

A Tradition of Hopeful Intelligence: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Anthony J. Kelly CSsR

Abstract: *This article reflects on the ways Christian hope affects intelligence. Without the sustaining influence of hope, intelligence suffers. With it, intelligence can overcome diffidence in the search for truth, and contribute more creatively to the common good. Christian intelligence, deriving from the wisdom of the cross, anticipates both an ultimate fulfilment and an ultimate judgment on evil. The article concludes with a reflection on Christopher Dawson's analysis of the modern cultural situation.¹*

Key Words: Christian hope; eschatology; intelligence; rationality; civil law; common good; grace; human fulfilment; hell

In what follows, I will be bringing together what is normally kept apart, namely, the energies of hope and the activity of intelligence in working for the good society. Christian hope has, in fact, brought forth its own kind of intelligence, habits of mind and imagination, as in its theologies, philosophies, law, literature and art. But this is a critical time for both hope and intelligence. Theoretically and practically, we must, as Christians, keep on “accounting for the hope that is within [us]” (1 Pet 3:15-16). This is to say, intelligence can take the path of “hope seeks understanding” (somewhat parallel to the traditional “faith seeking understanding” of the Anselmian adage) in the present historical, social and cultural contexts. Hope inspires and sustains its own kind of intelligence in regard to the direction of history, the meaning of the good society, the destiny of the universe. It bears on the ultimate worthwhile-ness of the values we most cherish – including the value of intelligence and truth itself.

In the classic Thomist presentation expressed in terms of an Aristotelian form of faculty psychology, hope is not, technically speaking, an intellectual virtue, but resides in the will.² On the other, hand a broader consideration of human consciousness would suggest that hope in all its forms, all the way from an elemental passion or emotion,³ right up to the theological virtues, underlies all aspects of life, above all the hard labour to understand and to come to the truth and to reach its practical implications in our social conduct. Hope preforms and conditions the way we understand. It amplifies the scope of

¹ This article was originally in the form of a paper presented at a conference entitled, “*The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Good Society*,” sponsored by the Schools of Law and Catholic Studies at the University of St Thomas, Minneapolis, in April, 2005.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pars Prima Secundae, question 62, article 3: hereafter, STh 1-2, q.62, a.3.

³ For example, there is a “passion” or emotion of hope present in the sensitive and “irascible” appetite, as a living thing seeks its future good in the midst of danger and threat. Cf. STh 1-2, q.25, a.3-4.

that understanding and gives confidence in the truthfulness or real bearing of our intellectual activity.

1. NOTION OF HOPE

All life is to some degree is an uphill struggle, a *bonum arduum*, even for animal life intent on survival. Hope, in all its registers, implies a trustful and confident movement toward the future. It is trustful, for it is relying on something or someone for the help that is needed. Whatever the evils that threaten, hope anticipates an escape or release into a fuller dimension of life. It is always about a movement forward. While it is not always easy to find words for what we are hoping for, at very least hope is moving from defeat, danger or despair to something more positive. It shows a certain defiance: the future has to be more than the present. Hope outstrips what can be controlled and planned for, and senses, however implicitly, that, hidden in the present, there is a promise that can and will be kept.

Indeed, our ultimate life-form, the life of grace, is impossibly uphill without a God-given gift by which we can rely on God for the final attainment of the divine purpose for all creation. St Thomas Aquinas, along with Christian tradition generally, understands hope in this manner. It relies on God to achieve what faith reveals and charity most desires.⁴ Because of its God-given and God-directed character, hope is classified among the “theological virtues.”⁵ The adjective, “theological,” when applied to faith, hope and charity, is used to contrast what is within the natural scope of human action. Hence, in line with Aquinas’ description, theological hope is for the good—in fact the supreme good of God.⁶ Yet it is a future good, since we are not yet united to God in the face-to-face vision of eternal life. In this regard, hope deals with a possible good, since eternal life is exactly what God has promised. Nonetheless, hope is concerned with a difficult good. To desire the good that is promised as the supreme goal of our existence is a choice. It involves what is experienced as a risk. It means choosing the greatest good over lesser goods. And this choice is made in the context of a certain tension. An idolatrous bias towards the attractions of power, pleasure, possessions or an all-permissive nihilism has radically affected human history. Hence, the theological virtue of hope sustains the courage necessary to rely on God alone for the fulfillment of the divine promise.

2. A DWINDLING HOPE?

But hope, in whatever form, seems to becoming a non-renewable resource. The fund of trust and confidence that our different cultures once had has dwindled. There is an oppressive dearth of good news. Our staple media diet is largely one of doom-laden reports and the record of death, violence and catastrophe of one kind or another. Given the dire predictions concerning the world economy, the ecological well-being of the planet, to say nothing of the intractability of peace-making efforts in many regions, the path to the future seems increasingly arduous: the good intended seems less possible and more uphill...

⁴ STh 1-2, q.62, a.1.

⁵ STh 1-2, q.62, a.1.

⁶ For a concise, culturally relevant and Thomistic treatment of hope, Joseph Pieper, *Hope and History*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Burns and Oates, 1969) is outstanding.

Because of this depressed cultural mood, basic human experiences which once held their own promise are now far more ambiguous. Marriage and family, for instance, were once the sturdy inter-generational basis of a confident world. But in that area now problems multiply. The fragility of human relationships is evidenced in divorce and family breakdowns in most cultures. There is overpopulation in some regions and increasing sterility in others. In the West, ageing populations shuffle from retirement villages to nursing homes, there to contemplate their end, often in sad isolation. A “happy families” view of things seems hopelessly naïve.

Many once entered the professions, say, of education, science, medicine, law, politics, media or business with youthful enthusiasm. These were motivated by high ideals of serving and protecting society. Not uncommonly, people now feel trapped in enormous networks of contrary influences. Their confidence in doing something worthwhile for society is undermined by quite radical questions: Who, or what, am I working for? What possible difference can my contribution make? And, of course, the postmodern situation almost forbids one to ask, How can I ever know anything? A loss of cultural self-confidence reaches into intelligence itself.

Refined planning skills can express a great deal of what needs to be done in a determined context. But planning by itself cannot do much about changing human beings, if only for the reason that it leaves out the ultimate questions of human destiny. The greater the vision of a good society, the more it is faced with the question of how the human heart can be transformed. Despite the good will and intelligence of the participants, no “peace process,” no “Justice and Reconciliation Commission,” is assured of a happy conclusion.

3. EFFECTS ON INTELLIGENCE

With the present celebration of the cultural differences, common intellectual or moral criteria are hard to find. The promotion of human rights remains one of the noblest carriers of hope for a community of justice and personal dignity. Yet even this is imperilled. A consumerist world favours an endless litigious catalogue of “my rights against all others.” As a result, the common good is interpreted in an increasingly solipsistic and fragmented manner. A good society looks more like a truce amongst the selfish rather than a self-transcending concern for the good of all, especially the most defenceless.

French intellectuals of a previous generation became appalled at the murderous impracticability of Marxism they had so promoted and exported. They concluded that since this “grand narrative” no longer worked, and that all big stories and all great hopes were oppressive. The restless, darting intelligence of a Derrida, say, was ever busy assuring us that reality, whatever we thought it to be, was otherwise. Still, there is a constructive side to this.⁷ Deconstruction removes the immobilism of big systems and allows for a fresh conversation between hitherto excluded others.⁸ In some ways, intelligence is freed, to play unhampered; but if diffidence and even despair over ever

⁷ Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR, “Blessed Negativities: The Contribution of Deconstruction to Theology,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 2 (February 2004): aejt.com.au

⁸ In the previously mentioned article, I engaged with Kevin Hart's influential *The Trespass of the Sign. Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). His more recent, *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004) is a remarkably accessible exposition of this style of thinking, illuminating for all readers, whether they be beginners or advanced.

coming to the truth is the presupposition, then the new conversation, however lively, leads to a deeper intellectual depression.

Add to this the extremely bleak views represented by some Nobel Laureates in science, such as Jacques Monod⁹ and Stephen Weinberg. The latter writes, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.”¹⁰ Mix this cosmological gloom with the superficial simplicities of much of the media, and the future would seem not to belong to intelligence, nor intelligence to have much of a bearing on the future.

We ask, then, how does this diminishment of hope affect our ways of understanding, and the very scope of the questions we consider worth asking? When the evils are so obvious, the language of hope seems too good to be true. And yet, the gods of progress promised so much; but this is what they delivered. As a result, the deepest self remains unemployed, depressively wandering in an irrational world with nowhere to go.

4. LEGAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS

The traditional definition of law was picked up by Aquinas and examined in each of its components: a determination of reason for the common good, made and promulgated by whoever had responsibility for the community (*dictamen rationis ob bonum commune ab eo qui curam communitatis habet promulgata*).¹¹ I must leave to expert judgment how much the making of law has become a counsel of despair rather than a *dictamen rationis*, i.e., a practical determination of reason on behalf of the common good. But we can wonder about what kind of reason is at work in contemporary law-making. Is it veering toward a voluntaristic imposition of a political correctness that owes little to the elaboration of reason, at least to reason enlivened with a comprehensive sense of proportion and sense of the whole. Has the transcendent value of reason, a participation in a universal order of intelligence and value, been replaced by the will of the majority or the effectiveness of a pressure group? The United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) was a noble achievement. But, as its framers admitted, it left open the question of who was responsible for the implementation of such rights.¹² With no reasoned grounding of universal human rights in a universally shared responsibility, rights language can appear oddly abstract and uncontrolled in its extensions. Endless disillusioning complexities have resulted. In a different perspective, the old legal axioms expressed in such phrases as “innocent until proved guilty” seem to proceed from a deeply hopeful understanding. But now with the enormous censorious power of the media, guilt rather than innocence is taken for granted. Moreover, it used to be said that “hard cases make bad laws.” But now a hard case, or at least a dramatic one, places a demand on the legal structures to come up with a new law raising the prospect of more bad laws, with precious little of “reason” in them? Then, there was the grandly confident axiom, *lex non curat de minimis* – the law does not consider slight or purely individual matters. The self-referential litigiousness of today finds that hard to swallow. Have “the slight matters,” not the great, transcendent values at the foundation of society, become the driving force?

⁹ Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, trans. Austyrn Wainhouse (New York: Knopf, 1971).

¹⁰ Stephen Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 149.

¹¹ STh 1-2, q.90, aa.1-4.

¹² See Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 36.

The common good, for its part, presupposes a dynamic confluence of self-transcending personal values. These are ideally evidenced in faith and art, in all the deeper reaches of culture. Such values find expression in a workable politics and the economic structuring of the social reality, and so extend into life of families and schools, hospitals and universities. Ideally they affect government and business, science and scholarship and all the uses of practical intelligence to achieve the concrete, possible good, now and for the future. The self-transcending responsibilities of a good society would also include the vital values of public and individual health, and, of course, a wholesome environment within a sustainable ecological ambience.

In short, the good of society presupposes the rationality of values. They are inscribed in the objective order of the human good by the self-transcending capacities of human subjects, not simply as feelings, but as determining rational judgments and decisions on the nature of society and its good. Not only are values rational; there is the value of rationality itself, a confidence in our capacities to find, tell, and apply the truth.

A hopeful intelligence is realistic. Given the contrast between, say, the noble conception of human rights and the self-serving virus of litigiousness, it is clear that our world is not populated by archangels; and even if saints occupied the high places of government in any domain, there would be clash of viewpoints regarding priorities, and the conditions in which the freedom of the less angelic or the less saintly should be respected, tolerated, restrained or punished. Evil has its strange parasitical attachment to any good we do, especially if we pursue it impatiently to the detriment of a prudent discernment of the concrete situation, its possibilities and its limits.

As Christians we believe that we live already in the light of an immense transformation that has occurred in human history through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, for others nothing has happened to affect “the real world” in which violence, envy and the lust for power and possessions are the order of the day. The world has not changed, and the real world cannot change. If you want to live in that real world, then waste no time on how it is meant to be; for the issue is simply one of surviving against the odds, and loading the dice as much as possible in your favour. Hope, consequently, is dismissed as irrational attitude, divorced from that world calculation and control. From this perspective, Christian hope is peculiarly impractical, not to say self-defeating. Why should it so curiously linger around the cross of an executed criminal, and then go on to speak of his resurrection in a world where the dead simply do not rise? In contrast to a hope seeking further intelligence, this flatly pragmatic, self-serving attitude comes dangerously close to despair seeking its own confirmation, and cultural depression seeking to justify its own apathy.

In that desperate perspective, the rule of law means a bigger police force, larger prisons and the unsleeping, technological surveillance of every life in its every transaction. When the recognition of human rights collapses into a welter of litigiousness, a huge haemorrhaging of social resources results. The impenetrable carapace of political bureaucracy and economic institutions, unable to envisage any good other than maintaining itself, weighs ever more heavily on freedom and exercises ever tighter controls. As Christopher Dawson pithily puts it, “It is the great paradox of civilisation that every victory over nature, every increase of social control, also increases the burden of humanity. When man builds a fortress, he also builds a prison.”¹³

When there is no eschatological hope, no hope beyond this world as it is, freedom begins to emerge as the enemy. The transcendent values of human dignity, honesty,

¹³ Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 61-62.

justice, loyalty and moral conscience are of little value in the management of society. As laws pullulate, the inevitable tendency is presumptively to criminalise every citizen and to turn even the most peaceful society into a kind of detention centre. The tensions inherent in such a culture feed a mindless adversarialism. The “other” is automatically demonised and scapegoated. The resultant absurdity is magnified by image-obsessed media exchanges in which no one ever learns, no mind ever changes, and no one can admit to being wrong. Again, to quote Dawson,

The whole tendency of modern life is toward scientific planning and organisation, central control, standardisation and specialisation. If this tendency was left to work itself out to its extreme conclusion, one might expect to see the state transformed into an immense social machine, all the individual components of which are strictly limited to the performance of a definite and specialised function, where there could be no freedom because the machine could only work smoothly as long as every wheel and cog performed its task with unvarying regularity. Now the nearer modern society comes to this state of total organisation, the more difficult it is to find any place for spiritual freedom and personal responsibility. Education itself becomes an essential part of the machine, for the mind has to be completely measured and controlled by the techniques of the scientific expert as the task which it is being trained to perform.¹⁴

This is to suggest that, when a culture loses its hope, it loses a good deal of its intelligence and educative power. The depressed mind, whenever it meets with a difficult situation, is already closed to the grace of a larger humanity and a more imaginative intelligence. The virtues of humility, forgiveness, compassion and religious faith, hope and charity are demeaned as impractical. When the hopeless intelligence loses so much of its cognitive power, at least in regard to unmanageable truths and values, the sense of human proportion vanishes. Only problems and unresolved grievances remain. History is reduced to a catalogue of defeats and a precarious clinging to supposed victories. The resultant despair underwrites a culture of oppressive conformity. Nothing new can happen. The good and the bad are clearly identified, and in that frozen mindset, extreme adversarialism becomes the thinking-machine of any given society. The only way forward is more oppressive control. When the resources of hope cannot be renewed, intelligence settles into a kind of psychic and social permafrost that no appeal to possibilities of community, compassion or reconciliation can melt. When unlimited technological power operates in the vacuum of intellectual diffidence, if not nihilism, the very possibility of a human future is called into question.

5. A HOPEFUL INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The Catholic intellectual tradition, as a tradition of hopeful, creative rationality, sees things otherwise. Beyond what we have already suggested regarding the rationality of values and the value of rationality, how is this best expressed? In contrast to a bleak, oppressive outlook, the intellectual dimension of hope is always open to a larger conversation. For hope can never recover from its initial surprise: the Lord rose from the tomb. As the Spirit breathes, there is always room for more surprises; the great human conversation is never over. Hope must gently insist that no one be left out of the unending human search for our common good. Each individual brings his or her own hopes, sufferings and even guilt, to the table of life. Each is to be welcomed in the open space, beyond any human imagining, of God’s saving will for the salvation of all.

¹⁴ Ibid, 26-27.

Hope thus looks beyond frozen alternatives to refresh the human condition with hope for final reconciliation. People and systems can change, because something that makes all the difference has occurred. Here, hope shows its long-term patience. It accepts the reality of dialogue with different faiths, philosophies, scientific explorations and the arts. Its hope-sustained intelligence unfolds in an horizon shaped by the conviction that “God our Saviour... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Genuine intelligence is not to be feared. It has the capacity to search for, and find, truth; it is made for meaning: the universe is radically intelligible, no matter what the evils and the experience of absurdity which tempt one to despair. For the intentionality of hope, i.e., a hope-enlivened intelligence, is an activity within a universe of God’s one creation and its reconciliation in the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus. God alone is the originating and final principle. There is no original or final conflicting dualism of light and darkness, good and evil, truth and absurdity. In the created universe, there is a structured and dynamic unity of relationship-in-difference which manifests itself, not in mutually contradictory principles, but in what has been called, an “analogical imagination” (D. Tracy).

The hope-oriented understanding of the human world can appeal to the unprecedented “eschatological” emphasis of Vatican II, as it invites intelligence to see what is most meaningful and valuable and as having a future in the transformed world to come. *Gaudium et Spes* speaks with special assurance:

When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise – human dignity, fraternal communion, and freedom ... we will find them once again, cleansed from stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom....¹⁵

The hope for the transformation of what we already most value is meant to release new energies in the domain of our worldly activities:

Christians, on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, should seek and think of these things which are above. This duty in no way decreases, rather it increases the importance of their obligation to work with all men in the building of a more human world. Indeed, the mystery of the Christian faith furnishes them with an excellent stimulant and aid to fulfil this duty more courageously and especially to uncover the full meaning of this activity, one which gives to human culture its eminent place in the integral vocation of man.¹⁶

6. HOPE IN AND FOR THE WORLD

The Church exists in history to be the space of hope in the world. As that part of the world that has awoken to the plenitude of the divine promise, it expresses not only hope in the world, but an unconditional hope for the world. In this regard, the Church is the community of those who have a sense of a future so full of promise, so absolute, that nothing and no one is excluded. To be the People of God is to live as the people of hope. Christians are called to witness to the great transformation now afoot which promises the liberation of all human hopes to their fullest dimensions, including, let us remember, the consummation of human intelligence in the vision of God, face to face.

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39 (“The Church in the Modern World”), as in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988). For the centrality of Christ, see *GS*, no. 45.

¹⁶ *GS*, no. 57; cf. also *GS*, no. 92.

Yet it is not as though Christian hope occupies some deathless standpoint, untroubled by the agonies of the world and invulnerable to its sufferings. The life of hope is not a matter of watching in armchair-comfort a replay of the highlights once “our team” has won. For, in this case, the team is everyone; and the game has not yet been played to the end. The followers of Christ are not passive spectators, once or twice removed from the agonizing contest of history. Immersed as they are in the great human and cosmic drama, Christians still have to confront the many faces of despair—in themselves and others. Hope must arise and grow in the midst of inexplicable suffering, inevitable death, humiliating failure, meaninglessness, guilt, and fear in all its forms. It is always up against the sheer power of evil in all its virulent manifestations. Whatever the joy and peace inherent in the Gospel of hope, it offers no complacent, passive preview of things. For hope must share in the patience of God. Only in that divinely loving patience can the promise latent in the unfolding of human time and in the meandering history of human freedom be finally kept and revealed. Because hope lacks this final evidence, it is always being refashioned, and its intelligence forced to consider new questions. Whatever the unpredictable turns of history, whatever the mysteries of the cosmos yet to be discovered, hope is always open to new dimensions of Christ, moving forward with “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). As the Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch remarked, “Christianity seems like a final emergence of what religion is – a total hope and an explosive one.”¹⁷

There is, indeed, a distinct originality in Christian intelligence that tends to break out of all categories in the way the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are beyond worldly comprehension. The historical concreteness of the mystery of Christ hones this intelligence to a special edge. It cuts through to the core of reality and existence. Theologians have tellingly exploited the works of René Girard at this point.¹⁸ The Cross, to the wisdom of the world, is the point of darkness and defeat, where violence and the vicious circles of scapegoating are powered by the false gods of any culture. But for Christian intelligence, the Cross is the point of light and revelation. The stone rejected by the builders of the world has become the cornerstone (cf. 1 Pt 2:4-8// Mt 21:42; Mk 12:11; Ac 4:11. Cf. Ps 117). However vulnerable the truth of ultimate love, it is never overcome: “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn 1:5). The Cross of Christ does indeed reveal the defencelessness the good in its exposure to evil. Yet, at the point defeat, the absolute values of love and forgiveness radiate with a greater intensity. The truth and the good buried in the graves and prisons of the victims of history are vindicated in their eternal significance when the crucified One rises from the tomb. This hope-filled intelligence exposes the absurdity of the violent efforts of power and greed to shrink the world to its purposes alone. Paul, in line with both the prophetic vision (Isa 53) and the wisdom of Israel (Wis 1-2), allows that that the deepest wisdom of the Cross must appear foolishness; but in the perspective of ultimate hope, it is wisdom: “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25). The intelligence appropriate to non-violent love expresses a hope for all, and for an ultimate reconciliation. It cannot but appear ridiculous in the eyes of

¹⁷ As quoted by John Macquarrie, *Frontispiece of Christian Hope* (London: Mowbray, 1978). See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* 3:1125-1131, 3:1256-1274.

¹⁸ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

worldly calculation and ideological control. For all that, it is not a lesser form of intelligence, for it shares in a wisdom transcending everything in the world, yet gathers into itself wisdom and truth wherever it is to be found, as is expressed in a precious aside of St Thomas Aquinas, “every statement of truth, no matter who makes it, is from the Holy Spirit” (*omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est*).¹⁹

In this perspective, let me make two remarks, both dealing with the eschatological orientation of the Catholic intellectual tradition: the one anticipates the beatific vision of heaven; the other, paradoxically, presumes the terminal reality of hell and an ultimate judgment on evil, in the sense to be explained.

7. THE DYNAMISM OF EXISTENCE

Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology*²⁰ expresses the Thomist tradition concerning the “the natural desire to see God” in a more contemporary, psychologically attuned idiom. He articulates how the self-transcending and unrestricted drive toward truth and goodness constitutes the basic dynamism of our conscious living. He is not talking about a theory. He is appealing to a set of experiences intimately accessible to everyone. We are present to ourselves in our questioning of what and why and how. The open-ended dynamic that is evident in our questioning finds a particular point of rest when we make a considered judgment on what is the case. Yet it keeps moving: a deeper level of responsibility is engaged through the decisions we make in the light of the truly good. We are in this way registering in our deepest selves the attraction of meaning, truth and goodness. The dynamism driving our conscious existence is ever taking us beyond all limited attainments. The meaning of all meaning is the goal. The ultimate worth of all we have found to be good is the promise. It would seem, then, that hope is inscribed into the dynamism of our being. Yet there is a question, and Lonergan conveniently asks it,

But is the universe on our side, or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of decline?²¹

A hopeful answer to such questions, however it is expressed, has a profound effect on attitudes and resoluteness. Lonergan teases out the questions implicit in our living:

Does there or does there not necessarily exist a transcendent, intelligent ground of the universe? Is that ground or are we the primary instance of moral consciousness? Are cosmogenesis, biological evolution, historical progress basically cognate to us as moral [and intelligent] beings or are they indifferent and so alien to us?²²

The mind and heart cannot rest content with a little bit of meaning, truth or goodness. We look to the full disclosure of the reality that is already sustaining our existence and drawing us on. We cannot be content with “partly living.” The ultimate exerts a gravitational pull on our intelligence and freedom. Our present participation in being and goodness impels mind and heart to anticipate a fulfillment and completion. There is an anticipation of a final homecoming built into the self-transcending dynamics of our conscious existence. Hope thus stirs in our every waking moment. It moves in the deepest orientation and longing of our being. It is an openness that resists any form of self-

¹⁹ STh 1-2, q.109, a.1 ad 1.

²⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972).

²¹ *Ibid*, 102.

²² *Ibid*, 103.

enclosure, for it unfolds in the limitless horizon. It borders on “a region for the divine, a shrine of ultimate holiness.”²³

Such an account of human experience can, of course, be dismissed by those who are overcome by despair or see no point to the universe. The atheist will say there is nothing there, that this radical openness and longing of our being is futile (Monod and Weinberg);²⁴ it means nothing, and is going nowhere. An agnostic can hesitate over the direction of this radical hopeful thrust of life, and assert that it lacks any real proof. A humanist concern to improve the world might consider that any hope for a transcendent, eschatological fulfilment is a distraction from the real challenges that face society. But however the question of hope is asked or answered, the deeper question of life keeps reoccurring. Is our search for meaning, our concern for truth, our struggle against evils and celebration of the good, nothing but a journey to nowhere and an eternally frustrated hankering for the unattainable? Is there is no “last thing,” no eschatological reality, in which the final answer resides, in which the heart comes home and towards which the universe is tending? Hope gives a positive answer.

8. THE GIFT FROM ABOVE

Yet the fullness of Christian hope is not reducible simply to an upward movement from the core of our being. However precious the intimations of our deepest thinking, our most passionate loves and creative actions, we never simply think or will ourselves into this ultimate realm. This upward and forward journey leads to an impenetrable darkness and silence. Courage can fail; our failures can seem too numerous and the challenge too great. The sheer weight of the world’s ills and evils tempt one to lose heart. The “one thing necessary” is something so “other,” so far outside the “system,” at once so unattainable and all-demanding, that the spirit can wilt.

If hope is to be a world-shaping energy, it is desperately in need of a gift that will make all the difference. But such a gift from above is exactly the source and foundation of Christian hope. The Word has become flesh and dwelt amongst us, to take on himself what we most fear. His tomb is empty; and his Spirit is the fresh air our souls now breathe. Hope is not disappointed. St Paul understands it as continually sustained by the love that is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). In this sense, hope is born of a gift; and that gift is precisely the energies of God-given love. The fulfilment that this gift of “grace” or “being in love” is eloquently described by Lonergan:

As the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfilment of our conscious intentionality. That fulfilment brings a deep-set joy that can remain despite humiliation, failure, privation, pain, betrayal, desertion. That fulfilment brings a radical peace, the peace the world cannot give. That fulfilment bears fruit in a love of one’s neighbour that strives mightily to bring about the Kingdom of God on this earth.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ In the interests of dialectic, see the devastating critique of biologist Richard Dawkins’ ideology in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

²⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 105.

This gift makes all the difference. Without it, life would be dissipated and directionless. The power of evil would be too great, and the noblest lives of self-sacrificing love would be futile gestures in meaningless universe.²⁶

The Word of God, irrevocably incarnate though it is, does not kill the ongoing conversation of human history. It comes to its fullest human hearing only in the kind of hope that welcomes the creativity of dialogue among all peoples and their deepest hopes. The Word becomes flesh, and the flesh is the story of a conversation unfolding throughout the whole human story. It includes the life-stories of individuals and communities, of societies and cultures, and the great cosmic story of the universe itself. Everything we are in this corporeal, earthed, communal and individual historical existence is now part of the story of the incarnate Word. The Gospel story is told and retold within all the variety of contexts that make up our human condition. It provides no catalogue of information about the future, but illuminates the direction of life at whatever point hope stirs and despair threatens.

You might say, given this account of things, that Christian intelligence anticipates the heaven of a final vision, when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). But there is a second point, a kind of anticipation also of the hell, and the final, utter defeat of evil. We now move to a consideration of that.

9. ULTIMATE JUDGMENT

The hopefulness of Catholic intelligence does not permit any ultimate judgment in this ambiguous world of the penultimate. In this connection, Hannah Arendt wrote that "the most significant consequence of the secularisation of the modern age may well be the elimination from public life, along with religion, of the only political element in traditional religion, the fear of hell."²⁷ One immediate result of the modern elimination of the religious symbol of hell is its continuing reemergence in a secular guise. Floating free from its original religious significance, hell begins to occupy a dark region in the secularized world of self-enclosed human experience. There are consequences. James Schall makes a good point:

...Whenever hell is neglected, it returns under another form. The tradition of Aquinas is that all evil will be punished ultimately, that all human evil is precisely chosen. But it need not be the function of politics to punish all evils or to correct all evil choices... the effort to create a perfect, self-conceived society on earth invariably seems to result in a kind of incarnate hell...²⁸

The result of reducing the religious symbol of hell to an empirical historical form of reprobation has a double consequence. First, theologically speaking, hell ceases to be understood as an objective eschatological possibility calling all to humility and repentance. Secondly, hell is now projected onto the dreadful "other" (people, country, party, etc) within the world and its history. This damnable and dreaded "other" becomes the focus of historical hatred and reprobation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not only impossible, but also undesirable. Human freedom is frozen into the hopeless divisions of

²⁶ Ibid: "On the other hand, the absence of that fulfilment opens the way to the trivialisation of human life in the pursuit of fun, to the harshness of human life arising from the ruthless exercise of power, to despair about human welfare springing from the conviction that the universe is absurd."

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking, 1968), 133.

²⁸ James V. Schall, "Displacing Damnation: The Neglect of Hell in Political Theory," *The Thomist* 44.1 (1983): 43.

the good and bad. Possibilities of growth or change cannot be entertained. Satan reigns in the realm of the evil "other."

Shorn of its theological significance, hell becomes a human projection in the history of violence. The imagination of hope is stultified. History is no longer the ever-inconclusive play of the human drama. It is burdened with the weight of ultimate judgments. Those "on the side of the angels" have to keep up the pretence of being inhabitants of a heavenly city. Their judgments on anything or anyone on the other side cannot allow for any ambiguity. There can be no compromise with the realm of the evil "other." There Satan reigns. Forgiveness is irrational. There arises the ferocity of a merciless moralism permitting no response save that of eliminating the enemy.

In contrast to a socially or politically determined hell, the theological doctrine of hell frees social and political interactions from being terminally overloaded. Schall makes an anthropologically astute point. Hell, theologically understood, "frees politics from an impossible worldly burden inasmuch as it enforces a contingent, imperfect civil order in such a way that the same civil order is not required to exercise absolute justice and punishment."²⁹ In any theological understanding, ultimate judgment is not pronounced and executed by some group of the enlightened. Hence, it is not the function of politics to punish all evils and correct all abuses. If any political group attempts to implement an ideologically pure society in the world, the last state is worse than the first. The unfortunate result can be described as "hell on earth."

I would suggest, then, that the symbol of hell, for all the reserve with which we must explore it, has a place in the intelligence of hope. It denotes the final reprobation of the actual evil-doing that we experience in ourselves or others. It forbids any representation of God's love as tolerance of evil or a compromise with it. For hell is where evil is contained and rendered impotent, and made to serve the higher purposes of a good creation. Evil will be revealed for what it was all along, the parasite living off the original good of creation. The light of God is the radiance in which no pretence, no evasion, no compromise, no further subversion of the good will be tolerated. The mighty will be toppled from their thrones. The mass-murderer will no longer triumph over innocent victims. Pride and violence will be brought to nothing, and Satan will disappear in a puff of smoke.³⁰

What conscience has found most hateful and worthy of utter reprobation will have no part in the new creation.³¹ Though it is true that evil has no power unless it is the work of evil-doers, today we have learnt to identify more clearly the social structures of evil and the social and cultural conditioning that makes it morally impossible for people to act in peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. Hell, from this point of view, must mean the inglorious collapse of these evil social conditions.

In Johannine theology, for example, the life-giving generativity of God is frequently set in contrast to the perverse generativity of evil. Believers must choose that which is to be the determining factor in their lives.³² In a terrible conflict with his adversaries, Jesus speaks of opposed generative principles, different "paternities" to which we might lay claim:

²⁹ Ibid, 33.

³⁰ Quoted in Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 198.

³¹ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers. The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986), 39-40.

³² Anthony J. Kelly and Francis J. Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003), especially Chapter 7, "Between Different Paternities: Making the Choice," 169-204.

You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

In this dramatic language, the diabolic power at work in human history is expressed as an intrinsically murderous and mendacious force, enlisting human beings into its dominion. John's First Letter takes up these themes: "everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil" (1 John 3:8). It goes on to say, "we must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (v. 12). The destructive power of evil is further expressed as a form of murder: "all who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them" (v. 15).

We note, in this regard, different New Testament expressions of the nullification of the diabolic powers. Jesus destroys the influence of the evil one: "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). The epistle to the Hebrews is even more direct in regard to the devil-destroying power of Christ: "so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:14-15). We can say, in fact, that the only role which the devil/ Satan plays in the New Testament is as the one who is in the process of being defeated. Jesus has seen him fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18). In an image taken from a Roman military triumph, Colossians 2:15 describes Christ having "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them through the Cross." The stone which the builders rejected reveals the mechanism by which the powers of evil infesting the world order are unmasked and defeated. A new understanding of history begins.³³

10. ALL THINGS IN CHRIST

Since the death of Jesus was brought about by the powers of evil, his rising means a radical victory over the world-forming destructive forces that were ranged against him. God, then, is revealed as the love that overcomes evil; and the followers of Christ are called to be participants, in our different vocations, in its revelation. When this sense of proportion is lost, any tendency to theorise on the powers of evil is more likely to diminish experience of salvation than enlarge it. Evil is personified in the devil, the diabolos, literally, "one who throws things apart." Diabolic influence is evidenced in human history as a disintegrating and isolating force. It is the root of envy and of defiant alienation from God.³⁴

In contrast to the rending and disintegrating nature of the diabolic, is the "symbolic" (lit., "bringing things together") reality of Christ. Paul speaks of God's plan for the fullness of time "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10), for "all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17). The only proportionate response to this totality of all things in Christ – in their origin, goal and coherence – is a truly Catholic intelligence (kat'holou – open to the whole). It is not the time for the Catholic intellectual tradition to lose its hope, even if when we consider the ever-expanding range of current knowledge. Keeping the "holic" in the "cat-holic" is the continuing challenge. And yet, the

³³ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 157. He refers further to René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (London: Athlone, 1986), 184-197.

³⁴ For the resentment of the wicked against the ways of the wise, see the Wisdom of Solomon (Wis 2:12-20).

crucified Christ remains the focus. It reaches into the violent dismemberment of histories and cultures caused by evil, and yet holds the hope of a final vision of truth: “for in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20).

CONCLUSION

The great historian of culture, Christopher Dawson, in many essays recognised the transforming power of Christian hope in human history. This was well before the days when Liberation Theology began its productive and often heroic account of hope as inspiring new cultural, political and economic ways of conduct in the light of the Gospel. Dawson foresaw many of the dimensions of the problems we are now facing, though I doubt that even he anticipated the extent of the nihilism and the loss of meaning that looms today. Still, he suggests some similarity of the present cultural situation to that in which the early Christians found themselves, with its implications of mission and witness to hope:

But today we have seen that these [materialist] hopes have proved delusive and the new Babylon is threatened by an even more catastrophic and suicidal end than any of the world empires of the past. Thus we find ourselves back in the same situation as that the Christians encountered during the decline of the ancient world. Everything depends on whether the Christians of the new age are equal to their mission – whether they are able to communicate their hopes to a world in which man finds himself alone and helpless before the monstrous forces which have been created by man to serve his own ends but which now have escaped from his control and threaten to destroy him.³⁵

Forty years ago, Dawson saw the world as far less stable than the situation of the Roman Empire, seventeen centuries previously. The rate of change is momentous. Yet he sees nothing that should cause Christians to despair since faith has prepared them for exactly this kind of crisis as an opportunity to fulfil their mission. Though no one can predict how it will end, perhaps in large-scale self-destruction or in the emergence of a new stage of Christian culture, he writes,

All we know is that the world is being changed from top to bottom and that the Christian faith remains the way of salvation: that is to say, a way of renewal of human life by the Spirit of God which has no limits and which cannot be prevented by human power or material catastrophe. Christianity proved victorious over the pagan world of the past, because Christians were always looking forward while the secular world was looking back.³⁶

This is an arguable point today: perhaps we Christians are the ones who are looking back, instead of forward to the fulfilment of history. One way of looking forward is to renew our confidence in hopeful intellectual tradition in which we are participating. In an essay entitled “Civilization in Crisis,”³⁷ Dawson touches more directly on our topic. He observes that, with the progress of science and technology, there is a huge concentration of power in institutions of government, so that “Even the weakest and mildest of modern governments possesses a universal power of control over the lives of its citizens which the absolute monarchies of the past never dreamt of.”³⁸ This has consequences for any form of

³⁵ Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 67.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 26-27.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 79-98.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

education that might stand for something different. He allows that "... the modern Leviathan is such a formidable monster that it can swallow the religious school system without suffering indigestion."³⁹

But he sees an exception, and this has consequences for our topic: on the level of higher education: "The only part of the Leviathan that is vulnerable is its brain, which is small in comparison with its vast, armoured bulk."⁴⁰ He asks whether we could develop Christian higher education to a point at which it meets the attention of average educated person in every field of thought and life, the situation would be radically changed. He proceeds,

The difference is that today the intellectual factor has become more vital than it ever was in the past. The great obstacle to the conversion of the modern world is the belief that religion has no intellectual significance; that it may be good for morals and satisfy man's emotional needs, but that it corresponds to no objective reality.⁴¹

The horizon, in which the Catholic intellectual tradition operates, unfolds in an openness to God, the self, history, the world and the universe itself. It tends to an objectivity that is the fruit of all our capacities to sense and to feel, to imagine and to question, to reflect and decide, to believe, to hope and to love. It is an objectivity determined, not only by the fullest deployment of our subjective capacities, but also by the appearance of a gift in our history, namely, God's own self-manifestation in Christ, and in the words, the sacraments, and the inspired witness that serve it. In that objectivity, the self-transcending capacities of the human spirit are met with the self-communicating gift of God.

For Dawson, this tradition must continue with assurance. It is first of all a matter of recovering an intellectual and educational creativity with new confidence:

It is the task of Christian education at the present time to recover these lost channels of communication and to restore contact between religion and modern society—between the world of spiritual reality and the world of social experience.⁴²

In the recovery of "lost channels of communication" between the transcendent or spiritual dimensions of hope and its social applications, we are in the happy position of having plenty of resources which, I have no doubt, would have delighted Dawson—as with the recently published *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. True, documents cannot do our thinking for us, given the concreteness and complexity of the cultural and social realities in which we live. This tradition has developed, making bold connections between the Gospel and its social and cultural applications, all in specific relationship to the human person.

Here Dawson makes two suggestions that bear on the task ahead:

This reform can be conceived in two alternative ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as a return to the tradition of Christian education which has always been one of the main sources of Western culture and which still remains today as the representative and guardian of the spiritual traditions of our civilisation. On the other hand it can be seen in terms of psychology as a movement to bring modern education into closer relation with the psychological bases of society and to re-establish the internal balance of our culture.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid, 88.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 89.

⁴¹ Ibid, 89.

⁴² Ibid, 90.

⁴³ Ibid, 98.

Dawson's first suggestion would mean a return to the tradition of Christian education through the classic texts and persons that most form and interpret the tradition. Here the doctors of the Church, especially St Thomas Aquinas, and of others reaching to our day, as in the case of Dawson himself, not to mention Edith Stein, Karl Rahner, Simone Weil, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bernard Lonergan and so on. You might say this is a movement "from the outside in." It leads to a deeper appropriation of the tradition in its power to form, inspire and sustain the creativity of the Catholic intelligence.

The second suggestion envisages a movement as more "from the inside out." It entails an examination of human interiority and an exploration of consciousness characterised by the self-transcending dynamism in which intelligence operates and objectivity, in terms of truth and value, is possible: the "psychological bases" of social existence. Unless there is a rationality connected with values, unless there is value in our rationality, science becomes mere cleverness; and morality a matter of sentiment or tolerance, and human rights at best a matter of law, at worst a nice idea. Social existence has no bases, and nihilism is the presumed standpoint. This is more germane to our present argument, with its emphasis on the intellectual bearing of hope.

Here, I am giving the barest indications of the continuing challenge. It is no use pretending that the opposition to the Christian tradition expressed in various forms of ignorance, resentment and cultural dissipation is easily overcome. Here hope moves into a larger range, the shared hope of the Church to address even this age. In that larger, long-term range, I will leave to Dawson the final word:

Though the Church no longer inspires and dominates the external culture of the modern world, it still remains the guardian of all the riches of its own inner life and is the bearer of a sacred tradition. If society were once again to become Christian, after a generation or two, or after ten or twenty generations, this sacred tradition would once more flow out into the world and fertilize the culture of societies yet unborn. This movement toward Christian culture is at one and the same time a voyage into the unknown, in the course of which new worlds of human experience will be discovered, and a return to our fatherland—to the sacred tradition of the Christian past which flows underneath the streets and cinemas and skyscrapers of the new Babylon as the tradition of the patriarchs and prophets flowed beneath the palaces and amphitheatres of imperial Rome.⁴⁴

Author: *Dr. Anthony Kelly, CSSR, STL DTheol (Anselmianum) - Member of the International Theological Commission; Australian Catholic University Professor of Theology. Homepage: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/ankelly/>*

Email: a.kelly@mcauley.acu.edu.au

⁴⁴ Ibid, 29-30.