Human hope and the reign of God

Werner G. Jeanrond

Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Correspondence
Werner G. Jeanrond, Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.
Email: w.g.jeanrond@teologi.uio.no

This article discusses the theological virtue of hope in relation to the Christian expectation of God’s coming reign. Hope, as distinct from optimism and from all sorts of individualistic hopes, refers to God’s gift of future. Hence, the tension between expecting God’s coming reign, on the one hand, and the challenge of living constructively in the here and now, on the other hand, engages theological approaches to hope. It is argued that the divine gift of love, rather than faith, provides the main source of orientation for the Jewish and the Christian praxis of hope in this world. Faith is often understood in terms of assent to certain doctrinal definitions, while the other dimension of faith, God’s offer of relationship, has moved to the background. Accepting love as guide to the Christian praxis of hope strengthens the relational nature of hope. No one can hope for herself or himself alone. The Gospels and the Pauline letters confirm the centrality of love for Christian discipleship. The article concludes with, first, a discussion of the contemporary challenge of migration; and, second, with a consideration of the connection between hope for personal fulfilment and hope for the future of the universe. Both examples point to a theology that is inspired by love and equipped to approach Christian discipleship in a spirit of hope.

KEYWORDS
church, discipleship, hope, love, reign of God

1 | HUMAN HOPE AND THE REIGN OF GOD

In this article I wish to reflect on Christian approaches to hope and how they may relate to Jesus Christ’s invitation to strive first for God’s reign and its righteousness (Mt 6:33). In a first step, I examine hope and its horizon. Second, I approach love as the primary source of inspiration for the Christian praxis of hope. Third, I explore the vocation of Christians to become agents of hope in the world.

2 | HOPE AND ITS HORIZON

No human being can survive very long in the absence of hope. Ontologically speaking, we humans are relational beings. We are constituted by our relational network, its future orientation, and its respective languages. We are potentially reaching out to and form relationships with fellow humans, God, God’s creative and reconciling project in this universe, and our own emerging selves. Within this fourfold network of interdependent and dynamic relationships, we are developing corresponding expectations: how might these relationships change in the time to come? Will the expected changes be good or bad? How do these particular relationships affect each other? Such questions point to the impossibility of expressing a hope merely for my own self and future. Our relational set-up provides a larger horizon for our hope that necessarily transcends my personal perspective and aspirations. No one can, therefore, hope only for herself or himself alone.
Of course, I may be harboring all sorts of personal expectations or hopes, such as winning the lottery, aging more slowly than others, living longer, surviving a pandemic, remaining healthy, etc. However, it would be unrealistic to hope for my own self without considering and assessing the horizon of my hope. Hence, I suggest to distinguish between hope and hopes. “Hopes” are mere expectations of this or that, while “hope” refers to the ultimate meaningfulness of my existence within the relational network that characterizes my life.

It is also important to distinguish between optimism and hope. Optimism expects the system to work as planned. It is systemic by nature, whereas hope is relational and universal in scope. I might be optimistic that life in the Anthropocene, after all, will turn out well—at least for those people living in the affluent Northern hemisphere where systems are in place to provide support for those who are affected by climate change. However, I cannot seriously hope to remain unaffected by climate change since I am part of the constellation in which climate change has been developing. Similarly, it would be unwise, even irresponsible, merely to hope for my own survival in an ongoing pandemic. Since all human lives are affected by a pandemic, I might well remain optimistic to survive in view of excellent medical care, but I cannot seriously hope to remain unaffected by the respective viral or other cause of the pandemic as long as this cause remains active in the world.

For the emerging Christian movement, the experiences of the ministry, violent death, and unexpected resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth propelled the development of a new quality of hope. Jesus’s proclamation of God’s reign and of the related need for conversion, God’s act of authenticating both through raising the crucified Jesus, and the conviction that these events ushered in the end of the ages, together encouraged a fresh appreciation of the advent of God’s gift of future: for the mortal person, who, like the resurrected Christ, now could look forward to being raised by God and thus to remain eternally related to God and God’s project, but also for the entire universe. The resulting tension of the already-not-yet of God’s action and coming reign underlines the significance of hope and its relational nature. Christian hope relates to God and to God’s past, present, and future involvement with this universe. The emerging Christian praxis of hope was further enriched by the dimensions of patience, perseverance, deliverance, universalization, and dynamic development. Early Christian disappointment over the delay of Christ’s second coming had prepared the way for a new outlook on hope: the Christian praxis of hope remains concerned with this our world and not with any easy exit from it to some Gnostic vision of a trans-material and pure paradise.

However, the experience of the tension between expecting God’s coming reign, on the one hand, and the challenge of living constructively here and now, on the other hand, has promoted different forms of hope. Attempts at identifying particular human agendas and hopes with specific religious, social and political manifestations of God’s kingdom have led to tragic and often bloody confusions concerning the interaction between God and human beings. Prescribing human passivity as a mark of respect for God’s sovereignty has weakened human resolve to resist all sorts of tyrannies—religious and secular. Individual and communal projects and political theologies thus can be either empowered or limited by hope. Hope remains an ambiguous phenomenon. This means that the Christian praxis of hope constantly calls for theological reflection and critique. Moreover, Christians should not aim at imagining or longing for some pure state of hope. However, it may be appropriate to distinguish between hope and radical hope.

Radical hope differs from hope not in substance but in degree and intensity. Even when all hopes and our trust in the continuity and substance of our religion, our culture, our tradition, and their respective institutions are shattered, this does not necessarily imply the end of hope. Rather, it directs our attention to the challenge of facing up to “radical hope” that comes to us without our own doing, without our calculation and initiative. Radical hope confronts us with radical transcendence. “My commitment to God’s transcendence and goodness is manifested in my commitment to the idea that something good will emerge even if it outstrips my present limited capacity for understanding what that good is.” Many religious virtuos, such as the apostle Paul, John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, etc., have witnessed to this perplexing gift of radical hope, while theologians have been searching for adequate expressions. Karl Rahner, for example, spoke in this respect of “the one and entire hope [ganze Hoffnung]” that may embrace us and liberate us from our most cherished hopes. Hope remains a life-long challenge. My hope needs liberation.

From where does our hope receive its inspiration and liberation? Should we consider the Christian praxis of hope in terms of a function of Christian faith? Or does hope spring from the praxis of love? Here, I wish to defend the thesis that love provides the primary inspiration of both hope and faith.

3 | LOVE INSPIRING HOPE

For the apostle Paul, there was no question that, ultimately, only love remains. It never ends. Hope and faith are human and mortal, while love is eternal. Love participates in God’s realm. It is the greatest of the so-called theological virtues.
of love, hope, and faith. In the Johannine literature in the New Testament, the connection between love and God found its most powerful expression: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:8).

While theologians generally have subscribed to this divine priority of love, nevertheless they have tended to subordinate love and hope to faith. This raises a number of questions: Why has their priority shifted from love to faith? Why has faith been expected to provide the best source for inspiring the Christian praxis of hope? In this article I cannot offer an in-depth assessment of this shift of priorities in Christian thought and history. However, a few comments may be helpful in this regard.

Love is neither a Christian invention nor possession. Rather, Jesus of Nazareth confirmed the Hebrew biblical tradition’s various love commands and applied them to his own particular religious, cultural, social and political circumstances, and challenges. The love of God, the love of neighbor, loving God’s acts of creation and liberation, and loving the emerging human self, all are interrelated and all refer to God as their origin. Love is a gift from God to all people.

However, through the centuries theologians have contemplated the human ability to love, on the one hand, and different Christian insights into pure or genuine love, on the other hand. Augustine, for instance, expressed doubts about the human ability to love and instead highlighted God’s acts of love in the human beings who are engaging in the praxis of love. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther both affirmed the human ability to love, yet both expressed a need for faith to control love. Anders Nygren and the Lund school of theology distinguished between a proper Lutheran commitment to divine love (agape) and a number of wrong approaches to love in terms of eros and nomos. The theological fight for genuine love was conducted in the name of faith—faith understood as both God’s offer of relationship (fides qua) and the sum of the church’s doctrinal definitions (fides quae). Hence, it seems fair to conclude that in Christian tradition faith has mustered more trust than love in spite of the biblical witness to love’s eternal quality and divine provenience.

This predominance of faith in Christian thought and life has many reasons. One of them has to do with the appeal to faith in terms of defining the boundaries of the Christian church. Confessions of faith are able to support decisions on who is in and who is, or should be, excluded from the Christian community. Appeals to love are hardly appropriate when trying to exclude people from a community or church. For love, by its very nature, seeks, desires, and negotiates otherness and conflict. Love lives of otherness and of relating to otherness inside and outside of me and us—including God’s radical otherness. Love, thus, is keen to transgress human-made boundaries.

Faith, however, can more easily assemble a system of beliefs and doctrines that claim assent from faithful members of a community. Repeatedly in Christian history, the relational nature of faith has been downplayed in favor of a distinct doctrinal content of faith in conjunction with a wider exercise of theological, administrative, clerical, and patriarchal power. An urge to establish and maintain doctrinal purity and ecclesial orthodoxy over against assumed incomplete or heretical expressions of faith has promoted the objectification of faith. Hence, quite often faith has become the object of faith, and Christians merely believed in faith rather than engaging in the praxis of love and hope.

Mistrust of human love, on the one hand, and emerging systems of power in the church, on the other hand, have thus strengthened the church’s management of faith and weakened the Christian praxis of love and hope. Moreover, the potential of hope to open and direct attention to the future horizon of love receded, and the systemic logic of doctrinal faith tragically reduced the horizon of the future of humanity, of creation and of the material universe to mere considerations of and concerns for individual salvation. The journey of the individual soul and its care moved to the foreground, whereas the significance of hope for the future of the overall dynamic network of divine–human relationships faded away. This development has had severe consequences for the Christian appreciation of God’s creative and reconciling project within this universe. Hope and eschatology assumed the status of objects of belief rather than as vital resources for a dynamic Christian faith praxis.

Hope, therefore, has not been hugely controversial in Christian life. Hope seldom causes public debate. Thoughtful Christian rarely question the significance of hope for Christian life—either with respect to the horizon of expectation for salvation, redemption and reconciliation, or with respect to expectations of an eternal life with God and the community of saints beyond our individual death.

Most Christians would agree that hope involves perspectives of the future, of expectation and of fulfillment of the divine–human relationship. Like love and faith and together with both, hope can inspire a human praxis in response to the divine invitation to enter into relationship with God through fellowship with Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. God’s promise of covenant and fulfillment points to hope as the temporal and spatial framework for both love and faith. Therefore, it makes good sense to approach hope through love. Becoming a full and fulfilled subject together with others and with God is an essential aspect of Christian eschatological dynamics. Love opens our eyes for difference, otherness, and for ways of dealing with the challenge of otherness. Hence, it makes a difference if we approach hope through love or through any presumed order or system of faith. Love makes
hope more dynamic, but also messier and more unpredictable. A praxis of hope inspired by love always runs the risk of revealing new aspects, challenges, alienations, and promises of the Christian life.

This insight also points to the need for assessing the experiences and structures of evil, sin, and distortion that continue to affect all our journeys towards emancipation, subjectivity, transcendence and communal, and personal transformation. Developing and embracing critical and self-critical forms of hope always already implies an acute awareness of the need for confession, conversion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing within the fourfold network of dynamic and interdependent love relationships.

Hope and its critique can never be adequately explored outside of the interconnection of hope, love, and faith. Faith refers, at best, to the fundamental relationship between God and human beings that grows through prayer, liturgy, and contemplation, through reason and revelation, through community formation and maturing selfhood, and through concerted actions on behalf of God’s project of creation and reconciliation. Faith finds in hope its temporal dynamics and the personal and political space-time for the rich and diverse praxis of love. Love attends to otherness—the otherness of the universe, of the religious self and other, and of God as the radical other. Faith and hope culminate in the praxis of love, but they also provide critical correctives for this praxis.

The specific task of hope remains to remind Christians that the history of transformation of each person and of the universe as a whole is not a simple and linear history upwards, but a complex process that includes neglect, injustice, hatred, lies, misuse of power, violence, exploitation, forgetfulness, suffering, and death. Only when all of these aspects of life and history are gathered into the critical orbit of hope can the praxis of love appropriately unfold—God’s love for us and our love for God, for God’s creation, for our fellow human beings (past, present, and future) and for our own emerging and fragile selves.

Christians believe that in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the transformative reign of God has irrevocably manifested itself, and that the church, however visible or invisible and however fragile and in need of constant conversion and transformation, is called to contribute to the emerging “body of Christ” in this universe. Christians know that no one hopes for himself or herself alone. The church, therefore, is called to become a community of hope, a community extending also to those women, men, and children who have died before us in the hope of being eternally united with the divine-human community of love. Hence, the church is a community charged with an always deeper, more critical, and self-critical praxis of hope in love.

4 | HOPE AND DISCIPLESHIP

The Gospels repeatedly emphasize the importance of love in Jesus’s proclamation of God’s reign. Likewise, the apostle Paul underlines the significance of love for Christian approaches to God, to each other, and to God’s creation. Thus, it seems appropriate to see love as the primary constellation for discerning the potential of hope and its praxis in the early Christian movement.

Like Jesus himself, his disciples benefitted from their rich and varied Jewish resources for the expression of hope in God and God’s ongoing involvement in this world when they tried to make sense of Jesus’s ministry, violent death, and surprising resurrection. The framework of love and the respective experiences of Jesus Christ provided the foundation for the development of a theology of hope. Prophetic and apocalyptic expressions of hope together with a strengthened belief in the resurrection of the dead and in the beginning of God’s reign now characterize the emerging Christian praxis of hope. However, let us not forget that this praxis was not homogenous. Rather, competing approaches to hope can be identified in the different New Testament texts—some of a more prophetic and others of a more apocalyptic character.¹²

It is not possible to know exactly to what extent Jesus’s own proclamation of God’s reign rejected deterministic models of hope and instead preferred prophetic expressions. In any case, as far as we can see from the Gospel texts, Jesus did not invent new genres of hope discourse. Rather, he used existing ones in order to convey his particular message of what God’s reign may entail here and then. The Gospels claim that through his deeds and proclamation in the name of God, Jesus incorporated the reasons to hope made available by the biblical heritage. These include God’s gift of love, the radical inclusivity of God’s fellowship, the forgiveness of sin and guilt, the overcoming of shame, and the formation of new forms of eucharistic community.

It seems clear that Jesus shared the hope of many fellow Jews in the arrival of the messianic age and in the resurrection of the dead (cf. Mk 12:24-27). However, it was the early church that saw in Jesus the Son of Man who would inaugurate the ultimate transformation of the world upon his final return and judgement. Thus, Jesus the proclaimer of hope in God had now himself become part of the divine orbit of hope. The experiences of Easter and Pentecost gathered the disciples afresh and provided them with a radically new insight into God’s transformative presence in
this universe. Moreover, for Jesus’s disciples their reasons to hope have become both more concrete and more remote: more concrete in terms of the disclosure of God’s reign in Jesus Christ and more remote in terms of the timescale for the ultimate implementation of this reign at Jesus’s second coming, the Parousia.

This new already-not yet tension is articulated and contemplated especially in the letters that became part of the New Testament canon, culminating in the confession of early Christians that “Christ is our hope” (1 Cor 15:19; Col 1:27; 3:4). For the emergent church community and for Christians ever since, references to hope now include Jesus Christ. Thanks to the incessant campaign of Paul, hope is understood to concern not only the Jews, but also the entire cosmos—people and matter alike (Rom 8:22). In addition, Christian references to hope often carry a positive emotional note: to hope means to expect the fulfilment of God’s promises in Christ with confidence. “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom 12:12-13).

The respective expectations of Parousia differ between New Testament texts. However, notwithstanding different accentuations either way, the principal tension between present and future fulfilment, on the one hand, and the invitation to open one’s heart to God’s emerging reign with the necessary attention to the tasks and challenges to be faced on the way, on the other hand, have been shaping the Christian praxis of hope ever since. Hope is relational, and therefore its praxis remains particular to persons and communities.

Here I cannot trace and discuss the history of hope in the various Christian traditions. Instead, I wish to highlight two pertinent challenges to the praxis of hope today. As we have seen, the apostle Paul links the praxis of hope with the call to extend hospitality to strangers. Moreover, he stresses the connection between hope for personal fulfilment and hope for the future of the universe. Thus, he forcefully underlines that nobody can hope only for herself or himself alone.

### 4.1 Hope for the stranger

In our globalizing world, the issue of migration has moved to the forefront of political debate. Populist politicians often claim that “we” cannot welcome “them” all to our respective country and culture. It is, of course, true that one single country could not offer sufficient hospitality to “all” the present and potential migrants and asylum seekers, if millions of people would set out to leave their countries marked by need, suffering, famine, climate change, and persecution in order to seek a new life among ourselves in the wealthier parts of the world. Nevertheless, such a populist point is utterly misleading.

If we approach our human constitution not through the selective needs and aspirations of an individual subject but through an appreciation of the fourfold relational network in love, then we cannot any longer differentiate between “them” and “us” in the first place. Rather, any human condition marked by misery, persecution, exploitation, suffering, brokenness, and essential lack would evidently present a challenge to us all. We and our very constitution as human beings would be at risk. Hence, this requires not merely a series of charitable actions for “them,” but a radical transformative praxis for us all. This praxis could motivate us not only to open our doors for those who knock, but also to direct our attention more forcefully to any attack on our common humanity wherever and whenever this may occur. Any separation between migrants and non-migrants has no place within such a praxis of hope. Rather, what is required is a new appreciation of the migrant nature of all human journeys and a grateful acceptance of the gift of love as the most promising means to conduct such journeys together.

The migrant vocation and spirituality associated with Abraham and the development of a praxis of hope in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions could be a powerful inspiration here. If we, like Abraham, choose to accept the vocation to set out and move with God, we could appreciate afresh that no land belongs to us, and that all gifts received on the way are signs of grace and not rightful belongings. My point here is not to plead for a property-free society and economy, but to urge a review of our sense of attachment to our properties (cf. 1 Tim 6:17-19). Whatever we possess, we have received for the benefit of all. It is not my merit to have been born on this or that side of any border. However, it pertains to the logic of Abrahamic vocation to consider everything I have received ultimately in terms of grace and shared provision on the way.

Understanding ourselves as migrant disciples of Christ, guided by God’s Spirit on our way through life, helps us to learn to see other human beings as fellow migrants: we can no longer differentiate between them and us. Rather we all are on our way to an ever-deeper appreciation of the gift of life and the promise of God’s fulfilment of our life together within the divine project of creation and reconciliation. Those pursuing this project share in the hope of divine perfection of this project with potentially all of humanity—past, present, and future. Hope is not a Christian possession. Rather, it is God’s gift to all humanity. Christians, like members of other traditions, attempt to respond to this gift in their particular praxis of hope. Hence, it makes perfect sense to call for a continuous inter-hope dialogue in which all can compare notes on how they have been responding.
to God’s invitation to share in the hope of God’s coming reign.16

4.2 | Hope for creation

The future of the universe has not always been a burning concern for Christians when focusing on hope. All too often merely the individual journey of the soul, faced with either heaven or hell, attracted eschatological attention.17 The eclipse of attention to the non-human and the material dimensions of the universe has led to widespread and dangerous Christian apathy about God’s project of creation and reconciliation. Such tendencies can, of course, be observed also outside of Christianity and in other religious movements. Against this background, Paul’s reference in Romans to the whole of creation represents a call to conversion with respect to the place of nature within God’s project: “We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labour pains until now” (Rom 8:22). The universe, thus, ought not to be considered meaningless within the horizon of a Christian praxis of hope. Thus, biblical hope in a new creation should not eclipse the physical universe. Rather, as David Wilkinson has remarked, God’s new creation “is not simply the present order with a renewed humanity. There is something essentially ‘new’ both for humanity and the physical universe.”18

The eschatological trajectory is open-ended in view of God’s sovereignty as creator and reconciler. Moreover, there can be no aspect of the created universe that falls out of God’s creative agenda. Although I am not privy to God’s plan for the future of the animal kingdom, the recognition of the divine will and purpose to create and to restore, I find it impossible to reduce animals to the status of mere objects or machines or to mere waste products of human engineering and the food industry. Animals, plants, and the physical universe all participate in the relational framework of love that inspires the Christian praxis of hope. Therefore, the ongoing ecological discourses of thinking and acting are crucial for a restoration of a new and balanced approach to the created order and evolution of the universe. They may help to promote a conversion to a deeper appreciation and love for all aspects of the fourfold relational and dynamic constellation in which we humans have our life and being. The task we face at this moment in time is to reconcile the relationship between us human beings and the animal world, and, more generally, to restore the human and non-human parts of this universe to their rightful place in God’s created order of love.

Once we recognize in this present creation the groundwork for God’s emerging new creation, and once we see ourselves as divinely loved and invited collaborators in the ongoing project of creation and reconciliation, then not only our ecological and climate commitments and our inter-generational responsibilities will need to be reconsidered. Rather, our own subjectivity, agency, and eternal vocation will demand to be anchored afresh in the fourfold dynamics of interdependent love relationships. The requirements and shape of an adequate institutional order in church and society can then be considered more fully and discerned more appropriately. Once love is to inform hope and faith, a new appreciation of God’s great project might attract new levels of interest and faithful excitement in and beyond the Christian movement.

ENDNOTES

1 For a more detailed examination of the nature and scope of hope, see Jeanrond, Werner G. (2020). Reasons to hope. London/New York: T&T Clark. In this article I make use of some passages from this book.
2 Jeanrond (2020, pp. 26–35).
5 Cf. I Corinthians 13.
6 All biblical citations in this article are taken from Holy Bible: New revised standard version. London: SPCK, 2008.
7 For a more detailed argument on behalf of the primacy of love, see Jeanrond, Werner G. (2020). Reasons to hope, op. cit. (pp. 11–16).
9 Jeanrond (2010, pp. 45–103), for a more detailed discussion of some major theological approaches to love and for the respective references.
10 Jeanrond (2010, pp. 113–120).
11 For a more extensive discussion of the Christian concern with individual salvation and some of its problems, see Jeanrond (2020). Reasons to hope, op. cit. (pp. 25–72).


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