

THEOLOGY OF HOPE: MODERN WRITERS

JOSEF PIEPER (1904-1997)

On Hope [Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986]

Hope and History [Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994]

Hope—A Virtue of the Pilgrim Christian

Pieper speaks of the condition of being a *viator*, a pilgrim, 'one on the way' in contrast with the condition of being a *comprehensor*, 'one who sees or knows' [see *Philippians* 3.13]. For Pieper the *status viatoris* is a metaphysical concept associated with creatureliness. It does not designate place but refers to 'the innermost structure of created nature', to the inherent 'not yet' of finite being, to the human being's 'becoming-ness', between the shores of nothingness and being.

The *status viatoris*, of being pilgrims, means that our existence is characterised by *not-yet-ness*. *Positively* this means an orientation towards fulfilment, our ability to establish a 'claim' to the happy outcome of our pilgrimage, the possibility of *merit*. *Negatively* it means the absence of fulfilment, a proximity to nothingness and the possibility of *sin*. Pieper understands this as another way of describing creatureliness. Our way as *homo viator* is towards being and towards realisation although *realisation is not yet fulfilled* and *the fall into nothingness is not yet impossible*. The answer to this condition is neither despair nor presumption but **hope**.

Pieper says that there are two ways of denying the reality of the *status viatoris*: **idealism** denies the reality of time while **existentialism** denies the orientation towards fulfilment. In more traditional language the way of *homo viator* or the way of hope negotiates a path between **two forms of hopelessness**, *despair* and *presumption*.

Despair and Presumption

One form of hopelessness is **despair** which is an anticipation of the non-fulfilment of what is hoped for and is therefore a descent into hell, an anticipation of damnation. For the one who despairs *prayer is useless* and the 'not yet' becomes simply 'not'. In its full sense despair is not a psychological state into which we fall but a decision of the will and an act of the intellect. In despair we deny our own desire and we deny Christ as our 'way'.

Despair means turning away from some future and arduous good because it is judged impossible of attainment. Hope believes the good is attainable, despair decides that it is not attainable. In despair the object is regarded as excessively valuable, beyond one's powers and capacities, beyond one's entitlement, beyond perhaps the capacity or the willingness of the one from whom one had hoped to receive help. Modern psychology might describe this in terms of a lack of self-esteem, a judgement that this good thing is impossible for me to attain, I am not worthy of it, I am not able for it, or whatever. St Thomas speaks of this when he says that despair ensues from an overwhelming excess of what is good. Too much good makes us despair! Faced with the goodness of God, why do we not simply and always despair?

In despair we continue to have an interest in and desire for the good thing for which we had formerly hoped. It is a negative emotion because it suppresses the forward thrust of hope.

The beginning and the root of despair is *acedia* or sloth, according to Pieper. Sloth is not just idleness and laziness but 'a kind of sadness', a sadness in view of the divine good in the human being, an 'anxious vertigo' in face of the greatness to which God calls us which results in inactivity, depression and discouragement. The opposite of sloth is not industry and diligence as a work-ethic oriented society might imagine but magnanimity and joy. The 'daughters of sloth' are *restlessness of mind* which manifests itself as loquaciousness, excessive curiosity, pouring oneself out, interior restlessness and instability of place or purpose; *sluggish indifference*; *pusillanimity*; *irritable rebellion*; and simple *badness*.

Presumption is a second form of hopelessness. It is not the opposite of hope. Despair is the opposite: *de-spe-ratio*, the condition of being 'de-hoped'. Presumption is rather a counterfeit hope. It is a lesser sin than despair because God really is good and merciful. Presumption means the anticipation of fulfilment or the affirmation of a condition of non-fulfilment as though it were fulfilment. For presumption prayer is unnecessary and the 'not yet' becomes 'already'. Presumption fails to accept the *futurity* and the *arduousness* of eternal life. It is therefore a kind of false security.

The presumption of Pelagianism is that the human being is able by his own nature to win eternal life and forgiveness. The presumption of the Reformation is a certainty of salvation in which it is judged to be 'already' achieved.

Both despair and presumption anticipate—the former anticipates non-fulfilment, the latter anticipates fulfilment—and they therefore destroy the pilgrim character of human existence in the *status viatoris*. Despair is a kind of senility which is tragic.

Presumption is a kind of infantility which is comic. Despair looks only to God's justice and presumption looks only to God's mercy. These two divine attributes are reconciled *existentially* in the Christian virtue of hope [see Pieper, pp.70ff and St Thomas in ST I,21 where he says that God's justice is a mode of God's mercy which is the primary root of each of God's works]. A virtue of ongoing youthfulness, hope enables us to be confident without being arrogant and to be humble without falling into self-contempt. Hope makes **prayer** possible and is strengthened by the Holy Spirit's gift of **fear of the Lord**.

The Gift of Fear

In explaining how emotions are contrary to each other [e.g. at ST I.II 40], St Thomas says that concupiscible or impulse emotions are contrary to each other by one criterion only: they approach contrary terms as love is concerned with good and hatred with evil. Irascible or contending emotions may be contrary on another basis also, namely the approach towards or withdrawal from the same term. *Fear* and *hope* are contrary by the first criterion: they are movements towards contrary terms, good and evil. *Hope* and *despair* are contrary by the second criterion: they approach and withdraw from the same term. To move from hope to despair means that the same object, which was at first attractive to us, has become repulsive to us. This means that fear and hope are not always mutually exclusive but that hope and despair are. We cannot both hope and despair about the same thing at the same time but **we may hope and fear in regard to the same thing at the same time**.

Classical theology takes it for granted that fear is a constant companion in human existence. Many things are, objectively speaking, fearful and it would be odd not to fear them. In the 'order of fear' we can, of course, fall into error and sin either through a mistaken kind of fear or a mistaken kind of fearlessness.

The 'fear of the Lord' of which the Bible speaks is not simply 'respect for God' or 'reverence' or 'awe'. The fear of the Lord fears the deepest threat to human existence which is the ability to commit sin and so be separated from the ultimate ground of all being. Fear of the punishment for sin is called *servile fear*, fear of sin as sin is called *filial fear*. The first kind can become the second kind but filial fear is still fear, even more so because the fear of sin responds to a deeper imperilment of human existence than does the fear of eternal damnation.

Filial fear *increases* as the love of God grows in intensity. It is a *gift of the Holy Spirit* and perfects natural anxiety so that it accords with reality. *Fear* and *hope* complement one another. The fear of the Lord assures the genuineness of hope because human

existence, destined to fulfilment in God, is perpetually threatened by the closeness of nothingness. *'You who fear him, trust in the Lord' [Psalm 113B(115).11]*.

The virtue of hope - concerned with a good which involves difficulty - must be related also to the virtue of courage – which is specifically concerned with the 'management' of fear.

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR [1905-1988]

See also Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, Chapter VII, 'Salvation Through the Church' and Chapter VIII, pp.140-45

Judgment, 'Hellfire' and Promise of Salvation

In his book *Dare We Hope 'That All Men be Saved'?* [Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988] Balthasar stresses that we are *under judgment* [1 Cor 4.3f and 1 Jn 4.17] and that **one who is under judgment as a Christian can have hope for all people**. Our judge is Jesus and because we are *under* the judgment and cannot stand over it, **we do not know its outcome**. A twofold outcome is possible.

The NT is basically about love. The 'hell'-statements, of which there are many, express 'the definitively valid requirement behind this command'. Thus Matthew 25, the last judgment scene, is not a report of the last day before it happens but a disclosure of the situation in which the person addressed now truly exists, called to a decision with irrevocable consequences. Christ gives us not a report on life after death but **enough light to hope** and a **sufficiently serious warning** that we must take account of the real possibility of forfeiting our salvation.

There are two series of statements in the NT which are not easily reconciled. On the one hand are the statements about 'hellfire' [Matt 5.22,29f; 10.28; 23.33], 'outer darkness' [Matt 8.12; 22.11ff; 25.30], 'eternal punishment' [Matt 25.46] and 'unquenchable fire' [Mk 9.43]. The Book of Revelation contributes much to this scenario with its references to the 'lake of fire', 'the second death' and so on: 19.20; 20.10; 21.8. Many of these statements are on the lips of Jesus himself: Matt 7.23; 11.20ff; 12.31; 18.21ff; 21.33ff; 25.12,30, 41,46. In fact the person who speaks most often about hell in the NT is Jesus.

On the other hand, are texts which hold out the prospect of universal redemption, the salvation of all: 1 Tim 2.1-6; 4.10; Jn 17.2; 12.32; Rom 5.12-21; 11.32. The key texts for Balthasar are Jn 12.32 and Rom 5.12-21. Other texts are Tit 2.11; Col 1.20; Eph

1.10—the latter two speaking of Christ reconciling all things to God and leading all of creation back to the Father. Christ has the keys of death and of hell according to Revelation 1.18; 22.13 [see also Romans 14.7-9; 2 Pet 3.9; Hebrews 9.27f].

Balthasar writes: 'What we have here are two series of statements that, in the end, because we are under judgment, we neither can nor may bring into synthesis'. What we have as Christians is hope not knowledge. We do not have the certainty of salvation but, in the word of the gospel, hope outweighs fear. **Certainty cannot be attained and yet hope is justified.**

There is a sense in which we judge ourselves (Jn 12.48) just as we have ourselves created hell (Jn 12.47f). Hell is self-hatred, a perversion of humanness. For the early Christians part of the good news was the conviction that they would be judged by Jesus, human like us, made to be the judge of the living and the dead by the Father who had raised him from the dead and exalted him to his own right hand. Our image of Christ as judge is too much affected by representations like Michelangelo's in the Sistine Chapel. Instead, says Balthasar, look to Fra Angelico's representation of Christ as judge where all he does at the judgment is point to his wounds.

The decision to which Christians are called is of an 'ultimate seriousness' but why does the *Maranatha* [Come, Lord Jesus] of the early church become the *Dies Irae* of the medieval church? For the early Christians, Jesus is judge. This is good news brought under hope. We must not claim to know, either way, about the outcome of the judgment but limit ourselves to Christian hope that 'rests essentially content with the Church's prayer, as called for in 1 Tim 2.4, that God wills that all men be saved'.

Origen, Augustine and Saint Thomas

What we have as Christians is *hope* and not *knowledge*. We must not claim to *know* either way about the outcome of the judgment. It was believed that *Origen* had repudiated an eternal hell and he was condemned by the Church for this opinion. The normal meaning attached to the word *apocatastasis* is the view, attributed to Origen, that in the end all creatures will be restored to the original purity they had with and in God in the beginning. Scholars such as Henri de Lubac and Henri Crouzel defend Origen and argue about whether or not he really taught the view for which he was condemned. Balthasar believes that Origen, in speaking of Christ leading all creation back to the Father, spoke cautiously, prudently, hypothetically and carefully.

1 Cor 3.12f is a striking text: all go through fire (fire = God, Hebrews 12.29). In the light of 1 Cor 2.9, if God's rewards are beyond imagining, so too are God's

punishments. In any case, to claim to know that there is, or will be, nobody in hell can be regarded as a 'presumption' of salvation. Critics of Balthasar accuse him of this. According to them, he says:

If one were certain of attaining the ultimate goal no matter what, a quite essential motivation to conversion and absolute Christian resolve would be lost.

He agrees that this is perfectly correct. But, says Balthasar, **I speak of hope not of certainty**. Will all be saved? I do not know. I have no certainty whatsoever ... Which means I have no certainty whatsoever that all will not be saved.

In this matter Balthasar believes that *Augustine* must bear a great responsibility. 'What a story of misery he set in train', he writes (p.192). If Origen was condemned for what was regarded as his 'presumption of salvation', Augustine is to be criticised for what Balthasar regards as his 'presumption of damnation'. Augustine stressed the reality of hell and of its numerous inhabitants. 'It signifies a turning point in Church history insofar as Augustine interprets the relevant texts in such a way as to show that he plainly and simply knows about the outcome of divine judgment.' In correcting presumptuous hope, Augustine did not remain within the limits laid down by the Gospel. He threw sacred history out of balance by centring it on Adam instead of Christ. This error has had serious consequences in theology ever since.

The later distinction of God's will into 'conditional' and 'absolute' will—the latter wanting the salvation of all, the former wanting the salvation of all who will in fact be saved—comes from a tradition which, says Balthasar, has long thought itself to know too much about the outcome of judgment. **To know that hell is populated is to know that the cross of Jesus has ultimately been futile** [which is against Jn 12.32].

Those who criticise Balthasar on this question are certain that hell is not just a real possibility (as Balthasar admits it is) but a certainty. Therefore, there is no hope for the salvation of all. Against his critics Balthasar says: 'I believe that **the most serious thing that exists is not God's punitive justice but rather his love**' (p.164), a love which is beyond all justice, absolute, ineffable ...

There are two points in this discussion on which Balthasar feels *Thomas Aquinas* makes important contributions. The first is to **see hope in the light of love** [ST II.II,17,3]. Augustine restricts Christian hope to hope for oneself. St Thomas says that because one loves others as other 'selves', one hopes for their good also. He thus derives the universality of hope from that of love.

As regards the divine attributes of justice and mercy, Balthasar argues that the attempt to reconcile these two in God requires one to speak of the cross. St Thomas, speaking

of 'the greater mercy', is 'better to follow' [in ST I,27] where God's justice is understood as a mode of his mercy, a mode of God's goodness. 'The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy and is grounded in it' (p.156). Mercy is 'the primary root in each of God's works'. In the end these two divine attributes are **integrated not intellectually but existentially**: Balthasar cites Pieper, *On Hope*, pp.70-71.

Alternative Visions

In a chapter entitled 'Testimonies', Balthasar searches for an understanding of Christian eschatology distinct from the Augustinian 'knowing too much about hell'. He finds it in the writings of saints and mystics, mostly women, and therefore not educated in the tradition of the schools. There are two insights that ground these testimonies:

- God's love in Christ is stronger than any resistance it encounters—hope for all people is therefore permitted
- Rom 9.3—Paul's wish to be accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen by race.

The first insight is illustrated by citations from the works of Mechtilde of Hackeborn, Angela of Foligno, Julian of Norwich and, especially, **Thérèse of Lisieux** who offers herself to God not as a 'sacrifice to justice' but as a 'sacrifice to mercy'. She speaks of her 'blind hope' in God's mercy and talks of the saints and angels wondering how far she would go in her trust in God [cf Job 13.15: 'even if you kill me, I will have hope in you']. 'Divine mercy' is 'always more'. Thérèse's Christmas play illustrates her conviction that 'every soul will find forgiveness' (pp.103-05).

The second insight, on 'experiencing hell on behalf of others', finds its scriptural warrant in the example of Moses (Ex 32.32), of Paul (Rom 9.3) and of Christ himself (Gal 3.13—he is made a curse, made to be sin for us). Among saints and mystics who experienced hell he mentions Christine von Stammeln, Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi, Marie des Vallées [who comments that the love of God is more cruel than his justice—p.108, note 20], Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Marie de l'Incarnation, Catherine of Siena and Adrienne von Speyr. [Note also Pseudo-Dionysius in *Epistle VIII*.] All this is not quietism, Balthasar says, but stems 'from a fervent love of the Cross, a wish to suffer with Jesus for the redemption of mankind, and therefore to gain a small share, in a manner pleasing to God, in Jesus' godforsakenness' (p.111).

Balthasar recalls the descent of Christ into hell which thus becomes a 'mystery of salvation', the solidarity of Jesus in knowing the full suffering of humankind, hell belongs now to Christ. Only Christ has suffered absolutely, suffering 'godlessness', damnation, made to be sin ... The hell which is seen by saints and visionaries produces in them, not resignation, but resolution to resist it more strongly than ever. [Note also the desire of St Dominic to be a large stone in the mouth of hell, cutting off access to it and see Edwin Muir's poem, *The Good Man in Hell*].

Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell has been criticised and even deemed heretical because he seems to make it essential for the achievement of redemption. The orthodox position is that redemption is achieved on the Cross and Jesus went to preach to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3.19) simply in order to tell them that it had been so achieved. Balthasar seems to make it part of the work of redemption, putting the Trinity under a kind of intolerable strain as the Son 'becomes sin' (cf. 2 Cor 5.21) as well as, some argue, embracing the condemned doctrine of *apocatastasis*.

My Own Damnation and Hope for All

Of great importance to Balthasar is what he terms the personal significance of the mystery of hell. The threat of damnation is addressed to me 'before' it is addressed to anyone else. I must leave concern for the salvation of others up to divine mercy and must concentrate on my own situation before God. Hope is for myself last, not first, as Augustine said. He recounts stories from the Desert Fathers, as well as a passage from Kierkegaard, about seeing all others saved but not myself ... (pp.248-51). 'Do you have the right to refuse to your brother the hope that you have invested for yourself, through your living faith, in your Judge?'

A consequence of thinking others lost is that charity becomes impossible. Whenever a person speaks of the *massa damnata* he never includes himself in it. How could he, if he is to be a Christian who hopes in God for salvation? But that means that if hell is populated it is there for the others, not for the chosen, the elect. Many aberrations follow from Augustine thinking he knew that there were people in hell, including the Reformation's concern with the certainty of salvation, strange doctrines of predestination, convictions about belonging to the saved or the elect, and so on. Charity is rendered impossible, because if the possibility of one person's being lost is reckoned besides oneself, how can one love unreservedly (p.211)? Yet this is what charity requires. Far from being a softening of Christian doctrine and life, heaven for all is the heaviest imaginable demand upon us. It requires patient waiting for the conversion of the other.

Balthasar concludes his *Short Discourse on Hell* with a citation from Edith Stein who understands things as Balthasar does. To the question of the possibility of remaining perpetually closed to God's love she answers 'yes, it is possible'. Whether it is a reality she considers 'infinitely improbable'. Divine and human freedom are not opposed, nor is human freedom broken or neutralized by divine freedom. But human freedom can, sooner or later, be 'outwitted' by divine freedom, because there are no limits to divine love.

Some other questions raised by Balthasar

- the eternity of hell - its endlessness, it is exitless, whereas the eternity of heaven is the eternity of God and of his glory ... heaven as everlasting motion through God and toward God [Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, Irenaeus] and thus an eternal activity rather than an eternal rest. For Augustine the vision of heaven is in the 'mind', the experience of hell in the 'imagination' ... hell is a state more than a place for Augustine ... likewise Augustine says that Christ is our place after we die. The question of 'where' heaven or hell is, is not a very useful one.
- Satan is more an 'unperson' than a person ... it is the contradiction of all that makes for personhood ... redemption is about humankind: all we need to know is that the satanic really exists, an evil power, more-than-human and contra-divine.
- whether the blessed rejoice at the sufferings of the damned is an 'embarrassing - I would rather say instead shameful - problem' (p.202). It is one of the questions that he believes should never have been asked and it follows from Augustine's mistake in thinking he knew there were people in hell.

BENEDICT XVI [1927-2022]

Pope Benedict XVI devoted his encyclical letter *Spe salvi*, published in 2007, to a consideration of hope. Hope redeems, he says, and the goal justifies the effort of the journey. But we must ask what sort of hope it needs to be and how certain we can be about it. The Christian message is performative and not just informative, the one who has hope will not just know more but will live differently. The hope Jesus brought changed life and the world from within.

He summons a first witness to Christian hope, **St Josephine Bakhita** (1869-1947), a Sudanese slave who later became a servant in an Italian family and then a religious sister. Recounting the sufferings of her life and how her faith supported her hope through those sufferings he quotes her saying 'I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me – I am awaited by this love. And so my life is good'.

He reflects on some concepts of the modern age that might easily be confused with hope – progress, evolution, history. None of these is the same as Christian hope because they lack either direction towards a goal or a free personal engagement or a social dimension which hope must have. We are not slaves of the universe and of its

laws, we are free. Faith gives life a new basis and a new freedom. It draws the future into the present so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet' but also an 'already' because present and future spill over into each other. Faith gives 'eternal life' (John 17.3) which is the substance of our hope. While it is beyond the present world and cannot be understood without God, the 'blessed life' has to do with this world also.

Benedict gives some space to teasing out the concepts of the modern age which he has identified and showing why reason needs faith in order to be fully human. While great advances have been made in science there have not been corresponding advances in ethical formation or inner growth. Redemption cannot come from outside the human being, only from within. Science alone cannot do it because the human being is redeemed by love, absolutely and certainly redeemed only by an absolute and certain love which is that of Jesus Christ. Being in communion with him means being drawn into his 'being for all'. We need the great hope, which is God, coming as a gift, already present wherever God is loved and wherever God's love reaches us.

He speaks then of three 'schools of hope', experiences in which hope is both practised and developed. The first is **PRAYER**, which is the characteristic act of the virtue of hope. Here he calls as another witness the Vietnamese cardinal **Nguyen Van Thuan** (1928-2002) whose prison experience informed profoundly his later writings about prayer and hope. Benedict quotes Augustine, saying that the human heart is made for God but is too small and therefore needs to be stretched. It is contaminated in various ways and therefore needs to be purified. Prayer does this, exposing our lies, purifying our desires, illuminating our illusions. We come to see that only God forgives and that if there is no God then I must take refuge in lies. Only through hope, exercised in prayer, can we live in the light of truth.

A second school of hope is that of **ACTION AND SUFFERING** each of which needs hope, action if we are to persevere and avoid becoming fanatical, suffering because we cannot merit heaven which is always a gift. Only the great hope sustains our action through good and bad. Suffering arises because of our finitude and because of our sin. Only God in our history can heal history. A third witness is summoned, **Saint Paul Le Bao Tinh** (1793-1857) whose writings from what he himself describes as Hell speak powerfully about hope in the midst of suffering. 'I cast my anchor towards the throne of God, the anchor that is the lively hope in my heart', Paul writes, using the image of the anchor first used to speak of hope in Hebrews 6.19. Benedict says that Paul's letter about conditions in the camp 'is indeed a letter from Hell, but it also reveals the truth of the Psalm text: 'If I go up to the heavens you are there; if I sink to the nether world, you are present there ... If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall

hide me, and night shall be my light’ – for you, darkness itself is not dark, and night shines as the day; darkness and light are the same’. Christ descended into ‘Hell’, Benedict continues, ‘and is therefore close to those cast into it, transforming their darkness into light. Suffering and torment are still terrible and well-nigh unbearable. Yet the star of hope has risen – the anchor of the heart reaches the very throne of God. Instead of evil being unleashed within man, the light shines victorious: suffering – without ceasing to be suffering – becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise’ (n.37).

Humanness requires being able to accept suffering for the sake of goodness, truth and justice. Love requires renunciations of the self and these are painful, another kind of suffering, but God suffers with us. The capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity.

The third setting for learning and practising hope is **JUDGEMENT**. Christ will come as judge and this gives us a criterion by which to order our lives, a summons to conscience, and hope in God’s justice. Human efforts to establish justice without God have led to the greatest cruelties and injustice, precisely because they are false. Without a resurrection of the dead there is no justice. The experience of Christ, crucified, God-forsaken and suffering, but risen from the dead, establishes the certainty of our hope that there is a God and God can create justice in a way we cannot conceive. Our faith in the last judgement is, first and foremost, hope because the need for justice is the strongest argument for faith in eternal life. The injustice of history cannot be the final word. Judgement is an image of hope, evoking responsibility and the fear of the Lord which has its place in love.

The fire of judgement will test the quality of each person’s work (1 Cor 3.13) but that fire is Christ and the encounter with him is decisive. The pain of love which we will experience in the judgment is our salvation and our joy. Judgement and grace are one as justice and mercy are one. And so we work out our salvation in fear and trembling but with trust and hope in the judge who is also our advocate.

He concludes with a call on Mary, our Star of Hope, who carried in her womb the hope of the world and who has set the direction for our lives and for our hopes.

Note also Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit* (9 May 2024), the bull announcing the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025 whose theme is ‘Pilgrims of Hope’.

MODERN CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN HOPE AND RESPONSE TO IT

[These notes come from my professor of moral theology, Conleth Byrne OP, teaching in the mid-1970s! But it is interesting to see how the concerns raised by Benedict XVI are already identified.]

A modern 'mystique' of hope, going back ultimately to Hegel and leading, through Nietzsche and existentialism, to Marxism, relies on the evolutionary process to lead humanity progressively to the full consciousness of its true dimensions, its unity and power. The various forms of this mystique generally agree on these points:

- a rejection of specifically Christian hope as too narrowly individualistic
- an exaltation of the human being that relies on the human being alone, without God
- a more or less exclusive concentration on earthly values
- a particular view of history as the vehicle of humankind's hopes.

Nietzsche had some very harsh things to say about Christian hope. He saw it as the typical example of the evasion of human responsibilities and tasks in the real world, as a virtue of the weak, and as the supreme blasphemy because it is the worst crime of all against this earth. According to him:

The Christian is a useless fellow, cut off and resigned. A stranger to the work of this Earth, his commonwealth is in Heaven (Phil 3.20). When one thus places life's centre of gravity in the hereafter, one robs life (here) of its centre of gravity. For life ends where the Kingdom of God begins [*The Will to Power*].

This revolt against Christian hope was further emphasised by atheistic existentialism, especially with the French existentialists Sartre and Camus. The human being is called upon to live his life without appealing to anything beyond himself. He must live even without hope or expectation of any outcome that would ultimately make sense of and give meaning to his life and activity. This absurd, indifferent and useless working out of his destiny is left in the human being's own hands. In the words of Camus, 'life is a matter for man, to be settled between men' [*The Myth of Sisyphus*].

Marxism goes beyond this rather negative criticism. It proposes an earthly destiny for humankind to work towards by a programme of things to be done by the human being himself, a programme which will effectively bring that destiny about. Its mystical and not altogether unconstructive vision of tomorrow's humanity in an earthly paradise of its own making has succeeded in provoking people's rightful anger against all kinds of injustice and in inspiring them to work towards a better social order for the generations to come.

Such mystiques of earthly hope, with their critique of Christian hope, have had great influence and so there must be some truth and validity in them. Their greatest weakness, from a Christian point of view, is that what they criticise is, very often, a caricature of genuine Christian hope, a caricature that Christians themselves may only too often have tended to accept as the real thing. True Christian hope is not meant to discourage all other human hopes and ambitions. It recognises and accepts the value and legitimacy of the human efforts to improve the situation of the world. Christian hope would claim that such human hopes and ambitions, if they positively exclude the perspective of Christian hope, are in danger of defeating their own purpose.

The hard reality of the human condition discourages dreams of utopia based on human effort alone. Although real improvements in the human situation are often brought about by systems that exclude or ignore the grounds and horizons of Christian hope, these positive gains are made at the expense of more important human values like freedom or truth or even-handed justice for all. Human attempts to go it alone without God towards a fulfilment of our own choosing and making are always doomed to frustration and failure [Genesis 3].

This does not mean that earthly betterment and human liberation are completely excluded from the perspectives of Christian hope. Although its object extends beyond this earthly life and although it must rely on more than human powers to achieve its purpose, Christian hope is not indifferent to the human being's earthly condition or his efforts to improve it. At least it must look for a human condition on earth that will not bar people's progress towards the Kingdom of Heaven. God can bring people to himself through the most appalling conditions but still we have a right to expect that he will not normally leave such obstacles in people's way and may hope that things will improve.

We cannot look forward to the success of any blue-print for earthly happiness with the absolutely firm confidence of theological hope. The object of such confidence is the final outcome and we do not know how God might use any human situation to further progress towards that final outcome. The message of the Cross—total divine success through total human failure—warns us against such optimism. Christian faith gives us certain expectations, even about life here and now, which we can hope to see fulfilled with the same hope with which we look forward to the outcome that seems to us to require them.

In a special way the success of the Church's pastoral and missionary efforts would be included among such expectations. Each one's hope extends beyond himself to the future of the Christian community as a whole. Christian fulfilment has a communal as

well as an individual dimension since it involves that communion in which all are joined together in Christ, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We move towards that fulfilment in mutual dependence as members of one Body who share in one Spirit. Although each of us must 'work out our own salvation' [Philippians 2.12-13] our hope for our own perfect goodness and happiness cannot be separated from that of the whole Church. Christian hope is not a withdrawal into sterile concern for one's own individual progress and salvation to the exclusion of all else since the salvation of each is vitally bound up with the salvation of all. Our hope must include whatever seems necessary for the success and expansion of the Church's mission to bring Christ's salvation to all men and women.

Our hope must never forget the Cross. Great Church establishments of the past have declined or crumbled into ruins, religious orders have come and gone, whole areas of the world and large sections of its population once touched by the Church's influence have apparently been lost to it, structures and institutions which once promised great things have become counter-productive. Christian hope allows us to expect that God is working in and through all these things, through failure as well as success, to bring about his ultimate purpose, the building up of the Body of Christ.

The tasks we undertake in order to build up the Church are undertaken with confidence, therefore, that God is working his purpose out in and through our efforts. Our hope is not in the systems we put in place or the projects we undertake but in God who works through these things. Such hope survives the collapse of even the most venerable institutions and the failure of even the most cherished schemes.

No earthly set-up will ever be more than an approach, destined to be surpassed. That is why Christian hope will never let us settle for any one of them as completely satisfactory, nor expect to see any one of them come about and succeed with its own absolute assurance. It may be the failure of the system on which we have set our hearts that ushers in a closer approach to the Kingdom of God in its truth and reality. Nevertheless, hope obliges us to make this world as close an approach as possible to the Kingdom of Christ and to establish as fully as we can the Kingdom values of truth, peace and justice. Christian hope drives us to fulfil the demands of even the most optimistic humanism with its hopes for the human future while protecting us against the inevitable disillusion involved in every merely earthly fulfilment. Christian hope looks beyond to a fulfilment that will surpass all earthly fulfilments while preserving all that is really worthwhile in them.