

The Unity (and Disunity) of Our Hope

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PART I. THE UNITY OF OUR HOPE² MARY DOAK, THE UNITY (AND DISUNITY) OF OUR HOPE

When I was assigned to teach a doctoral seminar in eschatology as a newly credentialed Ph.D. some years ago, the seminar had not been taught for some time due to lack of faculty interest. Although I was excited by the topic, my friends and colleagues in theology took some delight in teasing me for getting “stuck” with the course no one else wanted. They presumed that I would have to set aside my interests in political theology in order to parse the bizarre—if fascinating—apocalyptic expectations that recur with regularity in U.S. Christianity. Or, perhaps I would spend my time delving into tedious debates about the rapture, the likelihood of an intermediate state after death, or whatever happened to Roman Catholic belief in limbo. In any case, eschatology was often dismissed as, at best, an individualistic emphasis on one’s personal destination in the afterlife, or, at worst, as an escapist aspect of Christianity that looks for Jesus to “beam us out of here” and take us away from the problems of this world.

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I was, alas, not entirely successful in my efforts to persuade friends and colleagues that as the study of Christian hope, eschatology is not merely about the “last things,” but rather is integral to the whole of theology, and perhaps most especially to those theologies specifically engaged with historical and social issues. I suspect that this failure reveals not just something about my lack of persuasive skills, but also about the state of Christianity in the USA, where the prevalent forms of Christian faith are frequently highly individualistic and inclined to focus on redemption *from*, rather than the redemption *of*, this world. In this American context, it is not surprising that eschatology is often considered an overly speculative, even gnostic, sideline of theology, rather than the profound study of Christian hope that it is.

A more adequate approach to Christian eschatology prevailed in the mid-twentieth century, as is evident in the leading role of eschatology in the development of political and liberation theologies. As an instance, one might consider Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*,¹ or the significance of utopia in Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *Theology of Liberation*.² Influenced by Ernst Bloch’s magisterial work on the importance of the utopian imagination, these, and similar, theologies retrieved the concept of the reign of God as a central theological category with considerable political significance.³ That Jesus preached the coming of God’s kingdom (*basileia*) is not merely an issue for historical study into the end-time expectations of the first century; nor is God’s reign exhausted on earth by the foundation of the church.⁴ Instead, an ongoing Christian hope for the coming of God’s reign properly inspires and informs Christian socio-political praxis.

Fortunately, notwithstanding the escapism of American apocalyptic, the reputation of eschatology has undergone something of a

¹Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: on the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

²Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), esp. 213–239. See also Raymond Bautista Aguas, “Relating Faith and Political Action: Utopia in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2007).

³Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986).

⁴For a helpful discussion of the meaning of the reign or *basileia* of God in the Jesus movement, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), esp. 105–54.

revival in recent years, so that thinking about hope has become a more or less respectable theological topic again. Still, I think it is fair to say that the significance of eschatological hope remains underappreciated, particularly in relation to Christian contributions to public life. This is especially problematic if, as I am convinced, it is just this ultimately theological hope in the future that is lacking in American public life today. Humanity currently faces a serious crisis with total global climate change; we are in desperate need of more sustainable and equitable systems of production and consumption that are less abusive of land, animals, and people. This is surely a time when public life needs to imagine alternative economic and social institutions. Yet, instead, political discourse veers between denial and despair, as if we no longer dare to hope for a better future. Societal and technological innovations continue, of course, but there is little sense that in and of themselves any new gadgets or products will—or even could—lead to a more humane world with more life-giving forms of community. Capitalism, as Ernst Bloch observed, reifies rather than liberates the socio-political imagination.⁵

Instead of being a distraction from history and politics, then, eschatology might well be the most valuable Christian contribution to what can often seem like a moribund public life with its lack of a hopeful imagination. Christian hope in God's future frees the imagination to envision genuinely new possibilities beyond the flaws, tensions, and limitations inherent in all of history and certainly in the current status quo. Yet, at the same time, Christian hope is an active and transformative hope, intended to affect life in this world, where it is at least partially realizable. Perhaps Reinhold Niebuhr—who is often unfairly read as having hoped for too little and conceded too much to the limitations of the status quo—best expressed this when he argued that there is no limit to how much of the reign of God can be achieved on earth, except that the reign of God will never be (fully) achieved on earth.⁶

⁵See the discussion in Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution*, trans. P.S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 2 vols, ii, 430, as well as the discussion in Bloch, iii, 885–924.

⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1941–1943), 2 vols, ii, 244, 286.

The Church's Eschatological Mission

In this context of a world in serious need of hope, an emerging ecumenical consensus on Christian eschatology and on the church's eschatological mission deserves much more attention than it generally receives. Increasingly, Christian theologians and church documents affirm that the church's mission is to witness to, and to work for, the unity of the world. This is stated, for example, in "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) of the Second Vatican Council: "the promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church," since she is "by her relationship with Christ, both a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind."⁷ This formulation of the church's mission thereby derives from Christian hope for the full communion of all in God, a communion that God has called the church to serve in history.

The Second Vatican Council's focus on the church in service of communion was deeply informed by—one might more accurately say "borrowed from"—Orthodox theology, which has long emphasized a communion ecclesiology.⁸ According to Aristotle Papanikolaou, the Orthodox concept of "theosis," which he translates as "divine-human communion," is recognized as the starting point of all Orthodox thought.⁹ While there is considerably more variety in the starting points and emphases of Protestant and Catholic theology, this goal of divine-human communion has nevertheless assumed an almost taken-for-granted status in much—though of course not in all—contemporary theology. Not only is divine-human communion integral to the Second

⁷"Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," in Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966), no. 42. The "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" similarly states "the Church is a kind of sacrament, or sign of the intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity" in Abbott, *Documents*, no. 1.

⁸For a discussion of the influence of Orthodox thought on the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, see Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The New Awareness of the Trinitarian Basis of the Church" in Giuseppe Alberigo and Gustavo Gutierrez (eds), *Where Does the Church Stand? Concilium 146* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 14–21.

⁹Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), esp. 1–2, 5.

Vatican Council's documents on the church but it is also embraced in theologies as different as those of John Milbank and Miroslav Volf.¹⁰

In turn, communion theology is increasingly found in statements resulting from official ecumenical dialogues. Most notably, this form of eschatology is fundamental to the World Council of Churches' recent publication *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.¹¹ The mission of the church is here described as part of God's salvific plan to overcome division and to bring an alienated world into the fullness of communion: "It is God's design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10). The Church, as a reflection of the communion of the Triune God, is meant to serve this goal."¹² As this convergence document clarifies, the church shares in the redemptive, unifying work of God in history, who in the Son and Spirit, and through the church, is bringing all into harmony. The church, as *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* reminds us, experiences already in part the gift of this communion, while being called to increase this union throughout history until the eschaton, when all will be united in God.

This ecumenical consensus on the church's mission, moreover, is not only thoroughly eschatological, but also profoundly Trinitarian. It is supported and strengthened by the resurgence of theological attention to the doctrine of the Trinity in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹³ As much of this work has shown, the ideal of communion is not accidental to theology: Instead, we are made in the image of a relational Trinity and so are oriented to relationships with God and with one another. To put it simply: Human beings are made to be with and for each other, so that only in the promised eschatological communion of all in God will we be fully ourselves.

This is, in my judgment, a beautiful, sustaining, and inspiring hope, a hope that encompasses all of humanity and even all of creation. And it is no small thing to find such widespread Christian agreement about the

¹⁰See especially John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 422–432, and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

¹¹World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Publication No. 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013).

¹²WCC, *The Church*, 15.

¹³See, for example, the essays collected in Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

mission of the church represented in a World Council of Churches' document. Nevertheless, it seems to me, this fundamental consensus about the church's mission to witness to and to work for unity is underappreciated. Perhaps because it is taken for granted theologically, it is treated as though it were obvious and unremarkable. Instead of exploring the deep significance and profound implications of this common hope, ecumenical discussions seem to move rather quickly past this essential underlying agreement. The focus is consequently on the disagreements, in order to determine how much further Christians can go down this road together and where our paths still diverge. To be sure, attention to exploring continued disagreements makes some sense for ecumenists seeking greater unity among Christians. There are many further questions to explore; there is much more mutual understanding to achieve. For this reason, in the second part of this chapter, I contribute to this theological parsing by discussing inadequate or poorly formulated versions of this widely shared hope.

First, however, I would like to suggest that not only theology, but also the church, and even society, might benefit considerably from more theological attention to this emerging ecumenical agreement about Christianity's eschatological hope, as well as the church's mission to serve that hope. When we fail to appreciate this theological consensus, I would suggest, we miss an important opportunity to build further ecumenical unity on the basis of what we have in common and to cooperate with one another to bring a genuinely Christian perspective to public life.

The Mennonite–Roman Catholic document, *Called Together to be Peacemakers*, provides a helpful example here.¹⁴ This text notes as a point of Mennonite–Roman Catholic agreement that the church is called to serve the eschatological goal of the harmony of all in God. However, and notwithstanding that the title of the document highlights the common commitment to peace, there is little further attention given to this shared perspective. Instead, the document turns to a rather lengthy discussion of differences between the just war approach (traditionally affirmed in much official Roman Catholic teaching) and the absolute

¹⁴“Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference 1998–2003,” at http://www.oecumene.nl/files/Documenten/Called_%20together_to_be_Peacemakers.pdf (accessed August 30, 2015).

or near-absolute pacifism which has characterized the Mennonite tradition.¹⁵ While these disagreements are real and important, an opportunity was lost here: Without sufficient attention being given to the deeper agreement about the church's hope and reconciling mission in the world, how likely are Christians to find common ground on the methods that will best serve that mission? One might also ask whether such attention to deeper understanding of the shared goal might be more important than our differences of judgment over the best method for achieving it. When the ecumenical conversation shifts so quickly to the disagreements over how best Christians might serve the processes of reconciliation, it is easy to neglect the depth of our mutual commitment to peace.

Further attention to this growing ecumenical consensus on the church's mission to serve the harmony of all in God would also, of course, clarify why Christian divisions are so troubling. The failure of Christians to maintain unity amid diversity among themselves is a great scandal for a people called to increase unity amid the diversity of the world. Could it be, one might ask, that the often-bemoaned waning of ecumenical energy is at least partially due to lack of attention to the church's mission to unite humanity? Perhaps greater appreciation of the church's unifying purpose would re-energize ecumenism within our churches.

It should also be noted that the current ecumenical agreement about our hope for the communion of all in God is not evident to all—or even most—Christians. I think it is fair to say that there is considerable confusion among many Christians about what the church is for. After all, an individualistic Christianity emphasizing one's personal relation to God is so common as to be the default form of Christianity throughout much of the USA. Not surprisingly, there is considerable confusion about the purpose and role of the church, especially when church membership is not held to be the *sine qua non* for getting into heaven.

If theology has as one of its tasks to serve the life of the church, it is a significant theological failure to pass so quickly over this ecclesiological consensus that non-theologians and ordinary churchgoers have almost no idea that this common ground exists. This is particularly disturbing

¹⁵For a more thorough analysis, see Mary Doak, "A People Set Apart," in Margaret R. Pfeil and Gerald W. Schlabach (eds), *Sharing Peace: Mennonites and Catholics in Conversation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 77–86.

when the neglected theological agreement is about a central aspect of Christian faith and practice. Greater focus on the church's mission, especially in relation to the eschatological hope for the union of all in God, would help to provide a clear and coherent ecclesiology, integrating the faith and practice of Christians in a discipleship of service to the world.

Further attention to our common hope may also lead to more energy being devoted to what I will here call "practical ecumenism," by which I mean an ecumenism developed in and through shared practices of fostering unity and reconciliation in the world. As J.B. Metz argued some years ago, Christian hope is a hope that must be defended in practice.¹⁶ Surely this ecumenical agreement on the church's mission to serve unity compels Christians to join forces and to work together for reconciliation throughout the world. Working and praying together for the unity of all in God, celebrating that unity when we experience it (even partially), and mourning the exclusions and inequalities, the wars and injustices that so deeply divide us, are in themselves profound ecumenical acts. Being united in a common hope and in a praxis of defending that hope is likely to further the project of ecumenism far beyond what can be achieved solely through the exchange of ideas.

As I have argued above, a public witness of active hope for a better world is deeply needed today. There are good reasons to fear a new, global imperialism that enforces cultural uniformity and vast inequality; there are also reasons to hope for enriching relationships among diverse peoples and cultures. In a world brought together by the forces of market and media, with migrations creating new communities and destabilizing established communities, one of our greatest challenges is to learn to come together in relations of mutuality that are enriched by genuine diversity, rather than in a new form of imperialism that reduces diversity to a marketing strategy. In this context, an active Christian commitment to living the implications of hope for the unity of all would leave no doubt that Christian faith makes an important difference in the world today.

Maintaining an eschatological hope, the hope that the partial unity we can achieve here will be finally completed, affirms that this world and our efforts for greater justice are of central importance. However,

¹⁶Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), esp. 49–77.

as mentioned above, this hope also incorporates an important eschatological proviso ensuring that none of our socio-political projects are ultimate. As J.B. Metz and Benedict XVI have both notably argued, a hope beyond history is necessary to maintain hope within history and hope for history.¹⁷ To keep from despairing when projects fail—as they inevitably do—and to ensure that we limit the means we use to achieve our ends, it is essential that historical goals, however important, never become our ultimate goals. Perhaps most importantly, if we have no hope beyond this temporal realm, we will have nothing to offer those who are the victims of history, as Metz has tirelessly argued. Still, even if we cannot achieve the final unity within history, Christians should nevertheless be united in acting on the belief that what we do here matters because it contributes to the goal of our lives beyond history.

In summary, then, I am convinced that Christian agreement on the church's mission to serve the union of all in God deserves to be acknowledged, to be celebrated, to be clarified, and, above all, to be acted on. This hope for communion ought to be central to Christian theology (as it already is for the Orthodox); it ought to be central to ecumenical discussions; and it ought to be central to the life of the church in the world, informing a praxis of reconciliation and witnessing to hope in a better and more just—if never perfect—future.

The Disunity of Our Hope

Having argued for far greater attention to the unity of Christian hope, I now want to discuss briefly two concerns I have about how this hope, if not carefully nuanced, might contribute to disunity rather than unity. The first issue that worries me is a not-uncommon tendency to claim so much for Trinitarianism that differences from non-Trinitarian monotheism are exaggerated. The second issue risks the opposite error of attempting to achieve harmony prematurely by stifling the differences that at times need to be preserved if true harmony and justice are to be achieved. Both approaches—overstating differences and overstating

¹⁷See Metz, *Faith in History*, esp. 115–8, and Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (Encyclical Letter, 30 November 2007), §§25, 35 at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html (Accessed 12 August 2016).

commonality—can be fatal to the hope for unity in diversity that Christians are called to embody in the world.

Let me begin with the theological arguments that, in their zeal to defend a Trinitarian political praxis, accuse non-Trinitarian monotheism of being inherently oppressive and autocratic. To give just one rather clear example, Leonardo Boff states that “sticking only with faith in one sole God, without thinking of the Blessed Trinity... is dangerous for society, for political life, and for the church. ... It can lead to and justify totalitarianism in politics, authoritarianism in religion, paternalism in society, and machismo in the family.”¹⁸ Totalitarian, authoritarianism, paternalism, and machismo—these evils amount to quite a denunciation of non-Trinitarian monotheism!

Of course, it may well be that Boff’s statement here is a case of rhetorical excess, intended for “in-house” use in order to convince other Christian theologians of the significance of the symbol of the Trinity. Certainly, theological arguments about the liberating implications of the Trinity are seldom this explicit in accusing non-Trinitarian monotheists of holding dangerously totalitarian beliefs. Yet even when the defence of Trinitarianism’s superiority is less blatant than in Boff’s impassioned appeal, it ought to give us pause. When the doctrine of the Trinity is proclaimed essential to a liberating concept of God, what is being said to and about others whose religious beliefs differ from those of Christians?

Even when—as I suspect is often the case—the intention is not to criticize non-Christian beliefs but rather to defend the Christian significance of the Trinity, this denigration of monotheism as politically retrograde remains deeply problematic. It suggests that Jews, Baha’is, and Muslims hold essential beliefs opposed to equality, which can surely undermine cooperation among those in the Abrahamic faiths who seek greater justice and unity in society.

Perhaps more troubling is that this defence of the Trinity carries within it an implicit supersessionism in which the enlightened, egalitarian, and politically liberating Christian concept of God is lauded as superior to and as the proper replacement for the outdated, authoritarian monotheism of Jews and Muslims. If the long and sordid history of Christian contempt for the Jews has taught us anything, it is that we

¹⁸Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). 7. See also Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 20.

should beware of such presumptions of religious superiority, even—maybe especially—when the superiority is implicit rather than explicit. Unconscious patterns of thought can be more powerful, and more difficult to overcome, than overt arguments.

What unites Christians can thus become an obstacle to greater unity, or even to respectful dialogue, between Christians and non-trinitarian monotheists. My point is not that Christians should deny or downplay the doctrine of the Trinity. The challenge is rather to discuss what the symbol of the Trinity means to Christians, and why Christians value this symbol. But Christians should not assume that Trinitarian language is the only way to true community, that the symbol of the Trinity fully captures the essence of the divine, or even that symbols always function as predicted. Trinitarian Christians have, after all, been known to support highly autocratic social structures, while Judaism and Islam also have egalitarian traditions. The development of greater communion and reconciliation in society will not be served by fostering insidious illusions of intellectual and moral superiority, but rather by opening ourselves to the alternative perspectives that can reveal our own blind or distorted views.

The second issue I would like to raise here involves the temptation to invoke the ideal of communion to stifle protest against injustice, perhaps especially when this communion is envisioned in Trinitarian terms. As women have reason to know all too well, a rhetoric of seeking social “harmony” is often deployed to delegitimize efforts for justice and to support instead the continuation of oppressive social patterns and power relations. It is tempting for those who benefit from the status quo to dismiss demands for justice as unnecessarily divisive and disruptive of social harmony. In a world of considerable injustice and unequal power, it is crucial that attention be paid to whose interests are served when unity and harmony are lauded as the ideal.

Appeals to harmony can be ecclesially problematic when, as Gerard Mannion has so clearly shown, an authoritarian form of communion ecclesiology is wielded to silence disagreements with ecclesiastical authorities, on the (false) assumption that true communion requires a uniformity that suppresses frank disagreement.¹⁹ Appeals to ecumenical harmony can also be invoked to suppress demands for justice

¹⁹Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), esp. 52–63.

that disrupt the ecclesial status quo. It might at times be necessary to ask what kind of ecumenism will be achieved by discouraging attention to issues of justice within the church—for women or for LGBTI Christians, for example. An emphasis on maintaining social harmony can be deeply antithetical to real justice, as those who demand social reform must disrupt the unjust social harmony of the current structures.

Here again, the Trinitarian basis of Christian hope can be problematic, since invoking the Trinity as the model of desired communion can further exacerbate Christian discomfort with opposition and conflict. The symbol of God as a Trinitarian communion of self-giving love does not obviously provide a model for healthy conflict, especially given that the unity among the persons of the Trinity exceeds what is possible or, I would suggest, even desirable among human beings under the conditions of finitude. The symbol of the Trinity provides a powerful image of ultimate harmony, but one that lacks the agonistic relations that feminist political theorists in particular have defended as necessary to the struggle for justice.²⁰ When the Trinity is invoked as the model of eschatological harmony, care must be taken to ensure that disagreement and even occasional conflict in opposition to injustice are not delegitimated. The mutually self-giving, perfect communion of the Trinity may be an inspiring goal, but it does not represent a real possibility in this world.

Again, I am not suggesting that we give up on the symbol of the Trinity. It is imperative, however, that we keep in mind that the harmony of the Trinity is an *eschatological* goal: Though the union of all in God begins in history, it can only be fully achieved in the eschaton. If we neglect the eschatological dimension of Christian hope, acting as though perfect harmony were possible in this world, then Christian praxis may be seriously misdirected, contributing to greater injustice and disharmony. After all, sin, oppression, inequality, and exclusions are very much a part of our reality in this world, and these should not be ignored. Instead, they should be opposed precisely because of our eschatological hope for the true communion of all in self-giving mutuality (at the end of history).

²⁰See, for example, Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” in Bonnie Honig (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Given that perfect harmony will not be fully realized within history, attending to the complex relationship between love and justice must be an integral part of any Christian praxis of hope for the future. Paul Tillich's thought is particularly helpful here, since he analyzes both love and justice in terms of an eschatological hope for union. Love, Tillich contends, seeks to unite what should not be—but is in fact—separated; justice, he further argues, is essential to preserve what love seeks ultimately to unite.²¹ There is no love, then, without the preserving work of justice, because if the separated realities are not preserved in their integrity, they cannot be united. Yet justice is ultimately fulfilled only in the love that reunites what ought not to have been separated. If the demands of justice are overruled in the interests of preserving social harmony, the outcome is not unity, but rather an oppressive uniformity that fails to sustain differences and so destroys the possibility of true communion.

For those committed to this harmony built on justice, an option for the poor is indispensable. The experiences and perspectives of those whose “backs are against the wall,” as the African-American theologian and philosopher Howard Thurman put it, reveal the injustice and exclusions masked too often as societal harmony.²² To avoid the domestication of eschatological hope and to ensure that this hope truly interrupts an oppressive status quo, the church and its theologians must learn from the marginalized and the excluded what it is that justice and ultimately love require at any time. The consistent biblical message is that the reign of God is built from the margins, but it is difficult, perhaps especially for those of us who can be counted among the privileged, to move beyond the belief that it is the powerful and privileged who truly matter. After all, this world clearly caters to the powerful and privileged, reinforcing the often unconscious idea that it is the elite who are really significant. Unless our eschatological hope is thoroughly grounded in a theological and ecclesial option for the poor, our hope will too quickly become an ideology that supports an unjust status quo, covering over deep and unjust divisions while claiming to serve societal harmony. Our common eschatological hope requires further ecumenical attention and theological nuance if it is to serve the ecumenical movement, Christian

²¹Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: New York; Oxford University Press, 1954), 25, 67–71.

²²Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, IN: Abingdon, 1976), 13.

discipleship, and a world that deeply needs to imagine and to hope for a better future.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to draw attention to the importance of experiencing and celebrating the transformative and rich encounters that are possible when people come together in their differences. Hope quickly becomes unreal when that hope is not at least partially experienced; it is difficult to sustain a hope that is entirely other than the world one knows. On the other hand, to experience the power of transformative hope effectively present (even if imperfectly) in the world reinforces the credibility of that hope. This is, of course, why J.B. Metz has argued that Christians must defend their hope in practice; a faith that brings hope to the world must be active in the world.²³

We would also be well advised to attend to the inspiration of arts and culture—stories, film, music, theater, and visual arts—as these can open our imaginations to new possibilities and enriching alternatives. To hear jazz music played well, for example, is to hear the sound of democracy and to experience the thrill of individual creativities contributing to a new whole. Such encounters with the joy and beauty of unity in diversity are more effective than theological discourse in making real the truth that human beings belong to each other and can only thrive together. Christians might then know—and show the world—what is truly at stake in the struggle for the genuine communion of the reign of God.

²³Metz, esp. 60–84.

Hope in the Ecumenical Future

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