

## **Karl Barth's Having No-Thing to Hope For**

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### **What Hope is There For Us?**

There is nothing like a New Year to encourage us to think about where we have come from and where we are going, to identify our desires for our future, and to resolve to attempt to fulfil them before the arrival of the same stage the following year. This process was heightened and intensified by the recent turn of the millennium in the Christian calendar. What occurred, among many things, was the launching of a seemingly endless series of books, articles, talks, and television documentaries, and this very process served to express something of the variety of felt anxieties over the future. The anxiety generated reached apocalyptic proportions in the imaginations of many, and this itself further revealed just how little hope there seems to be that the human race, and perhaps indeed the very life of every earthly species, even has a future, or an earthly one

at least.<sup>1</sup> The God of action obviously keeps time with the western calendar, and such a God cannot be relied on for the future life of this world.<sup>2</sup> A comment made by George Steiner expresses the frequently heard apocalyptic mood: “Kafka’s stark finding that ‘there is abundance of hope but none for us’ may prove to be sober reportage” of the history of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, in an allusion to the incineration of those gassed at the hands of the Nazis, he is painfully forced to conclude that, morally rather than empirically speaking “To a degree which numbs understanding, this entire crucible of creation and of hope now lies in ash.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that hope, if there is any such thing, is partial, fragile, particular, and individualist (the “me-first attitude” of market-relations and the commodified-self), and frequently reduced to the increasingly attractive desire for some form of escape, as advertised by the growing popularity of hedonistic diets of narcotics and/or commercial and material comforts (comforts that, ironically, slip out of being comforting in

<sup>1</sup> In secular contexts some of this apocalyptic pressure was felt in the form of fear generated by the much-predicted, and potentially catastrophic, so-called ‘millennium bug’.

<sup>2</sup> God here in a sense turns his loving face away from his creation. Consequently, this kind of apocalyptic becomes a theology of death for, as George Steiner argues in a different context, when God hides God’s face “history is Belsen” [*Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 122]. It lives off the catastrophic violence by reading redemption in terms of God’s own violence enacted *against his world*, and thereby this deathly imagination hermeneutically exalts its own “texts of terror.”

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 134.

consumerist societies and therein slide towards the insatiable demand for 'more and more').<sup>5</sup>

In the year preceding the "new millennium" Elie Wiesel, whose most famous work still remains the brutally haunting *Night*, spoke in terms that pleaded that there be a dawn for the human. He drew on the much articulated theme of the necessity of hope for human living: "hope is an essential part of the human condition. Just as the body cannot live without dreams, the mind or the soul cannot endure without hope."<sup>6</sup> Using an image that harked back to his earlier dark narrative, he observed that "today some of our dreams often turn into nightmares."<sup>7</sup> Hope can be dangerous and terminal, he recognised here, when it is based on the delusion and falsehood of a hope that is conceived on the grounds of an anthropology that encourages dehumanising brutality against others. That is why invoking, creating and infectiously passing a properly purified hope on to others is such an urgent task for Wiesel. Indeed, he himself had

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<sup>4</sup> In *George Steiner: A Reader* (Penguin Books, 1984), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 97. Arguably, what the various processes contributing to economic and informational globalisation have done is reinforce the broadly secular 'world-views' of capitalism's consumer cultures, and therein designate what we can hope for in market terms, or commodifiably. So, as Frank Stilwell argues, consumerism has become "the dominant 'religion' of the era, ... fostered through the marketing activities of corporations worldwide, competing for market shares, and [thereby] reinforcing the consumerist ethos - 'I consume therefore I am'." ['Globalisation: How Did We Get to Where We Are? (And Where Can We Go Now?)', [www.phaa.net.au/conferences/stilwell.htm](http://www.phaa.net.au/conferences/stilwell.htm)]

come to the point where his own life had, for the sake of its integrity, to become an enacted testimony to those who had had their hope slaughtered, and who consequently have been denied having a contemporaneous hopeful voice of their own.<sup>8</sup> As Graham Walker, Jr., claims, Wiesel is “concerned that the survivor become the vehicle or medium through whom the dead can again speak.”<sup>9</sup>

Wiesel’s thought-provoking and passionately argued article deserves the type of sustained and sensitive evaluation which this paper cannot afford the time to give to it. For now it is worth asking just what hope is. Underpinning his account is a sense of hope as a transcendental act in which “I,” as the subject of hope, project myself into the future, and without which lies the “death of all generous impulses in me.”<sup>10</sup> How that comes about, what it involves, and what precisely it hopes for are not quite so clear in Wiesel’s text. However, reflecting carefully on these matters is vitally necessary if hope is to be understood as being urgent in the way he suggested, and is to resist slipping into the brutal performances he worried about. After all, as numerous recent studies

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<sup>6</sup> Elie Wiesel, ‘The Urgency of Hope’, in Leroy S. Rouner (ed.), *Religion, Politics and Peace* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 48-60 (48).

<sup>7</sup> Wiesel, 60.

<sup>8</sup> See Elie Wiesel, ‘Recalling Swallowed-Up-Worlds’, in James M. Wall, ed., *Theologians in Transitions* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1981), 130f; cf. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 11f.

<sup>9</sup> Graham B. Walker, Jr., *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (Jefferson, N. Carolina, London: McFarland and Co., 1988), 65.

inform, and as I have already suggested in the opening paragraph, the contexts of many Western people are not amenable to having, or speaking positively of, hope.

One's perspective on the hopelessness of one's situation can be transformed in subtle, yet sometimes significantly real ways, with the development or strengthening of certain forms of *meta-hope*. That is something recognisable in Marx's famous reflections on the role of religion – people in otherwise hopeless situations are able to bare their predicaments because of their 'illusory' belief in, and hope for, a compensating heaven, for example. The Nietzsche of the *Birth of Tragedy* argued that "illusions" are of the essential fabric of human living in a world that has to endure the dissolution of all teleological worldviews, whether they be theologically or philosophically founded. Of course, depicting them as 'illusory' somewhat weakens the sense of integrity of the one holding to accounts of the world that are hope-generating. Even so, Nietzsche admits, not just any sort of hope is valid. For instance, he maintains that nihilism is largely a response to the teleologies produced by modernity, and therefore the kinds of hopes that modernity can generate are de-legitimated, not merely overcome, but seen as contributors to the very existence of, nihilism.

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<sup>10</sup> Wiesel, 49.

The category of *dangerous* "illusion" is precisely how Nietzsche and Marx, for example, tend to view Christianity. As well as ruling out the so-called "myth of modernity," Nietzsche came to regard Christianity as life-denying, a "nay-saying" to life that needs to be unsaid in any worldly re-enchantment. It was a similar mood that animated Marx's oft cited complaint that Christianity was the "opium of the masses." Christian hope, he believed, was inappropriate for dealing with the various alienations that characterise living, and for which Marx produced a typology. Pushing the sense of these critiques, one could say that such hope is largely dismissed as, at best, absurdly arcane, and at worst, a dangerous distraction from the everyday business of living.

This is so for several reasons. Eschatology has the role of legitimating discourses in a *final* way because of the finality of its reference. The implication from Marx's critique is that Christians have used beliefs about the eschatological activity of God and the End of the world for purposes of legitimating the way things are, and of delegitimizing resistance to that present. So, on the one hand, Christian hope has prevented the inequitable character of social and political relations from being understood as such. Not merely are these forms of relations given in, with and under the conditions of the natural orders of creation but the provisionality of the world's forms and its relations prevent their importance from being finally perceived. Moreover, Christian hope has frequently hampered the development of attitudes

necessary for outrage against injustice and dampened the possibility of any facilitation of efforts to remedy it through notions of a “compensating heaven.” Furthermore, particular versions of that which Christians hope for can not only foster by default the destructive abuse of the various forms of life in this world, but actively encourage it in participation in apocalyptic renditions of what it means for the world to have its End in God.<sup>11</sup> Finally, as Merold Westphal notices with regard to the critiques by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the “masters of suspicion,”

Behind what professes to be love of God and neighbor they regularly find love of self, disguised beyond recognition, at least to those who perpetuate this pious fraud.<sup>12</sup>

What hope is there, then, for making *Christian* sense of Wiesel’s “urgency of hope?” Does the term *Christian* so qualify the term *hope* in such a way that the very idea

<sup>11</sup> Many engineers who were Seventh Day Adventists or who belonged to the Pentecostal movement did not have conscientious objections to working on the production of atomic bombs; they thought they were preparing the way for the second coming of Jesus Christ, which according to ‘biblical information’ would be preceded by an enormous global fire [see A.G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986)]. Another example of this type of perspective sees Ronald Reagan’s theological advisors painting a scenario whereby “America as a nation could tempt Jesus to return by offering him the burnt sacrifice of a world-in-nuclear flames” [Larry Jones and Gerald T. Sheppard, ‘The Politics of Biblical Eschatology: Ronald Reagan and the Impending Nuclear Armageddon’, *TSF Bulletin* 8 (1984), 19]

<sup>12</sup> Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 9. Comprehending the causes of their atheism, in many ways an eminently honest atheism, takes Westphal some way towards providing a theological parallel to Jacques Derrida’s complaint that recently we have lost our supposedly good reasons for failing to listen to Marx: “It will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx..., a failing of theoretical, philosophical, political responsibility. When the dogma machine and the ‘Marxist’ ideological apparatuses ... are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this.” [*Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt*,

of hope, that which regulates and determines what we do on our way into our futures, is subverted? And is Christian hope, then, not a subversion of the very possibilities of a moral life concerned with the totality of that which constitutes life in all its fullness, but instead slips into its opposite, a nihilism that is unconstrained by concerns with flourishing, at least in “this world?”

Christians, along with other individuals or groups with strongly held beliefs, would naturally be extremely reluctant to even concede the possibility that their hope may be illusory, prone to ideology, and/or generative of various forms of alienation. The temptation for the Christian, then, is to rush in to speak when hearing of the losing or silencing of hope, or suspicions over the validity of hope. This zealous (apologetic) movement is particularly a response designed to tackle the substance of what it is that is hoped for (in order to witness to a different object of hope).<sup>13</sup> This temptation more

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*the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 13]

<sup>13</sup> This kind of apologetics is not well placed to ask difficult questions over the nature and disruption of Christian hope within the Churches' very claims for it. The Christian, as with all those who have any hope(s) in general, needs to retain a certain degree of self-criticalness, since history has demonstrated that she, perhaps more than any others, is far from exempt from what Denys Turner claims to be “just about the most important theological question which we have today,” namely the question of idolatry [“How Should I Love God?: Eckhardt, Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas on How to Rumble Idolatries,” unpublished paper presented to *The Society For the Study of Theology*, April 2001]. So Westphal, for instance, attentively reads the “unholy trinity” of the so-called “masters of suspicion” by way of a perennial purification of theology, an act of theological penance [x]. “[T]his claim is not identical to these atheists' claim that they have the truth and that the church knows nothing but error, superstition, and



often than not, however, ensnares the theologically hasty. All too often the impression given by Christian talk of hope is that it is little different in general logic from discourse of hope that is not specifically Christian.<sup>14</sup> One particular example of one version of this tendency is Karl Rahner's transcendentalist move. In his discourse of hope he can sound, at his most "existentialist," as if he is making hope an independent characteristic of the human, an existential necessity to which God is *subsequently* related. For instance, Rahner enthusiastically argues that hope is "a basic modality of human existence".<sup>15</sup> But if the logic of this kind of approach is taken seriously, specifically Christian and other accounts of hope are differentiable solely at the level of the *object of hope* – that which is hoped for. But as the *ethical* nature of complaints against Christian hope suggest, the problem with hope lies much deeper than merely substituting objects would allow for.

Indeed, the matter is not as simple as either the apologetic approach or Marx himself imagine. It is arguable that the very prefixing of the word *Christian* to *hope* as its

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illusion. It is rather the claim, scarcely less disturbing, that there is an atheism which is closer to the truth than a certain kind of religion, not the religion of 'somebody else,' but quite possibly our own." [6]

<sup>14</sup> Much of the structure and feel of a paper by Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart suggests an apologetic move from identifying general cultural problem to religious solution ['Salvation and Creation: "All Things New"', in Vernon White (ed.), *The Scope of Salvation: Theatres of God's Drama. Lincoln Lectures in Theology 1998* (Lincoln Cathedral Publications, 1999), 40-54].

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 23 volumes (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961-1992), vol. 10, 254. This, one could say, reduces Christian hope to a general hope onto which Christian symbols are subsequently grafted. These are eschatological forms of thought that accompany secular reckoning, and find their way onto not merely the periphery of Christian eschatological discourse.

qualifier becomes neither the negation of what has, at various times, been interpreted as its *ethical dynamic* nor the defiance of ethical norms. This is because the term *Christian* is “not an innocuous modifier, a word that is subordinated to the word it modifies.”<sup>16</sup> The relation between *hope* and *Christian* here instead is complex and requires a radical rethinking of the function of each, a rethinking generative of promising versions of Christian beliefs about the End and the hope it generates that correspondingly demonstrates how these can be logically disentangled from those regarded as, at their very best, less promising. According to Kathryn Tanner, “a suspicion that Christian beliefs with abhorrent consequences are essentially bound up with all the rest is probably behind a sense that a fundamental reworking of Christian theology is required to avoid them.”<sup>17</sup> This certainly seems to be the case with certain Marxist critiques of Christian hope, and the reductive revision of the conceptual relation of *hope* and *Christian* that characterises the ‘fate’ of theology in certain dominant strands of so-called “modernity.”

Consequently, it is worthwhile spending time reflecting on what exactly hope means in the hands of those who have most carefully dealt with it, and what its

<sup>16</sup> The phrase comes from Edith Wyschogrod, referring to the connection between the terms *postmodern* and *ethics* [*Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990)].

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 5.

implications might be for imagining ourselves as hoppers in and for this world. In order to provide a challenge to the very ontological grounds of the “less promising” approaches I will turn to what many may conceive to be a rather unlikely source – the hopeful theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968). This, as I will hopefully demonstrate, is a fruitful theological move, particularly when his material insights are creatively pressed. In his all-too infrequently studied reflections on hope from the twilight of his academic career he encourages theologians to think much more carefully about what it is to hope as a Christian, or, better, as one whose determination and responsibility are ecclesially learned and performed in witness to God’s coming in Jesus Christ. The challenge that his material puts too much that passes for Christian talk of hope is pronounced and radical. In particular, he challenges the very kind *objectivity* of hope that makes what Christians hope for just another object; and in so doing, although I will focus less on this here, Barth casts serious suspicion on the *subjectivity* of hope that is therein necessitated (stable subjects of hope who can hope for different types of things).

### **The Christological Grammar of Hope-Talk**

What is Christian hope for Barth? For him there would be something very odd about a Christian asking a question such as “For what may we hope?” Notice that this very form of the question implies a *particular kind* of object – it asks about *things* hoped

for. Of course, there are no shortage of candidates for these things in the history of Christian reflection on eschatological matters. We could mention eternal life, the Kingdom of God, the millennium, the beatific vision, heaven, and so on. These are the *things* traditionally associated with eschatology, and eschatology generally defined as study of the *eschata* (the “last things”). After all, the seventeenth century Lutheran dogmatician Abraham Calovius (1612-86) of Wittenberg’s coined the term ‘*Eschatologia Sacra*’ as a general heading at the end of his twelve-volume dogmatics of 1677. And what he deals with under that heading is predicated on this particular etymological rendering of *eschatologia* in terms of the Greek neuter term *eschata* – death, resurrection, judgment, and consummation (most succeeding manuals of doctrine listed these four as resurrection, judgment, heaven and hell). One could further mention, of course, that “to hope” is a verb – not only do verbs have *objects*, or at least one object each (that which is hoped for) but they also have *subjects* (the one who does the hoping). Nevertheless, this way of describing what hope hopes for is disrupted by the theological account of hope in Barth precisely because he refuses to make the move of delineating the *objectivity* of hope in this fashion.

The clue to his reading of hope can be found in the very way that he locates the proper theological location of these themes, or objects of hope. His cartography of eschatological statements entails that eschatology should *not* be understood as the study

of the *eschata* as such, but rather should be understood as that which is concerned with the *eschatos*. Eschatology, then, is not so much reflection on the *last* things as theological reflection on *he who is our End*. In 1954 Rahner argues in an important essay that “*Christ himself is the hermeneutical principle of all eschatological assertions. Anything that cannot be read and understood as a christological assertion is not a genuine eschatological assertion.*”<sup>18</sup>

There are good reasons why Barth and Rahner make such a move. Rahner had elsewhere famously declared that should the doctrine of the Trinity disappear from western ecclesial (and thereby its dogmatic) life little of the content of western thought and practice would be consequently disturbed.<sup>19</sup> Sympathetic readers of the so-called ‘western tradition’ may want to suspiciously make a case that Rahner somewhat exaggerated the problem, carefully and strategically orchestrating this very exaggeration so that the rhetoric would make his own Trinitarian theology appear more original here than it actually is. But Trinitarian theologians find it too difficult to wholly dismiss Rahner’s damning claim, and the subsequent intensification of theological studies on the Trinitarian shape of Christian life and worship suggests something of

<sup>18</sup> Rahner, ‘The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions’, *Theological Investigations* volume 4, 326-46 (342f.). Just how far Rahner worked that out in his eschatology is, as material quoted earlier suggests, debatable.

<sup>19</sup> See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London : Burns & Oates, 1970), 11ff.

this. Barth's own way of conceiving the triune movement *ad extra* in *CD* I.1 *embodies* the freedom of God for us concretely in *Jesus Christ*. Thus Jesus Christ is the way God reveals God's Self; Jesus Christ is he whom God reveals; and it is in the Spirit's witness to this Christ that there is God's Self revealedness. It is little wonder, then, that *CD*, II.1 reflects carefully on the being of God as act, as *act in and as Jesus Christ*. Jesus Christ is the way God is towards us, and God's ways are always in and through this One.

It was in defining and applying such a theological hermeneutic that Barth had come to be engaged from the mid 1920s.<sup>20</sup> This learning process culminates in his discussions of Jesus Christ as 'Electing God' and 'Elect Man' in *CD* II.2. Jesus Christ is the creative, elective agency of God, and himself the One acted through and on. Not only, then, is there no absconded God hiding in the world's unseen hindparts or even shadows, but there can be no human abstracted or absconded from its *christic* being-in-covenantal-performance. In relation more specifically to the matter at hand, one can confidently maintain that Barth was learning to ask the question 'for what may we hope?' christologically. Or, better, he was coming to ask "for whom may we hope?," and was therefore seeking to *ground* and regulate the talk of hope which is proper to Christians in Jesus Christ. Consequently, it would be a *grammatical mistake* for Christian

<sup>20</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

accounts of hope to entertain or perform anything that would abstract discourse of hope from talk of the eschatological significance of Christology. This performance would constitute a failure to perceive the Trinitarian shape of Christian talk of hope that is learned and given in and through Jesus Christ.

How does Barth construe this sense of hope's christic generation and its consequent shape? Eschatology, he had discovered, is about Jesus Christ in his threefold *parousia* ("effective presence," CD, IV.3.1, 293f.) of resurrected life, pneumatological presence (the Spirit, here, is not a compensation for an essentially *absent* Christ, but the very making present of the ascended Christ), and consummating coming, and therefore the hope that takes its rise from this perspective is that which hopes in (i.e., from his resurrection) and for his coming. That is why he emphasises that "Jesus Christ is our hope".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed*, trans. James Strathern McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 120. As will be seen later, in this way, Barth even suggests, largely in a way unlike Rahner's subjectivity of hope, that there is a real sense in which *we* are not the proper subjects of hope at all – God in Christ is, the One who calls us to faith, hope and love precisely because these are the way of *his* life as *the human* for our humanisation, and therefore *in himself* the eschatological dynamic of the very notion of the human itself. Thus Barth's eschatology does not merely demand a subtle modification in the name given to hope's *objectivity*, but in fact subverts the objectivity by demanding a refiguring of its very *subject-ivity* as well. As Barth so often reminds concerning the objectivity of God in revelation, God never becomes an Object without remaining Subject. Barth's hope, then, is not an inversion of Neo-Protestant subjectivity through the process of theological objectification, but is precisely a relocation of the grammar of hope itself by radicalising hope's subjectivity.

Barth's eschato-logic spins on what may be called his "covenantal sensibility." In his obedient life and death, Jesus fulfilled that which humanity had not done – he had lived in the covenant fellowship ("you will be my people") with the electing God ("I will be your God"). As the true human being, indeed the prototypical human being, Christ is the eschatological One who is raised to eschatological/new life. It is from this "basis" that Christian faith, love and hope spring, and take shape. Hope, then, looks back to what he did for us. Hence in a pregnant passage Barth argues that hope's

final and decisive basis lies in the fact that the prophetic action of Jesus Christ, and therefore the revelation of the name of God already hallowed, the kingdom of God come and the will of God done in Him, and therefore the revelation of the man already justified and sanctified in Him, while it is complete in itself, is only moving towards its fulfillment, i.e., not to an amplification or transcending of its content or declaration, which is neither necessary nor possible, but to a supremely radical alteration and extension of the mode and manner and form of its occurrence. [CD, IV.3.2, 903].

### **It is Not Yet Time**

These statements to the keenly trained eye of the Barth-reader, of course, raise a certain puzzle. If everything is finished then has not Barth prematurely foreclosed the future, and undermined time after Jesus' resurrection ('our time')? Is this not what he means when he speaks of the consummating coming of Jesus as the "unveiling"/"revelation" of that which has been accomplished and is true, and referring



to sin and evil by the paradoxical terms “impossible possibility” and the “unreal reality”?<sup>22</sup>

In using eschatological language of *parousia*, or “effective presence,” to describe Christ’s resurrected being, however, Barth is not guilty of positing a triumphalism that excludes Christ’s whole incarnate existence and crucifixion from a consideration of hope, as John S. Reist complains.<sup>23</sup> It is the resurrection that is the manifestation of Christ’s glory, the unveiling only *anticipated* in, and *veiled* by, his ministry.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, in some sense, the resurrection is the culmination of Christ’s ministry, since it is the obedient One’s being raised to *new life*, and the Father’s vindication of his Son’s performance of the human.<sup>25</sup>

Christ’s Prophetic work is revelation’s disclosure of this reconciliatory completion (*Vollendung*), the unveiling (*Enthüllung*) of that which is an objectively once-for-all fact in Christ, and which therefore needs no supplementation or amplification. But does the question arise that this leads to a suppression of eschatological novelty in

<sup>22</sup> For the details of the charge, and a possible response from Barth’s *oeuvre* I would refer the reader to John C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy* (Aldershot, et al.: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> John S. Reist, ‘Commencement, Continuation, Consummation: Karl Barth’s Theology of Hope’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987), 195-214 (210f.).

<sup>24</sup> Christ’s resurrection is his “self-revelation”, the retrospective manifestation of that incarnate life’s significance [e.g., *CD*, IV.1, 301; IV.3.2, 613].

<sup>25</sup> On saying this, however, although Barth does mention the dark side of the cross his stress is on its place in his “Jesus is Victor” motif. Is this an example of a suppressing and flattening of narrative

our future, as Philip Rosato complains, so that our future will be a mere recognition of a past event?<sup>26</sup>

It is noticeable from the passage cited from *CD*, IV.3.2, 903, though, that Barth clearly recognises that that which is “complete in itself” (completed by Christ in his Person) is “only moving towards its fulfilment” (fulfilment for us, our “supremely radical alteration” in Christ). In contrast to Jürgen Moltmann’s attempt to liken them, it is just not possible to easily place Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in the same theological container – Barth evades this capture by resisting the full presencing of the eschatological. Bultmann’s attempt to reread eschatology in the name of his own programme of de-objectifying that which theology speaks of in this eschatological dimension provokes a sense of the compression of eschatological time into the presence of the eternal Moment. Importantly, in contrast, Barth’s move against *eschata-logical* objectivisation is not in the name of the existential subject encountered with de-temporalising immediacy. This “time” of eschatological provisionality, the “not yet” in us that moves from the “already” in Christ, is what characterises Barth’s discourse on the “Prophetic work” of Christ in *CD* IV.3, and that is, of course, a part-volume that

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detail detected by Eugene F. Rogers in Barth’s treatments of Jews and gender? [‘Supplementing Barth on Jews and Gender: Identifying God by Anagogy and the Spirit’, *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), 43-81].

belongs to a larger implicit (but nonetheless real) dispute precisely with Bultmann. For Barth, it is in this “time” that hope is generated. It is, then, shaped by the resurrection event, being sustained by his pneumatological contemporaneity, and being moved toward Christ’s consummating coming. Consequently, despite the continued presence of sin and suffering which still have to be driven from the field, hope receives a confidence that is appropriate to the belief that sin will be defeated by the risen Christ. Hope is the hope for a Future analogous to, albeit with a universal referent, Christ’s having come [CD IV.3.2, 642]. There is no way of escaping the judgment that this is the hope for the “*still awaited* redemption of the world reconciled in Him.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, as with his account of faith, Barth’s discussions of hope delineate precisely the christological grounding that gives it its particular shape. This is why CD IV.3 §73 investigates ‘hope’ as the product of the impact of Christ’s prophetic work – that work whereby he demonstrates himself and overcomes the world’s darkness in his resurrection power. Hope arises and has its “final and decisive basis,” Barth suggestively contends, in Christ’s having begun but not yet having fulfilled his

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<sup>26</sup> Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981). See McDowell, 2000, ch. 2.

<sup>27</sup> CD, IV.3.1, 343, my emphasis.

prophetic work, even though his work is complete in itself.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, this account stands in parallel with Barth's discussion of faith as a sure and confident knowledge of God's being for us in Christ, which is why his reflections on hope are placed within the larger architectonic of Christ's ongoing Prophetic ministry – it thematically follows IV.1's movement of divine *exitus* (the way of the Son of God into the far country, Barth's analogy with the Prodigal Son parable), and IV.2's corresponding *reditus* movement (the homecoming of the Son of Man).

However, this suggestion of the 'not-yet-fulfilled' nature of the *eschaton* can also be misleading. Certainly hope exists only in a time of incompleteness and provisionality, as, so to speak, the *external basis* of its existence.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless it is vital that the emphasis falls on the claim that Christian hope takes its rise from, or has its *internal basis* in, Christ's *completed* work (albeit, paradoxically, an incomplete-completed work). In other words, IV.3's thematics, developed from II.2's eschatologically significant theme of Jesus Christ as Electing God and Elect Man, can only be theologically (and chronologically) consequent to the already (*schon*) completed eschatological recreation of humanity in Christ. In him as the eschatological Man the covenant has been fulfilled.

<sup>28</sup> CD, IV.3.2, 903.

<sup>29</sup> The provisionality of 'our' time is indicated by two things: the fact that the experience of the presence of Jesus Christ has much more fulfillment to come [see CD, IV.3.1, 324, 327]; and the fact that sin, suffering, and evil continue to be in conflict with the Prophet [see CD, IV.3.1, 168, 261].

He is the Second Adam who achieves in his own person the world's great ultimate transformation, or "turn".<sup>30</sup>

It is in this context that Barth qualifies language about an "open future," when referring to the Absolute Future. This is noticeably a highly significant move for theologically conceiving hope. Much talk of hope in general terms leans heavily on the kind of conceptual structure that has learned much from the likes of Immanuel Kant.<sup>31</sup> However, a Kantian location of hope in a secular or general ethics, an ethics learned apart from (even as it is secured by) the *noumena*, creates a situation in which a now purely practical hope can lean towards vague (because unthematisable) and arbitrary (because projection of one's own present) leaps into one's future.<sup>32</sup> For Barth, in

<sup>30</sup> Barth, 1949, 122. This Future, determined for the world in and with its reconciliation, has become its true and concrete present [CD, IV.3.1, 315]. Barth explicated this understanding of election after his hearing of Pierre Maury's 1936 lecture on election's christological grounding [see McDowell, 2000, ch. 5].

<sup>31</sup> An observation made by Stanley Hauerwas makes a point appropriate for this context: "Protestant theologians, no longer sure of the metaphysical status of Christian claims, sought to secure the ongoing meaningfulness of Christian convictions by anchoring them in anthropological generalizations and/or turning them into ethics. No longer convinced that Jesus is the resurrected Messiah, his significance is now said to be found in his proclamation of the Kingdom of God [or, one could add, for many post-enlightenment thinkers, in his declaration of the immortality of the soul]. ... Theology, at least Protestant theology, became ethics, but the ethics it became was distinctively Kant's ethics dressed in religious language." [*Sanctify Them in Truth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 30].

<sup>32</sup> Rahner sounds too close to such a perspective when he argues that "Hope, then, is an act in which we base ourselves in the concrete upon that which cannot be pointed to in any adequate sense at the theoretical level, that which ultimately speaking is absolutely beyond our control." [*Theological Investigations*, volume 10, 254] He uncritically adopts the theory = control framework that Barth's *knowing* of the Future disrupts, and disrupts precisely because what is known is the unsystematisably free God in Christ. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that Rahner does not intend to make the Future unknowable

contrast, the Future is not unknowable because it is “open,” if by “open” is meant something *neutral* or indeterminate, an empty and neutral temporal nothingness waiting to be filled by humanly creative acts. In contrast to this account, he speaks of the “most striking determination of time” in Christ [CD, IV.3.2, 903]. However, in saying that the Future is “filled” one must be careful to note that Barth is not so much making an epistemological point – that our Future’s *shape and details* remain unknown, but nonetheless already determined. Certainly there is and has to be room for a fundamentally nascent hope (it is for this reason that Barth rejects universal salvation as a doctrine) – can *hope* be anything other? But his point is more obviously ontological, or to be more precise christo-ontological – while Jesus Christ is our Future and it is *he* who has already been raised *pro nobis*, the eschatological fulfilment of that raising *in nobis* yet remains *our future*. This is a christologically determined distinction that Barth feels is insufficiently worked through in Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*.<sup>33</sup> He worries that Moltmann has baptised the “*principle of hope of Mr. Bloch*”,<sup>34</sup> and has thereby forgotten

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in any simple sense – God is the Absolute Future, and God’s unknowability is *rich and excessive mysteriousness* rather than an unresolved or even unresolvable *puzzle*.

<sup>33</sup> In 1964 Barth wrote to Moltmann accusing him of unilaterally subsuming “all theology in eschatology” [*Karl Barth: Letters, 1961-1968*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 175].” An earlier letter to Richard Karwehl expresses that the problem lies in Moltmann’s “new systematizing” with his abstract and philosophically developed eschatological principle [174]. This, Barth declares to Moltmann, is what constitutes “the baptized *principle of hope of Mr. [Ernst] Bloch*” [175].

<sup>34</sup> Barth, 1981, 175.

that the eschatological Future is christologically content-full, even if its precise details (the consummation of Christ's prophetic work *in nobis*) as yet transcend our grasp and experience.<sup>35</sup> It is for that reason too that Barth sets the triumph of the *person* of Jesus against Berkouwer's depiction of the triumph of the *principle* of grace.

Moreover, it is precisely such an evaluation of the eschatological significance of the prophetic work of Jesus Christ that suggests that Rosato's reading of the character of Barth's eschatological noetic, and therein the nature of eschatological provisionality, is predicated on a significant misunderstanding. "Noetic" themes of revelation and knowledge cannot be read in *exclusively* (or even primarily) propositional and cognitive terms, either as "intellectualist" acquisition of neutral or academic information expressible in statements, systems, and principles; or as passive spectatorial

<sup>35</sup> Barth's critique of Moltmann's hope as sub-Christian should be pressed even further. Certainly Moltmann's talk of an 'open future' needs to be carefully handled. He does, after all, speak of the 'horizon' in ways that resist pressures against *simple closures* of the future, and thus it is a boundary that is meaning-forming and agency-directing – unless, of course, that horizon remains merely formal and therefore without discernable content. However, it is worth asking whether by conceiving the End beyond what Christians can say about the Future as God in Christ for and in us, Moltmann's horizon already slipping from its content? Also, Moltmann imagines that hope is something primarily that *we do*, that *we* are the subjects of hope. In other words, we are the subjects who are pressed on towards the object of the End. Moltmann's hope, then, has distinct difficulties in accounting for *eschatos-logia*. Furthermore, Moltmann's hope seems to be the produce of a certain lack: for example, in *The Theology of Hope* the linearity of God's being as future creates certain problems for articulating sufficiently God's being to and for the creature's present and past; in *The Crucified God* the cross itself comes to be given the theological qualities that would be more appropriate of the resurrection as the site of hope's birth; and in *God in Creation* the spatial metaphor of *zimzung* suggests that God empties a space of himself in order to give space for creation (thus creation lives in a *vacated* space). If the 'lack' of God in the space of creation is pressed, then what happens to the distinction and integrity of creaturely space when God eschatologically comes to indwell his creation?

contemplation. Rather, Barth explicates them primarily through existentially and ethically significant themes of confrontation, encounter, and approach; “alteration” and renewal of life, “transformation” and “conversion”.<sup>36</sup> George Hunsinger, therefore, speaks of Barth’s “personalist conception of truth” in which knowledge is a self-involving event, comprising God and human being in personal encounter.<sup>37</sup> Trinitarianly Barth even claims that “salvation” refers not merely to something christologically completed, but also to something contemporaneously realised in the Spirit and which “actually” occurs in the event of Christian knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Christ’s Future revelation will be an ontically causative as well as a cognitive event.

It is this theological consciousness of the world’s eschatological becoming that generates Christian hope and entails that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, sin retains a

<sup>36</sup> *CD*, IV.3.2, 510; IV.3.1, 299, 444. “God acts on the whole man”.

<sup>37</sup> George Hunsinger, ‘Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993), 41-56 (44). Cf. *CD*, IV.3.1, 183. In this event “reconciliation overcomes and destroys man’s distance from” God [*CD*, IV.3.1, 183]. The more-than-cognitive nature of the Christian’s liberation is accentuated through seven points. It is: a pulling out of solitariness into fellowship, with God and fellow-humanity [*CD*, IV.3.2, 664]; a “deliverance from the ocean of apparently unlimited possibilities by transference to the rock of the one necessity which as such is his only possibility” [*CD*, IV.3.2, 665f.]; a movement out of the realm of things into that of the human [*CD*, IV.3.2, 666f.]; a shift from desiring and demanding to receiving [*CD*, IV.3.2, 667ff.]; a deliverance from indecision and a setting in action [*CD*, IV.3.2, 669]; a replacing of the moral rule by forgiveness and gratitude [*CD*, IV.3.2, 670f.]; a release from anxiety to prayer [*CD*, IV.3.2, 671f.].

<sup>38</sup> *CD*, IV.3.1, 218. In the *Göttingen Dogmatics* Barth argues that the doctrine of revelation is not complete if faith and obedience are absent [Barth, 1990, 191]. Thus the pneumatological work is no an addendum to Christ’s completed work, but “is an integral element in the whole occurrence.” [*CD*, IV.3.1, 358] This, of course, itself operates from a soteriologically particularist basis – i.e., that Jesus is the One who has been redeemed *pro nobis*, but whose fruits are not yet *in nobis*.



threatening place, perhaps even a tragic one.<sup>39</sup> The finality hell cannot be ruled out as a possibility for others in the response to the Christ of, in Hans Urs von Balthasar's language, Holy Saturday. While sin and hell are horrific absurdities, as Barth's negative and paradoxical terms for evil (for example *das nichtige*, and "impossible possibility") suggest, they are nonetheless catastrophic by their surd-like possibility. But, less finally, there is a real sense of the fragility of hope in Barth – hope is that which Christ has and does *pro nobis*, in and after which we become hoppers in Christ's way with us.<sup>40</sup> Barth's radical hope, then, subverts and reorders even Christians' hopes. As William Stacy Johnson notes, echoing a famous comment made by Barth in his 'farewell' to Religious Socialism in his Tambach lecture of 1919, there are no Christians as such (one should add except Jesus Christ) but only the eternal opportunity of becoming Christians.<sup>41</sup> Barth in the early 1920s certainly does not sustain the question of who it is who can and does have hope, as such, and therefore he does tend to problematically underplay the potential for witnessing to something truly liberating. Later, however, from his

<sup>39</sup> The tragic nature of hope is discussed more fully in John C. McDowell, "'Mend Your Speech a Little": Reading Karl Barth's *Das Nichtige* Through Donald MacKinnon's Tragic Vision', in Mike Highton and John C. McDowell (eds.), *Conversing With Barth* (Aldershot, et al: Ashgate, 2004), 142-172; and McDowell, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Because of this, hope may well not be necessarily counterfactual, not merely *against* the stream, but also be complex enough to be open to alliances, suggestive of 'secular' parables [Barth's is not a revolutionary theology, merely, but also a reformist one].

<sup>41</sup> William Stacey Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977), 36.

understanding of the vicariousness of the humanity of Jesus Christ, there is a sense that what we do is something less than have “hope” – instead what we perform is something darker, more ambiguous and distorted, and therefore more terrifying for being that. What James Torrance argues with reference to the priesthood of Jesus is true here of Barth: “The Kingdom of God as God’s will for man has been realized for us intensively in the humanity of Jesus, and what has been realized intensively for us *in Christ* must be worked out extensively *in us* in the world, by the Holy Spirit, through the mission of the Church.”<sup>42</sup> Also, just to reiterate an important point made earlier, despite having a hope for the universal range of God’s saving grace that includes a rather tortuous rereading of texts on Judas, Barth does insist on a reticence over depicting the details of the shape of the Future.<sup>43</sup> Because Jesus Christ is what Christians mean when they talk of the End their lives are hidden with Christ in God. The shape of the End *in us* is not directly perceivable, then, but its impact is felt contemporaneously as we learn to live in hopeful anticipation of the truth of that End in us, while yet enduring our lives *under the conditions of the shadow of the Omega who bears the scars of his*

<sup>42</sup> J.B. Torrance, ‘The Priesthood of Jesus: A Study in the Doctrine of Atonement’, in T.H.L. Parker (ed.), *Essays in Christology for Karl Barth* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 155-173 (165).

<sup>43</sup> This is another theme that suggests that Barth’s hope is not wholly averse to the tragic [see McDowell, 2004].

*execution through the tragic texture of living in a complex world pervaded and distorted in its very fabric by sin.*

Nevertheless, these dark themes can never be allowed to order the substance Christian talk of hope. This mood differs markedly, of course, from the *krisis* of the 1922 edition of *Der Römerbrief* with its overwhelmingly explosive presence of the Wholly Other, a presence disruptive of the life of theology, religion, and church (also culture and politics). What Barth comes to admit is that God's No is the negative side or alien work of the Yes of God's grace to the world itself. How far this constitutes a shift in the substance of Barth's theology is presently being debated by Barth scholars, but what is certain is that the *mood* of his theology through the mid to late 1920s dramatically shifts. By *CD*, IV.3 Barth's hope explicitly denies the possibility of being theologically generated from a perceived lack, or a perception of the absence of grace. This markedly distinguishes Barth's account from those anxiety-generated accounts of hope made by, among others, Albert Schweitzer, and from those who variously make the odd claim that hope springs *from* situations of despair and suffering.<sup>44</sup> Barth's hope has an

<sup>44</sup> It should be asked, though, whether the oppressed really hope *because* they are suffering, or does suffering have the ability to crush hope in a way that leaves George Steiner observing, in post-Auschwitz mood, that hope now lies in ash? Unless one has *reason to hope* is not all hope *born from suffering* a short-term illusion? Does despair produce hope or wishes for the future? The distinction is important since Barth's account of hope is objectively grounded (because it is christological) and therefore consequently generates the hopeful subject, the one who now does not have any mere hope or desire but whose very hopes and desires are being redeemed, transforming hope and desire *for the other* to be a *non-*

altogether different feel – it has to do primarily with the *futurity of Jesus Christ*; the fulfilment of Jesus Christ as the One *in us*; the promise of an *even more to come*, which is presently experienced under the conditions of the painful “not yet”; and the return (second form of the *parousia*) of Christ in the Spirit to be with us.<sup>45</sup> Hope springs from the fullness of God in Christ *pro nobis* and for the world. It is taken up into the prophetic way of this Christ with us under these conditions of the dark night of the cross, and that way is what then prevents the End from folding in on us timelessly and being

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*self-possessing desire for the other's good*. Paul Fiddes makes a strange claim: “the shock of the nothingness of death will alert us to God who is our final concern, and it is openness to the God of promise that will bring an integration to a broken existence.” [*The Promised End: Eschatology and Theology in Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000), 12] This seems to imagine death to be an existential ‘point of contact’ for the production of Christian hope. Yet, it must be asked at the very least, whether being-towards-death has the capacity to be this, or whether it is itself the prime site for the construction of idols, idols who will deal with (and provide some sort of comfort before) the prospect of death.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson's study of Barth rightly reminds that Barth's move from *Der Römerbrief* to the *Church Dogmatics* is not a move from a theological witness to the eschatologically unpossessable to a stabilised theology of *presence*. He admits that “Upon first encountering Barth's magisterial *Church Dogmatics*, the audible strain is, of course, the sonorous harmony of his so-called ‘christocentrism.’” [1] Yet the “first” here is suggestive, and this is where Johnson's reflections are important – “there is also a countermelody at work, a tone more sober and restrained, a tone that stands in equi-primordial balance to the other.” I am unsure as to the propriety of a see-saw image for musical tonality, or for theology either – the negative way (speaking of God negatively, about what God is not), for example, is better understood as a *constant* unsettling of and corrective to the mood of the positive way (speaking of God positively) and not as a way of enabling the discovery of some stable and speakable balance, or even middle. Nevertheless, Johnson is insightfully making a vital point about Barth – there is much within Barth's writings that suggests that he continues to be aware of the *theological* problems with theo-logy or God-talk. Hence Johnson's delineation of the sense in which Barth's theology begins with the self-giveness of revelation, while this giveness always remains a to-be-given, is fruitful. There is always a *more*, an excess that evades transcription into a theological system, a ‘not-yet’ at the heart of the ‘already’ which stands contrary to all thoughts that God's giveness is securely given to thought or language. This is “a built-in corrective” to the dangers of ideology and idolatry. Nevertheless, there is something odd here in a study

domesticated into something harmless and possessable (like, for instance, blue-printable knowledge of the world's future).<sup>46</sup> It is this way that demands that the first and final thing that can be said about the human is not sin and death but grace and life, not a No but a Yes. The human cannot be read ontologically in dark and despairing terms, and consequently the Christian is unable to imagine a human for whom hope should be denied. That denial would function by effectively conditioning the range of God's grace and thereby set the terms for its scope.<sup>47</sup> It is the way of hope in Christ, then, which drives us as engraced creatures on to become *in nobis* what we are in him who is *pro nobis* as our very Beginning and End. And, further, it is this way which entails that the theological grammar regulating Barth's hope-talk requires a vocabulary of attention: that is, attention to the Other (in fact, *all others*).

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that, while importantly providing an account of the more "sober" mood in Barth underplayed by most commentators, understates the mood of theology's christocentric 'finality'.

<sup>46</sup> Fiddes makes a useful point when arguing that "The picture of God is not one who has a blueprint for the future, but one whose promises are elastic enough to be adopted. In making promise rather than prediction, God thus leaves room for the new and yet unknown, but we must ask whether this space *only* comes from the possibilities of God's own creativity. To take the love of God seriously implies that God allows those who loved to make a contribution to the mutual relationship, and so to share in his creative project. ... [N]ew possibilities emerge from the *interaction between creator and the created*." [170]. However, this would be maintained on a different basis for Barth. While for Fiddes this works because "It is not only the creatures who wait for the end, but God", for Barth that *yet to be realised is the dynamic way of the already realised* humanity in Christ [171].

<sup>47</sup> In contrast, apocalyptic all too readily slips into provoking talk of God's *No* to his own creation, especially the bodliness of that creation – this can, in practice as well as in theory, be destructive of others.

### **With the World: Hope's Strange Kind of Waiting**

As one would expect from such a radically christocentric theology, Jesus Christ is the world's universal and Absolute Future. He is the One of whom biblical images of eternal life, Kingdom of God, etc. refer. Any hope, then, which is conceived as having to do with confidently blue-printable assertions about the shape of future history is an illegitimate Christian "futurology" that lives in a serious abstraction from the non-possessable One who is always eventful. He is always excessive, the surplus that is never simply a given, and consequently remains on his way *with* us and *to* us.<sup>48</sup> Barth's perspective emphasises that *Jesus Christ is not an aspect of eschatology*. Instead, because Jesus Christ is the final form of God's being for the world, and indeed of creatureliness or creatures' being for God, *Christology is a theological conception that does necessary eschatological work*.<sup>49</sup> Barth consequently rejects any futurities and versions of hope that betray this "grounding" by being self-grounded and self-projected. These "general" hopes are illusory if they are not *Christianly* learned and governed. With a quiet nod towards several familiar and important critiques of Christian hope Barth contends that Christians do not have *an illusory hope* for the fulfilment of their desires and needs, or even for the divine blessing on their activities as such. Instead hope, properly

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., *CD*, IV.3.1, 221ff., 223f.

christologically construed of course, disrupts precisely any thoughts of the continuity of life through death as presented by doctrines of the immortality of the soul, or the belief that creaturely agency “must [or even can] laboriously build the road to” the Future.<sup>50</sup> These various eschatologies are merely sanitised, and therefore ultimately idolatrous, versions of the radically iconoclastic eschatological critique of human drives for power, motivations and desires provided by a properly configured hope in Christ as the coming One. For Barth, immortality-talk is only properly discourse concerning God as the Immortal One who confers his life through Christ’s resurrection. In other words, “immortality-talk” is not for non-mortal modes of seeing creaturely life in God. “Work-talk” is similarly proper only when it conceives of human agency under the form of *responsiveness* to the primordially of grace.

It is precisely hope that prevents any particular project of the human from ending. That is not merely, though, because of the distortions involved in any projection of a particular stretch of the imagination of the human, but also because the human is itself a notion which is christologically filled in an openly inclusive way that demands the dynamic imagining of movements of excessiveness – the excessiveness of the person

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<sup>49</sup> Seen in this light, then, claims of “eschatology as the basic mood of theology” are troubling [Fiddes, 6].

<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949).

of Christ in, for and with us. It is only the life of God in Christ that *finally* secures the possibility of a human community that is expansively more than tribal. In other words, eschatology slips from its theological grammar when it becomes the final validation of the right to speak by the secured new community or believer, the right to exert oneself (divinely legitimated, of course). This slippage reconfigures hope as a sign of the dangers of religious self-enclosure and claims to final legitimacy, and of all and every domestication of the history of the coming of God to God's world into the community or believer's system of control. Christianity's *comprehensive telling of the story of Jesus, with at best its frequent failure to resist the terror of anti-Semitism, highlights the ambiguous and provisional nature of Christianity's being-in-the-world*, and so seeks to push the reality of an outlook on the End beyond the confines of futural blindness.<sup>51</sup> Christian eschatology all too easily misplaces its own attention to the ways it learns its theology, to the terms in which it itself can disrupt and resist the ever fresh and unpossessable coming of God to its life, and the pressure of God to *faithful and honest* encoding and transmission of its witness through time.

<sup>51</sup> Rowan Williams: "Christ may indeed speak for the authentic Christian vocation of God's people, to show the pressure of God's reality in the shape of a corporate human life of justice and hopefulness; but the Jewish people, as victims of Christian and post-Christian ideological closure, speak for Christ to Christians in the name of God who is not a Christian, reminding Christians of their 'Jewish' vocation to embody that community of Justice between human beings that is God's purpose." [*On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 102]



Pushing this all further, one could claim that one of the ways Barth makes this move is by unpacking eschatology in a way that resists hope's reduction to the domesticating subjectivities of "modern" eschatologies – the *subject* who has confidence in the immortality of her *soul*; the *subject* of apocalyptic knowledge who has confidence in the future occurrence of that which *she* knows, and so on. Bultmann's detemporalised eschatology likewise offers a *subject naked and alone* before the *krisis* brought by the kerygma. His offering fails to adequately account for the radicality of hope since it domesticates it by reducing it to this stabilised subjectivity. True, the subject is set against herself by the *krisis*, and therefore there is a destabilising moment – it is that which enables Bultmann's theology to be less likely to fall prone to the temptations of immanentist political ideologies (hence his opposition to WWI and later to Nazism). Nevertheless, the subject remains at the centre of his deliberations, losing all sense of time and even of the human others.<sup>52</sup> Such an impoverished view of time, then, goes hand in hand with an impoverished view of the subject as one whose encounters are internalised even as they are not objectivised. The losses in his "eschatology" (and

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, has he likewise difficulty in accounting adequately for the divine Other? Bultmann is more adept at locating the theological significance of the Wholly Other than is, for instance, Kant, for instance, for whom 'God' is little more than an ethically pragmatic postulate. But the Wholly Other in Bultmann remains quality-less, which keeps him quite close in the end to Kant, and thus is always a theological *assertion* in danger of sliding into an other-reductive subjectivism.

indeed both of the modern eschatologies mentioned a little earlier), if it can even continue to be called "eschatology" at all, are ethically highly significant.

Barth's dogmatics displaces human self-consciousness as the determinative notion for talk of human hope independent of, or developed prior to, the humanity of God. By so doing not merely does he relegitimate the presumption that there can be no "hope" separate from theology, but also reconceives what it is appropriate for Christians to confess about hope, indeed the ethics of hope. This reconception moves suggestively beyond accounts of hope that passify the subject/hoper by reducing her to a spectator (of God's apocalyptic acts, of God's *krisis* of intensification of immediacy, or of the "natural" movement of the soul towards its endless life after death). Theologising about hope through Barth, instead, is all the more demanding because it insists that our very selves be made new, and that in this being made new we learn to attend to the continued presence of the old and therefore be made aware of the pressures of ideologies on honest discourse about God in Christ our End.

More must then be said about the time that hopes have. But, it would seem according to several readings of his work that Barth is a bad candidate for making this ethically significant move. If the hope that is appropriate to Christians necessitates the asking of the christological question "for whom may we hope?" then has not Barth, contrary to his intentions, swallowed up the otherness of the world in Jesus Christ? Has

he not exhausted the “eschatology into the “eternal moment” [something that] does not ... either take history seriously or satisfy the demands of justice for the wrongs of historical actions to be righted”?<sup>53</sup> This is a complex series of probings since it demands multidimensional examination, and it largely thematically harks back to the charges that Barth has no time for any futurity of the eschatological. However, it is suggestive that with one such as Richard Roberts, while the issue appears to concern the time that is denied the world, the placing a little pressure on his account of Barth reveals that his own dissatisfaction lies with theologies that do not allow for the *independence* of the many from the One.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Rosato, as has already been observed, critiques Barth’s *noetic* account of the future because he feels that it *denies contingency*. Yet Rosato’s own particular positive proposals display a desire to push in directions that Barth could not have moved – to a natural theology. Whatever the problems with their own concrete proposals, both Roberts and Rosato here can at least be seen as importantly asking questions of Barth concerning the “publicness” of his Christian hope. What is it that gives hope is certainty, its grounding? How can Christian hope be sustained before other hopes? What reasons do we have for hoping Christianly?

<sup>53</sup> Fiddes, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Richard H. Roberts, *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991). For a theological assessment of Roberts’ complex charge see McDowell, 2000, ch. 2.

These demand complex responses that must remain undeveloped for now, particularly in delineating the *modus operandi* of Barth's christological vicariousness. What can be said, nonetheless, is that, as has been suggested earlier, it is essential to Barth's account of hope that the Future comes to our present and casts its shadow over all our contemporary contexts (Wolfhart Pannenberg's terms). This is so in the sense that it is he who is our End, he who presents God's Self to us and whose way will manifest the fullness of our End in him, is our End not only *for and with us* but, significantly, also *not without us*. It is precisely this *practice of hope* that is the way the "publicness" of hope in Barth demands to be understood. The public nature of hope is not a feature of its demonstrability before the bar of a public reason, but the participation in the way of God in the prophetic work of Christ with us. It is the being taken into the dynamic of the eschatological engagement of God's Prophet with that which is blessed with the dignifying name of "creature". This One's face, to use the vibrant image that David Ford develops from Emmanuel Levinas, directs our gaze to the non-domesticatable faces of all those for whom he self-effacingly hopes.<sup>55</sup> There is a transcendence involved in hope-talk here. But one needs to carefully note where the point of transcendence is to be directed from and to. Hope, one can suggest, can only be a *self-transcendence* if that entails transcending the *sinful self*, the egocentric and/or

<sup>55</sup> David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

multiply alienated self, since the christic self as one's *true self generated in and for hope* is precisely set as hope in active responsibility for the world which God remains faithful to and calls his own.

It was precisely the distraction that Christian hope played in rendering hope somewhat passive for spectators of the apocalyptic *spectacular* that was the problem identified by Marx, of course. And it is worth mentioning Marx at this point since Barth, when pastor in Safenwil (1911-1921), became actively involved in the practical social and political affairs of his parish and joined the Social Democratic Party in 1915. Barth the "red" pastor crusading for justice was to "mature" into the theologian of freedom. He would witness to the divine freedom and the strange configuration of the human and what constitutes its flourishing in Christ in ways that demand that the witness be mirrored in social, political, and personal affairs. As a consequence of his engagements during these years, and the perspective that he was developing through encounter particularly with the Pauline literature, Barth learned that Christian hope and the eschatological soil from which it grows cannot be that which Marx and others claimed it to be: a shying away from the practical processes of engaging with injustices in the world.<sup>56</sup> Christian hope can only be an *ex-spectation*, or a move out of eschatologies of

<sup>56</sup> That Barth learns *theologically* from socialism further significantly suggests that there cannot be a pure and stable Christian subject whose theology is a pure given. Consequently, it is very disturbing to

the gaze, and towards the complex and potentially painful motions of constant *travaile* (work).<sup>57</sup> Any theology that demands anything less than an engagement of the hopeful imagination for the entire range of God's expansive grace for all the works of his hands must, therefore, be an abstraction from the divine faithfulness to creatureliness in the resurrection of the incarnate One. That entails that hope cannot be an easily digested opiate for the self, but instead always consists in a being-given-responsibility for *all* that which God has blessed through Christ. Consequently, reflection on hope belongs to

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hear a comment criticising Tim Gorrings's contextual reading of Barth to the effect that "As much as Barth read the Bible with his newspaper in hand, surely he intended the Bible to be the only source of revelation to mould his theology and proclamation to church and society. The assumption that context significantly affected Barth's construction might thus seem to contradict Barth's own stated intentions, particularly his famous opposition to natural theology." [Randall E. Otto, 'Review of Timothy Gorrings's *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*', *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7.2 (2000), 189-191 (190)] This is a bad reading of Barth on several levels, not insignificantly on the fact that Barth allows for God not to be left without witness in the non-human creation (in non-Christian philosophies, the music of Mozart, and so on). Otto has here put his finger on a significant problem for thinkers who claim simple starting-points such as scripture alone, reason alone, etc., when blindly unaware of the various presuppositions (cultural, philosophical, ethical) that are being brought to bare on their scriptural hermeneutics and subsequent theological formulations. It is not clear, however, that Barth was as guilty of this simple theological foundationalism as Otto implies. While certainly wanting to understand the message of the scriptures better, he was aware that God's voice may potentially be heard elsewhere ("through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog" [CD, I.1, 60f.]) in a way that shines a new light back upon the scriptures. The *Church Dogmatics*, for example, is replete with instances of Barth's use of non-theological elements as means of better appropriating what he considered to be theologically legitimate. Barth's claim of the movement of theology into politics is a theological one declaring the *ordo essendi*, and is not, then, so much the noetic one (*ordo cogniscendi*).

<sup>57</sup> Perhaps one could recognise in many apocalyptically conceived *eschatologies of the gaze* the construal in competitive terms of the gaze at the Future-making God and the gaze toward the human. It is this regulating competitiveness that renders the human passive before response-generating agency for, with and on behalf of the world. Barth's theological account of hope instead envisages God not as an *object* of our gaze who can be set in competition with other objects of our gaze, but rather as the very setting of our gaze aright.

considerations of *theological ethics* since it has to do with the End of *creatures* who have their being in the *covenant*.<sup>58</sup> It is, therefore, the public enactment of the making of persons who are on their way with and to the One who also, and primordially, stands behind them as Creator and Reconciler of the world (the *whole* world), and whose divine and human life is that of Self-giving.

Consequently, imagining that eschatology, and the fragile hope (since it is an all-too-human act of response to God's grace in Christ) that it inspires, is a moment of idle curiosity or speculative knowledge, or even the desire for a secure knowledge one's own futurity in God, is an idolatrous abstraction – it moves out of a confession of the God of Jesus Christ. Before Moltmann makes his famous critique of reductions of eschatology to the appendix of dogmatic systems, Barth himself develops a non-escapist, eschatologically contoured ethic in which the hope for Christ's coming, for God's being redemptively all in all in Christ, determines the shape of hope's active expression in "our whole life".<sup>59</sup> Hope is *necessarily* ethical to its core and not merely on its periphery. This is something one is constantly reminded of by Barth's insistence on the inseparable interaction and interrelation of dogmatics and ethics, and by his concept of vocation (or witness) as Christian task. Eschatology, "the rude incursion of God's

<sup>58</sup> Consequently, it has also to resist the nihilistic abyss over the precipice of which playfulness without responsibility hangs perilously.

kingdom" in Christ, throws into sharp relief an "image" (or rather a "Reality") that "apocalyptically" unmask or unveils the present so-called "reality" for what it is: a virtual reality corrupted by sin, and yet the place created, sustained, and redeemed by the effulgent and non-arbitrary love of the Triune God. It is this world whose structures, in the language of Rahner, are being subjected by hope "to constant reappraisal and criticism", but whose eschatological reality will be revealed in the consummation of history.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, then, Christian hope has ethical dimensions that are both socially and individually interrogative/critical and creative/liberating-healing (these are two general moods that are locatable within Barth's ethical scheme which maintains that the form of imaginative proposals for the shape of human activity depends on actual concrete circumstances). One may summarise these as hope's engagement in liberating humanity from all forms of dehumanising bondage, of acting against unjust suffering, and of participating in God's "de-demonising" of the world.<sup>61</sup>

Hope can thus be a charter for self-criticism which continues to be required in order to humble and purify both Christianity's institutional and the believer's own personal pneumatic self-confidence – these are versions of a self-confidence that

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<sup>59</sup> Citation from Barth, 1949, 154.

<sup>60</sup> Citations from Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 10, 258; Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 16.



themselves endanger Christianity's own honest attention to the very questionability and ambiguity of its own systems of meaning and all too prematurely finished grammar, and subsequently its identified programmes for its proclamation. Hope enables the church to live appropriately in constant self-effacing "radical postponement" for the good of itself and the world God has hope for.<sup>62</sup> Hence, once again, one must notice that Barth's hope lives not from a lack. His sense of *postponement* is not that of *endless deferral*. The latter appears more to be an expression of eschatological nothingness, whereas the former is the endless performance of its life in a fullness too rich for any momentary filling, at least this side of the consummation in Christ. Hope does enable the church to live in provisionality without apathy or resignation, and it thereby subverts all false claims to presence and illusory selfhood outwith the Christ who came, comes, and is yet to come again. Hope cannot be afraid of incompleteness for it lives and moves through the polyphonic tones of human performance, shaped and determined by the redemptive life lived *pro nobis*.

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<sup>61</sup> Barth, 1991, 218.

<sup>62</sup> The phrase is taken from John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20.

It is in this way, then, that Barth's is a *practical certainty*.<sup>63</sup> It is one in which one gives oneself to one's Future in God.<sup>64</sup> Therein one is firstly strengthened for one's necessary task, but also, secondly, sobered from the illusion of promoting a false activism and, correspondingly, iconoclastically prevented from aiming either for an achieving of ultimacy by one's agency or for a secular of one's self in God's redemption of the world. One's activities and intramundane hopes are both redirected and reshaped, in all their attendant risks in seeking to witness to the one true place of eschatological healing for a broken world that is elected in Jesus Christ. Given that God has allotted time for Christian existence and mission, hope is active in its tentative and provisional, but nevertheless necessary, movements of social, political, and personal interrogation and transformation.

It is quite clear, therefore, that Barth's account of hope differs markedly from certain late nineteenth century caricatures of hope, in several respects. Firstly, he distinguishes Christian hope from all forms of illusory optimism by placing its content

<sup>63</sup> It is a recognition of this that challenges the deep-seated desire for *securing* hope. Hope is not something that can be secured by the human hoper. To even attempt to do so would be to deny it as *hope*, and instead construe it as the futural mode of *faith made into sight*. It would, if secured, become something other than itself – optimism, and optimisms, of course, are secure in their knowledge of the future precisely because the future is known, displayed to one's present vision. Optimism, in other words, is an acknowledgment that all will be well. Put yet another way, it is an *objectifying* of the future, a making it into an object rather than a remembering its non-objectifiability or uncontrollability as the coming presence of Jesus Christ.

<sup>64</sup> This form of certainty differs in kind from the cognitive forms of scientific or logical certainties.

in the “Real” of Christ’s threefold *parousia*. Secondly, the Future’s universality entails that hope’s object is not a compensatory world for the hoping individual, but for the “the liberation of all men,” and the cosmos.<sup>65</sup> Thirdly, Barth rejects as unsatisfying and illusory the claim that Christians can leave this world behind in a form of pessimistic life-denial, since this would deny hope’s proper and only habitat. Redemption is precisely the end, goal, and fulfilment of *this* world. Fourthly, hope’s public and ethical interrogative and transformative practice can offer no “escape” from the realities of this world, or passively leave its structures untouched by human agency.<sup>66</sup> The centre of Barth’s ethical project, particularly in the late fragments collected as *The Christian Life*, is a delineation of the kinds of human responsibility that *necessarily* follow from, and are shaped by, an understanding of the nature and content of eschatological assertions – or, rather, the christological object of hope functioning as criterion for ethical performance,

<sup>65</sup> CD, IV.3.2, 675. Barth speaks of the “public ministry”, responsibility, and hope for others that Christians have. They are provisional representatives of Christ to the world and vice versa [CD, IV.3.2, 932f.].

<sup>66</sup> John Macken is wrong to suppose that CD, IV.4 exemplifies the emerging affirmation “of human and creaturely reality gradually won ground without contradicting the absolute claim of the divine subject” [*The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics: Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85]. As John Webster’s study indicates, Barth “has kept a firm eye on human persons as agents right from the beginning of his dogmatic argument” [*Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13]. The human decision, in all its located freedom “is the goal of the divine change” [CD, IV.4, 41]. Revelation (by which Barth intends the *matter* and *content* – Christ - rather than the *form* of God’s self-manifestation) summons one to give oneself in return.

the reality mimetically to be performed polyphonically and uncontrollably in and by the creativity of our hopes.

### **Conclusion: Developing Habits of Hoping**

As Barth reflected, asking “for what the Christian may hope for?” is asking the wrong question – this is a question of the *object-ivity* of hope. For him the *proper* question is not of the “for what,” but the “for whom...?,” and this is a shift in the type of question appropriate for a *Christian* to ask that makes all the difference in the world. It comes to ask about a for whom that although it requires a christological answer is a christology that is *inclusive* of the many for whom Jesus Christ hoped rather than *exclusive* of them in some grand, but world-denying, monistic scheme. Hope-talk for Barth is learned by obedience to Jesus Christ. It is appropriately a following-after, a *Nachhoffen* corresponding to the *Nachdenken* of theology done in faith. The way that Barth unpacks that notion demands that Christian hope realise its true subjectivity – the turn to the Subject (Jesus Christ) that is paradoxically also a decentering of the subject (away from ourselves as secure hopers) in the movement of realising subjecthood (that we are called to live hopefully, and this is who we are to become). This, then, closes off the options for Christian hope in any Cartesian securing of the subject with the future as its object (whether an object to be known, or an object to be controlled or created), and

any post-modern loss of hope with the erasing of the subjectivity of the hoper. *That christically reconceived "hope" is not a given but a task*, not so much a choice or expression of personal disposition either but rather something in which we are founded ontologically in Christ. We are, in a real sense, then, bound to hope and this founding subjection to hope is always a demand that we ourselves become ones who hope. We hope because God in Christ hopes for us, no matter what other events or affairs are thrown up for or against our hope. There is a kind of *eschatologia crucis* operative here in Barth which prevents God being read off, for example, what we identify as the *successes* or *patterns* of features off this world or our experiences in their structure, events, and so on. These are too ambiguous; there is too much pressure on the reading and discerning of "signs."<sup>67</sup> And who is the "us" for whom God in Christ has hope? The referent is nothing other than the whole expanse of the works of God's hands. Consequently, for the Christian hoper to fail to participate in this hope by delimiting hope and therefore rendering any part of God's creation hopeless is already to alienate hope from Christ our hope. It would be to illegitimately imagine that the world, or at least part of it, is an appendage to that for which we hope.

<sup>67</sup> This is what gives sense to the notion that Christian hope is not a mean between optimism and pessimism but denies the very substance that enables their very founding logic of reading and knowing the future. See McDowell, 2000, Introduction.

Pushing this account developed through Barth further, we can say that recovering the christic density of hope may prevent a Christian from being able to give suitably demonstrable reasons for her hope such that would convince all antagonists, for example, to transfer their own allegiances and perspectives.<sup>68</sup> A Christian may also, in a world bearing more than the mere imprint of sin and alienation from God (and therefore from one another, and our true selves), not “possess” a hope that will enable her to successfully overcome all personal and social alienations and illusions. But, in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, present in the Spirit, and promising his consummating presence, the Christian does have a hope that although it is fragile in many respects (since it is perennially prone to failure, weakness, and ideology), and is humbly conscious of and constantly attentive to its contingency and relativity (no thoughts and actions, while they may have a certain analogy to, are identical with those of God), is directed to engaging in a prayerful practice of actively, albeit provisionally and revisably, reflecting in its own liberating way the divine redemption of the world in Christ, and is itself creative of communities who can keep such hope, in its “perilous passage,” alive [CD, IV.3.2, 917]. In other words, Christ’s coming to reveal to history its eschatological fulfilment, unveiling the world’s place in his resurrection life, creates a

<sup>68</sup> One has good reason for supposing that the *ad hocness* of Barth’s own approach to apologetics operates in relation to the kind of ‘reason for hope’ in terms of witnessing to the persuasiveness that the

regulative perspective through which to imaginatively critique and creatively reconceive all other hopes, thereby fashioning a hope that is bound up with the daily process of worshipping the Trinitarian God, the world's Creator and Redeemer. Theological discourse of hope, then, is given the directed ability to promise human transformation, and to enable the living honestly of agents of hope in the light it sheds on our ways in the world. The aporia of Christian hope, its shining through the cracks of the systematisations of hope as predictable of objectifiable futures is in intrinsic alliance with life, the life of the world in that for which it can only legitimately ultimately hope: Jesus Christ.

"Eschatology, rightly understood, is the most practical thing that can be thought."<sup>69</sup> Barth's claim suggestively opens up the development of a conception of hope that promotes it less as a set of theological conclusions, a way of seeing by faith that which cannot be seen by unfaithful sight, than as a generative model (or, perhaps, a set of them) for how to do Christian living. Conceived of in this way, hope makes possible new modes of being human, new ways that discover that they are very old indeed – primordial in fact, since it is in the One slain from the foundation of the world

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movement of hope's performance in the affairs of the world has.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, 1949, 154.

that we are set as being human in hope.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, eschatological assertions take their cue less from a desire to provide the narcotic of a secure “way out” than from an unavoidably risky pilgrimage *through*, and engagement *with*, the pressures, strains, and futilities of our unlit and unwritten futures. Our eschatological Sunday remains in our future even if it is embodied fully in the new life of the raised humanity of Jesus Christ.

Barth certainly is rightly pressed by commentators over the ways in which he works out contingency – the Spirit, the future, the Jewish people, women, the world as uninvolved in the dynamics of human identity, the actualism of grace, and so on – in other words, the narratable density of our lives. And the pressure exerted at these points can break open the perspective on hope that this paper has been attempting to excavate and assess. But at the very least, one thing that his expression of hope does attempt to proclaim is that *we have been given time to hope*, and consequently this hope is only appropriately *Christian* hope insofar as it is engaged in its task of de-demonising the world. God’s hope for us gives us time to hope for others (and the “for others” has to be read as having a universal range, following the extent of the reach of divine grace manifested in Jesus Christ). Now is the time to awaken from the slumbers of our dreams and nightmares and see the Christ-shape of our dawn. Here Barth’s work on

<sup>70</sup> It is this kind of hope that is aware of being (all-too) fragily and anticipatorily performed in ecclesial communities of hope.



eschatology certainly deserves more critical prominence than it has frequently been given, since it is here that one can discover an interesting response to the unproblematised hopeful self that we have seen in, for instance, the work of Wiesel, Bultmann, and even in Rahner and Moltmann.