

Hope in Time

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Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise
Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And éyes, héart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic-as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!-
These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart réars wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Hurrahing in Harvest* ¹

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Hurrahing in Harvest' in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. G.H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1953), 31.



Gerard Manley Hopkins: Time, Creation and Being.

Gerard Manley Hopkins used poetry, illustrated by *Hurrahing in Harvest*, to point to the inexplicable, profound and even disturbing experience lying between mortal time and God's Being. Theological hope also, I suggest, sits in that temporal space of promise of change yet unknowing. At the outset of the poem the time of now in summer and autumn illustrates two moments within temporal flow, a break, yet also paradoxically chromatic flow, picking out a moment within a world that is changing.

Hopkins experiences the natural landscape in a fragmentary way as pointing not just to finite creation, but also to God's Being, akin to a rapturous love, yet a majestic stallion. The violent image of barbarity as summer ends, 'barbarous in beauty' amounts to an awkward integration of what is observed with Being, rather than a splintering off from it. This is important theologically, since theological hope cannot, I argue, be rendered gnostic in tone, but needs to be embedded in and grounded in time and in the natural world around us, finding God's presence in its midst. It has, therefore, acute ecological relevance.

According to literary scholar Margaret Morlier, Hopkins' violent imagery was not simply resonant with Darwinian images of nature red in tooth and claw.² And her argument makes clear that Hopkins, importantly, resisted a conception of time that was becoming popular in the Victorian period which argued that human spiritual progress was inevitable within the constantly returning cycles of the natural world. Instead, following Henry Liddon, who was his spiritual advisor, "He was never comfortable with any accumulated knowledge that is supposed to improve or change human identity. Any improvement in humanity as a species is attributed to God, whose grandeur accumulates in time (*God's Grandeur*)".³

Hopkins therefore believed that the passage of time and accumulation of education does not lead to humanity's progressive advancement, nor can the natural world itself be redemptive. Humanity is proceeding on its course in a repetitive way, as hinted at through the sequential process of summer changing to autumn, rather than necessarily changing for the better. *God's Grandeur* reiterates that human time is repetitive and without change: "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod"⁴. Hope in this poem as in *Hurrahing in the Harvest* is placed in God, so "over the bent/ World broods with warm breasts and with ah! bright wings". Participation in human affairs that

² Manley Hopkins may have been influenced by Charles Darwin's ideas, but he clearly understood the theological tensions arising from such a position. For a discussion of his influence see Jude V. Nixon, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and his Contemporaries: Liddon, Newman, Darwin, and Pater* (New York: Garland: 1994).

³ Margaret Morlier, "Barbarous in Beauty: The Violence of Time in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins" *Victorian Poetry* 1997, 35, no. 2 (1997) 222.

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, *Poems and Prose*, 27; see also Morlier, "Barbarous in Beauty" 215, 222.

also went beyond “wars”, “wounds”, “tosses” and awareness of “wrecked past purpose” as exemplified in the “Terrible Sonnets” was in dialogue with how time can also be redemptive. He “recognised three dimensions of time: regenerative, changing time; degenerative, changing time; and eternal, permanent divine time”.⁵ He achieved their convergence through understanding the painful human participation in mortal time as a “form of redemptive martyrdom”.⁶

I am beginning this short essay with Hopkins because he raises profound but difficult to articulate questions that are still crucially important for contemporary theological reflection on hope and time, particularly in the current global context of socio-ecological breakdown and collapse. He wrote in a period when Darwinian ideas were starting to take hold, which, when joined with secular ideals of Progress, too readily assumed inevitable and progressive forms of human futures. The perception of hope in such a context was thin, intimately connected with human material progress, and therefore tending to collapse into optimism. Optimism is expecting something to turn out well regardless of reasons, and, as literary critic Terry Eagleton has pointed out, one who hopes in this way is “in danger of buying his hope on the cheap”.⁷ Optimism makes positive assumptions about what might happen. *Optimalism*, on the other hand, is the Leibnizian dogma that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Current psychological theories of hope tend either to collapse the meaning of hope into optimism or portray it as an adaptive response between resignation and stress, which renders hope a ‘saccharine’ vision of what true hope is about, namely, that which faces up to life’s difficulties and challenges. Evolutionary based theories such as Matt Ridley’s *The Rational Optimist*⁸ offers a technological determinism which assumes a direct link between affluence and human well-being, while Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature* paints a picture of world history in terms of inevitable human progress.⁹ Breaking the link between hope and a doctrine of human progress without succumbing to pessimism and despair is critically important, as Hopkins was well-aware.

By placing time in relation to Being Hopkins touches on what might be termed the explicitly Christian understanding of *hope against hope*, which had been dismissed by Freudian analysis as a form of delusion. Although contemporary psychologies of hope are less likely to be so dismissive of religious hope by weaving in recognition that hope is not simply optimism, they still fall short of

⁵ Morlier, “Barbarous in Beauty,” 224.

⁶ Morlier, 225.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (London and New York: Yale University Press, 2015), 1.

⁸ Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

⁹ Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2012). For further commentary, see C. Deane-Drummond, *Shadow Sophia: The Evolution of Wisdom Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

understanding the depth that Christian hope articulates. That hope is still framed as helpful fantasy, rather than a hope that is both embedded in this temporal world as well as the next.¹⁰

Hope as Passion and Virtue

Thomas Aquinas teases out in more depth the distinctions between what could be termed secular forms of hope and the explicit Christian virtue of hope. Hope as a passion is inclined towards something good that is both difficult and possible.¹¹ Hope is not about incidentals, such as, “I hope the weather will improve today”. Aquinas argues that hope provides a spur to temporal action in the present. Does certainty in hope lead to complacency or negligence in acting? Aquinas resists that interpretation, since once there is a sense of security hope is no longer difficult. Does the possibility of sorrow prevent action? Aquinas objects to that argument as well because hope leads to a sense of pleasure as it dwells on future good, which stirs up hope and spurs action.

Understanding hope as a passion aligns it with the possibility that such a sentiment could be present in animals other than humans. Although Alan Mittleman dismisses that idea because humans perceive the future in a way that other animals do not¹², this objection was tackled by Aquinas, as well as the objection that animals cannot assess different possibilities of outcome, as, according to the knowledge available at the time, “they have no mind”¹³. Aquinas’ location of hope as passion in the irascible appetite allows him to attribute a form of hope to animals, even though he achieves this through speculation on their mental capacity arising from a divinely endowed Intellect that can foresee the future. Contemporary analysis of animal minds has shown that their levels of cognition are much higher than previously assumed.¹⁴ While sophisticated foresight is likely to be distinctively human, the possibility that certain animals can in some sense anticipate a positive outcome and recognise uncertainty over that outcome is not unreasonable. Insofar as hope is about the unseen

¹⁰ Gabriele Oettingen and Malin Patricia Chromik, “How Hope Influences Goal Directed Behavior”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hope*, edited by Matthew W. Gallagher and Shane J. Lopez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 69-78

¹¹ Irascible passions are fear, hope, daring and anger and differ from concupiscible passions which are joy, sorrow, love and hatred in that in the former case their object (that may be good or evil) is difficult to obtain or avoid. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, 50-119, Volume 14*, translated by Laurence Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander: Aquinas Institute, 2012) 1a 81.2; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Prima Secundae, 1-70*, translated by Laurence Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, *Volume 15* (Lander: Aquinas Institute, 2012), 1a2ae 23.1.

¹² Alan Mittleman, *Hope in a Democratic Age: Philosophy, Religion and Political Theory* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 40.3

¹⁴ For discussion of these aspects see C. Deane-Drummond, *Theological Ethics Through a Multispecies Lens: Evolution of Wisdom Volume I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 108-9

and related to divine intent, hope is distinctly human, but that does not mean that a form of nascent hope as passion is impossible for beings other than humans.

The more difficult analysis of hope in time is related to hope as virtue, which concerns the perfection of the will, rather than a perfection of an irascible passion. Hope when understood as a theological virtue is both in creaturely bounded time as well as orientated towards eternity. The temptation is to let theological hope collapse into eternity. In this case, as Hopkins' poetry shows, hope is both within creaturely time but orientated towards the infinite good in a way which can only be obtained by divine assistance.¹⁵ Within Christian literature there has been much debate therefore on whether the virtue of hope is restricted to Christian believers or not. An Augustinian hard line here does not seem all that reasonable, quite apart from whether hope as passion could be viewed as at least related to, even if not identical with, religiously orientated forms of hope. The conception of a separate psychological capacity of a will, for example, is not aligned with current theories of human cognition¹⁶. Josef Pieper struggles with the question of how human hoping can be both natural and gifted when he admits that the "emotional-intellectual hope of natural man" also "tends by its very nature to be stamped with the formative standard of virtue so that it may, by reason of this standard, gain a share in this orientation toward good."¹⁷ The intermediary virtue that refines hope as passion is magnanimity, which, as Nicholas Austin has helpfully pointed out, is "an earthly complement to the theological hope that orientates us to the eternal beatitude", and once recognised, means its "intelligibility and appeal as a virtue of moral hope need no longer be in doubt". Magnanimity works towards a "stretching towards great things" of the "*animus*" understood as an active and forceful part of the soul.¹⁸ Given that magnanimity can be both acquired and infused, it also spans what could be termed the dialogical relationship between nature and grace, and gives some insight as to how different kinds of hoping intersect.

It is also worth stressing that in Aquinas the virtue of hope is not simply forward facing in a temporal sense, but also includes the present enjoyment of participation in the life of the divine, even if only in a partial sense. It is still, I argue, hope experienced *in time* rather than outside of it in gnostic heavenly bliss. So "we should hope from Him nothing less than Himself, since His goodness, whereby He imparts good things to His creature, is no less than His Essence. Therefore, the proper and principal object of hope is eternal happiness".¹⁹ That hope in the present may be

¹⁵ Michael Lamb, 'Aquinas and the Virtues of Hope: Theological and Democratic', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no 2 (2016) 306.

¹⁶ C. Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

¹⁷ Pieper, *Faith, Hope and Love*, [1997] (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 100-101.

¹⁸ Nicholas Austin, 'Moral Hope: Aquinas and Cajetan on Magnanimity', *Nova et Vetera* 18, no, 3 (2020) 820-21.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, Qu. 17.2

“veiled”, as in Hebrews 6.19,²⁰ but it acts as a marker through which other secular hopes arise and therefore serves to qualify them. In expressing the virtue of hope the other is regarded as one who is loved as another self, which leads to hoping for another who is loved. Accordingly, “just as it is the same virtue of charity whereby a man loves God, himself and his neighbor, so too it is the same virtue of hope whereby a man hopes for himself and for another”.²¹

The Shadow Side of Hope as Virtue

But, we might ask, who is my neighbour? Although it is well known that Aquinas rejected hope for eternal life for any beings other than humans, our hope in time cannot be shorn from hope in eternity if hope is to have any valence in the contemporary socio-ecological crises. Climate change, the global Covid 19 pandemic, and now the violence of war in Europe alongside threats to global democracy challenge the possibility of hope. For many young people rising eco-anxiety borders on despair, which is the vice situated at the opposite pole of the virtue of hope.

Total dejection is an emotion shared with other social animals in response to loss. Primatologist Jane Lawick-Goodhall, who studied African chimpanzees at the Gombe reserve, found that following maternal death one of the chimpanzees named Merlin showed symptoms that clearly indicated depression. She describes his condition towards the end of his life thus: “Merlin was so thin that every bone showed. His hair was not only dull but there were great patches of it missing on his legs and arms where he had gradually pulled it out during self-grooming. Often he laid out stretched on the ground while the other youngsters played, as though constantly exhausted.”²² While mild depression and anxiety is sometimes accepted as a basis for an advantageous conservation of energy, and cultural factors need to be considered when assessing human states of depression, despair when interpreted theologically goes beyond such biocultural explanations.

Søren Kierkegaard, for example, in his *Sickness Unto Death*, highlights the subliminal aspects of despair, describing it as a kind of spiritual dizziness.²³ Despair is a sickness unto death because it is the existential hopelessness of not being able to die even though death is more appealing than life.²⁴ Thomas Aquinas deals with despair in the second part of *Summa Theologiae* within a broader analysis of hope and following a discussion of fear. He distinguishes the specific contexts in which despair is a sin against hope. So, countering those who argue against the idea that despair is a sin, he insists that “the contrary movement of despair, which is in conformity with the false opinion

²⁰ Aquinas, Qu. 17.2.

²¹ Aquinas, Qu. 17.3

²² Jane Goodhall-Lawick, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston: Marina Books, [1971] 1988), 225.

²³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.A. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 16.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 18.

about God, is vicious and sinful.”²⁵ His strong sense of the seriousness of despair is related to the fact that it is opposed to one of the theological virtues, namely hope, and therefore against an immutable good rather than a mutable good. Aquinas presumes despair to be in the appetite and is still possible when someone has a measure of faith in God,²⁶ but in this case considers that there is no hope of being forgiven because of a mistaken conception of God that is distorted by that despair. As Aquinas puts it succinctly: “despair consists in a man ceasing to hope for a share of God’s goodness.”²⁷ Despair is dangerous, since “when hope is given up, men rush headlong into sin, and are drawn away from good works”.²⁸ Citing Isidore in the same article, for Aquinas despair amounts to “falling into hell”.²⁹ Despair turns theological hope in on itself through a withdrawal so that it is no longer orientated towards eternity.

Socio-ecological hope

Aquinas gives us a detailed account of what the virtue of hope looks like and how we might come to express this in our relationship with God. He does not, however, ground his discussion in what the virtue of hope means in terms of practical transformative action in the present, even while giving us a framework for the inner tapestry of hope in the human heart in relation to God. Jürgen Moltmann develops the Thomistic distinction between what could be termed secular hope and faith-based “hope against hope”, a type of hoping that can be present even in the midst of change, suffering and death hinted at in Hopkins’ poetry. Hope and Christian faith are companions, both interlacing and interdependent on the other. The difference, however, compared with Aquinas is that for Moltmann hope becomes not just an aspiration towards love of God in charity, but a strong protest against suffering.³⁰

Theological hope, to be true to its name, must witness against the unjust suffering that is becoming part and parcel of the story of our warming and violent world. It is not just the threat of the earth’s ultimate extinction that is at stake, but the wider unfolding of the process of that loss on the most vulnerable human communities. For Moltmann hope “makes us ready to bear the ‘cross

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae, 1-91*, Volume 17, translated by Laurence Shapcote (Green Bay: Aquinas Institute, 2012), 2a2ae Qu. 20.1.

²⁶ Aquinas, Qu. 20.2.

²⁷ For Aquinas, despair of a hope in God’s glory is theoretically less grievous a sin than hatred of God or disbelief in God’s truth. However, it is more dangerous in as much as hope may be sought in other things, which leads one “headlong into sin...and...away from good works”. Aquinas, Qu 20.3.

²⁸ Aquinas, Qu. 20.3.

²⁹ For further discussion of despair and its relationship to psychological forms of depression and sloth see Deane-Drummond, *Shadow Sophia*.

³⁰ Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*, translated by James W. Leitch [1965]. (London: SCM Press, 1967),

of the present”.³¹ This “upside down” aspect of hope is stressed far more in Moltmann compared with Thomas, the greatest risk being that of not allowing the present to be challenged, i.e. recognising the practical radicality of hope.³² Hope for Moltmann, unlike Aquinas, also seems to have an ontological priority over love, so that “believing hope will itself provide inexhaustible resources for the creative, inventive imagination of love”.³³ His concept of *adventus*, Christian hope breaking into the present, which opposes a secular *futurans*, the linear extension of our hopes into the future, is arguably his most original contribution to a theology of hope.³⁴ However, by rendering *adventus* as inevitably opposing *futurans* Moltmann seems to have split apart hope as passion and theological hope, though the focus of his discussion is on hope in relation to time rather than the virtues.³⁵

The theological significance of hope is also teased out in an interesting way in the thought of Karl Rahner. Unlike Moltmann, he takes special care to stress *God* as the object of hope in a way that aligns with Aquinas’ position, such that God “constitutes our absolute future”, but without reducing hope to either faith or love “on the way.”³⁶ Hope as theological virtue becomes possible because of what Rahner terms “divine self-bestowal” through the divine *Logos* and divine *Pneuma*, and correspondingly, a single act of humanity is envisaged in two modalities of faith and love.³⁷ He is critical of scholastic tendencies to replace theological hope with its virtual disappearance on “possession” or “attainment”, even in the next life. Instead of humanity “attaining” something by means of possession, the “unfathomable mystery” instead “must be sustained and endured” rather than attempting to be “comprehended and so controlled and subordinated to the subject”.³⁸ He therefore stresses the distinctive marks of theological hope, which for him “*is a process of constantly eliminating the provisional in order to make room for the radical and pure uncontrollability of God. It is the continuous process of destroying that which appears, in order that the absolute and ultimate truth may be the intelligible as comprehended, and love may be that which is brought about by our love*”.³⁹

Theological hope in this mode does not so much disappear but continues and endures and makes possible love and faith. Rather than seeking to control the future, recognising God as one who is

³¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 31

³² Moltmann, 26-32.

³³ Moltmann, 34.

³⁴ For discussion see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 1979), 29-31; 55-58.

³⁵ This scope of this essay does not allow me to discuss Moltmann’s interpretation of time. See his discussion of time in Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 104-139.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations (TI), Volume 10*, translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), Part Three, ‘On the Theology of Hope’, p. 245

³⁷ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 246.

³⁸ Rahner, 249.

³⁹ Rahner, 250. Italics in original.

not to be controlled, liberates humanity from envisaging any fixed or pre-conceived outcomes. Yet, rather like the dialectic between hope as passion and hope as virtue, for Rahner the existential movement of hope works in both directions. So, a Christian must “impress the form of his hope upon the framework of the world”.⁴⁰ This hope in the concrete takes the form of reappraisal and critique, while sitting lightly to anything attainable in this worldly life as if human life were totally dependent on it. In a fascinating way he attributes this transforming aspect of hope in the world as both depending on a greater hope in God, but also making it real. So, “In the power of this greater hope he also possesses the lesser hope, namely the courage to transform the ‘framework of secular life’, as the Council puts it, and the converse too is no less true. In this lesser hope the greater one is made real”.⁴¹ The two modes of hope therefore work together for the transformation of society.

All three theologians I have discussed so far, namely, Aquinas, Moltmann and Rahner give insights into what could be termed the dynamism of an explicitly Christian hope which is orientated towards God and is capable of a radical “hoping against hope” even in the midst of pain and suffering. Hope’s situation at the boundary of impossibility yet possibility is relevant in the current context of climate change, environmental damage and social injustices that are all too much in evidence in our contemporary world.

Hope, following Rahner, is that ability to lose control and acknowledge God in the face of the unknown and unseen in order that the grace of God may become evident. Rahner is important since he reminds his readers that theological hope is not a guarantor. True Christian hope cannot be separated from the virtues of faith and charity, and, like hope, it is a divine gift rather than something that is acquired through learning. *Extending* love and our object of hope to other creatures is not in conflict with our ability to love others, or love God.

Interim Conclusions

I began this essay by referencing the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. He understood, in a prophetic way, that human progress was not inevitable, and that humanity’s relationship with God arises within our temporal, earth-bound, creaturely, vulnerable existence, while stretching somehow beyond it in hope through participating in God’s Being. Nature red in tooth and claw and its application in social Darwinism, becoming popular in the mid-nineteenth century, were not the last word when interpreting Hopkins through the lens of time and hope. By placing humanity in an agrarian context, Hopkins develops the theological concept of “hope against hope” in a specifically ecologically grounded way, while also being fully cognisant of tendencies for violence,

⁴⁰ Rahner, 258.

⁴¹ Rahner, 259.

including the ravages of war. Thomas Aquinas' moral theology helps to tease out a little further the distinctions between hope as one of the irascible passions, a capacity that I argued is also shared in some sense with other animals, and the virtue of theological hope, which is orientated towards participation in God. While Aquinas locates the latter in the will, I resisted the interpretation that the passion of hope should be split off in a radical way from hope as virtue, not least because while theological hope is gift, the temptation towards gnosis is ever present without a recognition of some measure of continuity between different human forms of hoping. Hope is in time, not outside time, even when considering hope in eternity. And just as Hopkins acknowledged degenerative time, so hope has a shadow side in despair. Reflecting on despair, I argued, clarifies the different dimensions of hope, for it shows up the risks of its absence. Despair, as Aquinas was aware, is a type of withdrawal, an inner assumption of disaster that has lost the ability to hope in the possible yet difficult outcome. It is akin to time turned in on itself, rather than reaching and stretching out through dwelling on the eternal God rather than self. Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Rahner assisted in developing the argument for hope to be expressed in present suffering, and in protestation against it. Rahner adds an important dimension of the uncontrollability of God which outlasts even death itself, so hope is permanent feature of human existence in both this world and the next. That uncontrollability is, I suggest, important to recognise if human communities are to develop resilience in the face of global social and ecological emergencies. Recognising as believers that God sets the agenda will prevent presumptive accounts of human futures. Our Christian form of hoping remains rooted in time, even in so far as it participates in the wildness of God's Being and loving.

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