which one assumes the object of hope is easily attained with little effort. Aquinas wryly notes that hope can sometimes be misplaced, as seen in ‘young people and drunkards’, who, due to a distorted perception of reality, lack the ability to desire and will things in the right order (*ST* I-II.40.6; II-II.20.21).

Aquinas also emphasizes the role of experience in shaping hope:

Experience is a cause of hope insofar as it makes a person consider something possible that previously seemed impossible. However, experience can also lead to despair: just as it can make a man believe something is possible, it can also convince him that what he once thought possible is in fact impossible. Thus, experience causes hope in two ways but despair in only one – and so, on balance, experience fosters hope. (*ST* I-II.40.5; Aquinas 1920)

Beyond natural hope, Aquinas also speaks of hope as an infused theological virtue – sometimes called trust (*fiducia*). Unlike natural hope, this supernatural virtue is not a passion but a habit of the mind (*habitus mentis*). It is a gift of divine grace, unattainable through human effort alone, and thus impervious to the uncertainties of this world. Unlike natural hope, which concerns worldly matters, theological hope is directed solely toward God and the promise of eternal happiness (*ST* I-II.62.1; II-II.17.1). God is both the final object of hope and its sustaining force: the one whom Christians hope for and the means by which they attain that hope (Root 2023; Hütter 2012: ch. 8).

Aquinas further explores this in his question of ‘[w]hether there is certainty in the hope of a wayfarer’ (*ST* II-II.18.4). He initially answers in the negative, noting that ‘hope resides in the will’ whereas certainty belongs to the intellect, and the will can never function perfectly in this life. However, in his response, Aquinas shifts the focus from the limitations of human

will to the omnipotence and mercy of God. Instead of dwelling on their own uncertainties, believers should fix their eyes on God and his promises. Understood in this way, hope cannot fail, for it does not rest on human efforts but on God's unwavering will to save. This perspective aligns with the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which states:

When God reveals Himself and calls him, man cannot fully respond to divine love by his own power. He must hope that God will give him the capacity to love Him in return and to act in conformity with the commandments of charity. Hope is the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God; it is also the fear of offending God's love and of incurring punishment. (CCC 2090)

The Reformation introduced a sharp critique of the medieval concept of hope, particularly regarding the uncertainty of salvation. Reformers rejected the idea that Christian hope could remain conjectural or fallible. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (*Apol.*) insists that certainty is essential to Christian life:

And in the Church [if there is to be a church, if there is to be a Christian Creed] it is necessary that there should be the [preaching and] doctrine [by which consciences are not made to rely on a dream or to build on a foundation of sand, but] from which the pious may receive the sure hope of salvation. For the adversaries give men bad advice [therefore the adversaries are truly unfaithful bishops, unfaithful preachers and doctors; they have hitherto given evil counsel to consciences, and still do so by introducing such doctrine] when they bid them doubt whether they obtain remission of sins. For how will such persons sustain themselves in death who have heard nothing of this faith, and think that they ought to doubt whether they obtain the remission of sins? (*Apol.* IV, 119; Melancthon 1530. See also *Apol.* IV, 148; *Solid Declaration* IV, 11)

Among the Reformed confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 1647) articulates the issue of certainty in the most detail. It begins by acknowledging the danger of false hope and carnal security:

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God and in a state of salvation – hopes that shall ultimately perish – those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus and love Him in sincerity, striving to walk in good conscience before Him, may be assured in this life that they are in a state of grace. They may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, a hope that shall never put them to shame. (WCF 18.I)

In contrast to Catholic teaching, the Westminster Confession rejects the idea of conjectural certainty and fallible hope, advocating instead for an infallible assurance of faith (WCF 18.II).

4 Modern accounts on hope

4.1 Philosophers on hope

After the Enlightenment, discussions of hope shift away from purely theological concerns. René Descartes explores hope within the context of epistemology and psychology. As a cognitive stance, hope is weaker than confidence because it inherently involves uncertainty. By definition, hope entails a lack of full apprehension, which means it is always accompanied by anxiety.

For Thomas Hobbes, hope is a passion that influences political deliberation and action. However, because individual hopes often conflict – especially religious hopes, which can cause societal unrest – Hobbes argues that sovereign authorities must guide and regulate citizens' hopes to maintain social harmony.

Baruch Spinoza takes a more critical stance, viewing hope as an irrational attitude or a false belief that lacks an adequate grounding in reality. He associates hope with superstition, arguing that it is always accompanied by fear, making individuals vulnerable to external control and manipulation. Similarly, Arthur Schopenhauer sees hope as a distorted passion that clouds our understanding of reality and intensifies human suffering, since hopes are never truly fulfilled. He considers hope a temptation that must be resisted. Friedrich Nietzsche echoes this negative perspective, famously declaring that hope is 'the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man' (*Human, All Too Human* §71; Bloeser and Stahl 2022: 2.3–2.5).

In contrast, Immanuel Kant presents a largely positive view of hope. He frames it within three fundamental philosophical questions: 'what can I know?', 'what should I do?', and 'for what may I hope?' (*Critique of Pure Reason* A805/B833). According to Kant, hope is directed toward three primary objects: happiness, moral progress, and the ethical advancement of the human race.

Hoping for happiness ties into Kant's moral argument for the existence of God and the afterlife – neither of which can be empirically proven but must be presupposed to make moral action rational. Similarly, both personal and societal moral improvement are necessary motivations for ethical behaviour, as without such hope, people would lack internal incentives for striving toward a better future. Kant also connects hope to his vision of historical progress. Rejecting the idea of inevitable cultural and moral decline, he maintains that humanity is steadily advancing toward greater harmony (Kant 1990: 178).

Søren Kierkegaard challenges the Kantian view, which treats the objects of hope as attainable human possibilities (see especially Kierkegaard 1991). While he acknowledges the value of worldly hope, he argues that Christian hope transcends all natural expectations, appearing as folly to those without faith. He provides his most fundamental account of hope by contrasting it with despair and anxiety. For Kierkegaard, despair arises when individuals fail to recognize their dependence on a transcendent source – namely, God. This realization, in turn, fosters the conviction that *everything is possible for God*,

which surpasses the mere probability calculations underlying natural hopes. While worldly hopes are often unfulfilled, religious hope, he asserts, will never ultimately be frustrated (Theunissen and Illbruck 2016).

In a more contemporary philosophy, the discussed topics include questions like the following. Is hope an emotional reaction or rational deliberative action towards certain events or prospects? To what extent is hope cognitive and imaginative? How should rationality of hope be evaluated; to what extent is rational hope epistemic or pragmatic? How do secular, religious, and utopian forms of hope differ from each other? Is hope a vice or virtue (Bloeser and Stahl 2022)?

4.2 Varieties of hope

In recent years, hope has become a central topic in theological discourse, with numerous works exploring its various dimensions in depth (Lennan and Pineda-Madrid 2013; Jeanrond 2020; Heuvel 2020; Pieper 1997; Schumacher 2003; McFarland 2024). One of the key texts that helped shape contemporary discussions on the subject is Gabriel Marcel's short article, 'Metaphysics of Hope' (1942; see Marcel 1962). Marcel builds on the Thomistic distinction between natural reasoning and absolute hope to develop his own framework. Natural hopes are grounded in experience, reason, and accumulated evidence, making them vulnerable to disappointment. Absolute hope, by contrast, is independent of such considerations, rendering it immune to tragedy and disillusionment. Moreover, absolute hope is characterized by absolute certainty.

Following Marcel's analysis, we can distinguish between different kinds of hope based on two key factors: the certainty of hope and the nature of its object.

Type	Certainty of hope	Object of hope
Natural hope	indeterminate	distinct
Transcendent hope	determinate	distinct/indistinct
Absolute hope	determinate	indistinct
Hopelessness/despair/ desperation	indeterminate/determinate	indistinct/distinct
Knowledge	determinate	distinct

Since natural hope is based on experience and probabilities (both of which are inherently imprecise), it can never be fully certain and always remains, to some extent, indeterminate. As a natural attitude, its object is something specific within the earthly realm: a hunter seeking to kill a deer, a mother wishing for her son to overcome his addiction, or a candidate hoping to be elected to office.

In contrast, absolute hope is fundamentally different. It is marked by absolute certainty, yet its object remains indistinct. A person gifted with absolute hope possesses a firm conviction that, ultimately, all will be well, yet without having anything specific in

mind. A prime example of this indistinctness is found in the book of Revelation, where John of Patmos employs vivid imagery to express absolute hope – orientating hope eschatologically through words and images that are not meant to be taken literally.

The varieties of hope exist between the poles of despair and knowledge. Knowledge involves grasping a true proposition with absolute and determinate certainty, rendering hope unnecessary. When hope is fully realized, it transitions into love, as the one who once hoped becomes perfectly united with the object of hope. The opposite of knowledge is hopelessness or despair, which can manifest in varying degrees. A hopeless person is lost, uncertain of what will happen, and unsure even of what to hope for. Hopelessness may intensify into despair when it becomes more definite and distinct. A person in despair has an almost knowledge-like certainty that a particular negative outcome is inevitable and beyond intervention. In some cases, despair may even be a rational response if it is based on an accurate assessment of the situation. Despair, however, can escalate into desperation, a state in which a person loses control and succumbs to panic. While desperation lacks heroism or virtue, it is difficult to fault those who fall into it.

There is a saying: ‘There is hope, just not for me’. Does this attitude make sense? In the realm of natural hope, it certainly does. For example, a soldier may choose to sacrifice himself so that his comrades can escape; he knows he will perish and has no hope for himself, but there is hope for those he protects. This is a heroic interpretation of the attitude. A more tragic example is an addict who believes he is beyond redemption, even while acknowledging that recovery is possible for others.

But can someone adopt this perspective regarding metaphysical hope? If one believes in transcendent salvation, one might think that while others can partake in it, they themselves are excluded. This, however, is a symptom of despair and reveals a peculiar form of certainty: the belief in one’s own unavoidable damnation. Marcel argues that excluding oneself from ultimate hope is possible but always pathological, marked by hubris or contradiction. He writes:

From the moment that I abase myself in some sense before the absolute Thou who in his infinite condescension has brought me forth out of nothingness, it seems as though I forbid myself ever again to despair, or, more exactly, that I implicitly accept the possibility of despair as an indication of treason, so that I could not give way to it without pronouncing my own condemnation. Indeed, seen in this perspective, what is the meaning of despair if not a declaration that God has withdrawn himself from me? In addition to the fact that such an accusation is incompatible with the nature of the absolute Thou, it is to be observed that in advancing it I am unwarrantably attributing to myself a distinct reality which I do not possess. (Marcel 1962: 46–47)

Marcel also provides an account of the experience of maintaining hope even when all seems lost. His analysis is not purely descriptive; it also carries a normative dimension –

lacking this kind of hope, in some cases, amounts to a moral failure. He illustrates this with his own situation: writing in 1942, during the Nazi occupation of France, he argues that failing to hope for France's eventual liberation would be akin to betraying one's country and siding with the enemy.

Here, the object of faith is not explicitly religious, yet the act of hoping shares characteristics with absolute, religious hope. To distinguish it from properly religious hope, I will refer to this as *transcendent hope*, a form of hope accessible even to atheists. Transcendent hope can also be seen as a performative act, an expression of commitment to bringing about a desired future. This explains the moral imperative attached to it. For instance, if a soldier ceases fighting, he may have valid practical reasons, such as slim chances of victory, but his surrender might still be viewed as a moral failure. Similarly, those who hold to naturalism can embrace something akin to absolute hope and may even be held accountable for failing to uphold transcendent hope. However, absolute hope itself cannot be demanded of a person, as it is not within one's power to generate it; it is a divine gift, a supernatural virtue.

While Marcelian absolute hope has influenced secular thinkers to develop their own versions of absolute hope (without the explicit theological commitments), secular perspectives often critique the Christian concept of absolute hope. For example, Patrick Shade identifies at least four key problems with promoting absolute religious hope (Shade 2001; see also Eagleton 2015).

- (1) If hope is detached from reason and evidence, it may lead people to act irrationally or immorally, as some hopes are misguided or even destructive.
- (2) Since absolute hope is often directed toward the impossible, it provides no concrete means for improving real-world conditions and may encourage passivity or resignation.
- (3) Hoping for the impossible risks rendering hope meaningless, as it lacks a tangible foundation and becomes vacuous.
- (4) Although absolute hope is often regarded as more resilient than ordinary hope, Shade argues that ordinary hopes may, in fact, be just as well – if not better – equipped to confront the challenges of life.

4.3 Theologies of hope

Among the twentieth-century theologians, Jürgen Moltmann is perhaps the most well-known for his theorization of hope (Moltmann 1967; 2012). Developed in the aftermath of the Second World War as an indirect response to its devastation, particularly in his home country of Germany, Moltmann sought to revalidate and reorient Christian eschatology, which had, over the history of Protestant theology, become a largely neglected or even avoided topic. On the one hand, eschatology had often been associated with radical

and apocalyptic movements; on the other, liberal Protestant interpretations of the New Testament had fostered the impression that eschatology was a failed enterprise in light of Christ's postponed return.

In contrast to these extremes, Moltmann asserts that Christian faith is fundamentally future-oriented, rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a sign of God's ultimate plan to redeem and renew the world. God's promise of a new creation, he argues, calls believers not to passive expectation but to active engagement in the pursuit of justice and liberation in the present. At the same time, Moltmann remains wary of attempts to identify historical movements as direct manifestations of God's kingdom, an error that had tempted many German Christians before and during the Second World War. Christian hope, according to Moltmann, is always intertwined with uncertainty; as we live in the time between Pentecost and Parousia (Christ's second coming), we cannot fully know what God's kingdom will ultimately look like. If we possessed such knowledge, there would be no need for hope. Thus, Christian hope is characterized by radical openness to the future. What can be known of it is only discernible through the reflections of Jesus Christ's acts and person (Bauckham 1995).

This hope is neither passive nor merely individualistic; rather, it calls Christians to participate in social and political change as an embodiment of the anticipated kingdom of God. Suffering and oppression are met with the assurance that God is in solidarity with the afflicted and that their struggles will not have the final word. In this way, Moltmann's theology of hope is both eschatological, concerned with God's final purposes, and deeply relevant to contemporary social issues, advocating a forward-looking faith that inspires transformation even in the present age.

Despite Moltmann's efforts to separate eschatology from specific political movements, his theology of hope has frequently been linked to left-wing political causes (Webb 2008). He engages with Marxist philosophy and, at times, aligns with its conviction that theology should not merely describe the world but actively seek to change it. Contemporary liberation theologies have drawn upon Moltmann's insights, though some tensions remain. For Moltmann, the central eschatological event is the resurrection, while other liberatory events, such as the exodus, are of secondary significance. This perspective has led some radical liberation theologians to view Moltmann's framework as offering too little for their revolutionary cause.

Liberation theologians see hope as an essential, active force that drives the struggle for justice, liberation, and social transformation (see, as a starting point, Latin American Liberation Theology). Rather than viewing Christian hope as a purely individual or future-oriented sentiment, they understand it as a call to action in response to present injustices, particularly those affecting the poor and marginalized. Hope, in this sense, is inseparable

from the here and now; it compels believers to resist oppression and work toward a more just society that reflects God's kingdom (Petrella 2006; Smith 1991).

For theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, hope has a concrete, communal dimension, drawing its strength from the biblical tradition of God's preferential option for the poor and Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed. This hope sustains and empowers communities engaged in the praxis of liberation, the dynamic interplay of reflection and action aimed at transforming unjust social structures. Rather than waiting passively for future redemption, hope becomes an active force that anticipates God's justice by resisting injustice in the present and, in doing so, manifests the kingdom within history (Gutiérrez 2001: 202). According to Gutiérrez:

The challenge of the church is to live by a hope that is rooted in concrete history of a people who are at once oppressed and believing, and that is inspired by the plan of the kingdom, which urges us on to something new and different. If the church breaks its links with the kingdom, it will by that very act lose its transcendent purpose and its ability to be critical of the present. It will submissively adapt itself to situations or will try to come to grips with them in terms of its earthly interests and not of the demands of God or the needs of the poor. In other words, it will lose its hope in the God who 'makes all things new' (Rv 21:5). (Gutiérrez 1991: 107)

The extent to which liberation theology draws from Marxist philosophy versus offering a critical reading of it, while remaining fundamentally a biblical project, has long been a contentious issue (Berryman 1987: 138–151; Turner 1999). Nevertheless, liberation theologians generally align with Marxist ideals in advocating for a qualitative revolution and radical social change (Boff and Boff 1985: 12). Both perspectives also emphasize the need to create a 'new man', an ideal kind of human being.

For Gutiérrez, this transformation occurs through religious conversion, which renews sinners and turns them into followers of Christ. In Marxist ideology, by contrast, the 'new man' emerges through a purified consciousness, enabling resistance to the false hopes of capitalism which seduce the masses away from revolutionary and apocalyptic visions (Marcuse 2007). Both perspectives, however, typically refrain from detailing how the envisioned qualitatively different society will emerge after the critique of the present or how it is meant to function (Smith 1991: 46–47). In this sense, both share an apocalyptic mindset, and Marxist visions of hope often contain a quasi-religious element.

In sum, for liberation theologians, hope is inherently revolutionary. It aligns with God's liberating will, strengthens communities in their struggles, and motivates believers to take action toward social and spiritual freedom. This hope affirms that God is both present and active in their efforts to create a more just world (Petrella 2008).

In contrast, many other strands of Christian theology have been more cautious, or even skeptical, about the manifestation of God's kingdom in the present age. The Augustinian tradition, sometimes referred to as 'Augustinian pessimism', as well as Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Christian realism', echo Moltmann's warning against identifying human institutions with the coming kingdom (Gregory 2008). Consider, for example, this statement by Henri de Lubac:

It is well to stress this so as not to arouse puerile hopes; no particular civilization will ever fully deserve the name 'Christian', far from it. The notion of Christian civilization does not represent either a past which some would like to see brought back, or a future on whose arrival one can count. It is an outline, an ideal, not a blueprint drawn up in advance, but a definite orientation. We might say if we like, in words that are accepted today, that it is a myth; but a myth which a Christian, even one who is on his guard against all idealistic dreams, can never entirely give up pursuing. (de Lubac 1984: 90)

Explaining the nature of Christian hope in relation to the earthly kingdom is always a challenging task. Alan Mittleman argues that hope is not solely about change but also about 'conserving practices and institutions that support meaning, which have been inherited from the past and still endure in the present' (Mittleman 2009: 14). Thus, hope can be understood as both a progressive and conservative disposition.

David Elliot (2020) poses three key questions. First, can Christians identify with this world and its institutions, such as nations and cultures, or does their otherworldly hope compel them to withdraw from them? Second, can Christians hope to benefit from these institutions, or should they remain indifferent? Third, can Christians hope for the redemption of these institutions from the corruption of sin?

Elliot answers all three questions affirmatively. While creation and human institutions are tainted by sin, they were originally good, and sin is merely extrinsic to them. Furthermore, human beings are inherently embodied and relational; without these qualities, we would not be fully human. Therefore, for Elliot, the proper Christian stance is one of love toward these created orders. This includes the hope that these institutions can be beneficial, while also recognizing that they are not always so.

Regarding the third question, *Gaudium et Spes* (also titled the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) offers insight, stating:

For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood, and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: 'a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace'. (*Gaudium et Spes* 24)

This Roman Catholic document, which is one of the constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, further asserts that this kingdom is already present on Earth in mystery and will reach its full realization upon the Lord's return (*Gaudium et Spes* 3). If something is to be perfected in heaven, it follows that it must have existed in some form on Earth (Elliot 2020).

A particular question of Christian eschatology is linked to the future of this cosmos and the end of the universe. A more detailed question concerns the reach of hope the Christian narrative seeks to offer. Is the story of Christ only meant for humans and to what extent does it have cosmological consequences? If the cosmos seems to be moving towards heat death or the 'Big Crunch' and termination of all life, how does one include any earthly hope in that scenario? Of course, this is such a distant scenario that no one reading these lines will experience it. That said, it is quite possible that human life will go extinct much sooner due to some other cosmic catastrophe, like a planet-killer comet, solar flare, or geomagnetic reversal. This leads us back to the duality of Christian hope, that is, to which extent the object of hope is this-worldly or other-worldly (Davison 2023; Wilkinson 2024).

4.4 Hope and theological epistemology

Wolfhart Pannenberg and theologians influenced by him argue that the central claims of the Christian faith cannot be verified with absolute certainty in this age. Instead, they can only be apprehended through an anticipation of the future, which has already been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As a result, hope becomes the central theological virtue (Pannenberg 2002; Shults 1998; Kärkkäinen 2017).

Hope is also a significant topic among philosophers of religion, particularly from an epistemological perspective. Robert Audi, among others, examines faith as a fluid attitude, suggesting that over time one may transition from disbelief to hope, from hope to trust, and from trust to full-fledged doxastic faith (Audi 2011). Audi maintains that it is both natural and desirable to seek higher degrees of certainty when the available evidence permits. However, this leads to an apparent paradox: if faith were to progress toward certainty, believers would theoretically move away from hope toward knowledge. Yet, Audi is not advocating for this outcome. His framework primarily tracks the varying degrees of epistemic conviction believers may hold. In fact, he cautions against overemphasizing the doxastic aspect of faith. While doxastic faith is its paradigmatic form, it is ultimately perfected only in the life to come. Thus, having a less firm epistemic grasp does not mean that believers have abandoned their faith.

4.5 Hope and psychology

Hope is deeply relevant to a wide range of life experiences, including therapy, empowerment, parenting, aging, athletic performance, overcoming illness, trauma, mental

health disorders, and living with disabilities (Snyder 2000). Ultimately, hope plays a crucial role in living well (Hooft 2014; see also Theology and Psychiatry).

In contrast, cynicism – expecting the worst from people – creates toxic environments and inhibits human flourishing. Within the influential field of positive psychology, hope is defined as ‘expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about’ (Peterson and Seligman 2004: 30). However, pathological optimism – that is, being naively hopeful – may also have deleterious psychological effects. Therefore, healthy forms of hope are always balanced with a dose of evidence-based skepticism (Zaki 2024).

Attributions

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