Hope – in need of retrieval

Dermot A. Lane

IT WOULD BE UNFORTUNATE IF CHRISTIAN CELEBRATIONS of the millennium became an occasion only for the triumphal trumpeting of two thousand years of Christianity. The celebration of the Jubilee is certainly a time for giving thanks, but it is also a unique moment in history – a *kairos* – for taking stock of the shape of Christianity at the end of the twentieth century. In the reflection that follows I want to examine the state of hope within Christianity. I will begin with an analysis of hope and in the light of that analysis seek to effect a retrieval. The important roles of memory and imagination will be called upon in the reconstruction of hope. The article will conclude with an emphasis on the primacy of praxis within the self-understanding of Christian hope.

Analysing the state of hope

Hope at the end of the twentieth century is in short supply. There is a growing presence of political apathy and increasing religious indifference at the close of the second millennium. The twentieth century has been brutalized by an excess of evil, suffering and death caused by two world wars. The existence of the Jewish Holocaust and the re-emergence of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Kosovo in the 1990s have left people bewildered. The association of religion, including Christianity, with violence, war and ethnic cleansing is disturbing. The ongoing threat of a nuclear war and the possible collapse of the earth's eco-systems give rise to a growing sense of helplessness. The ever-increasing level of globalization and the mounting presence of a mass-culture threaten to diminish levels of personal freedom and human responsibility. Increasing suspicion, and sometimes cynicism, surround the activities of governments, institutions and religion at the close of the twentieth century.

At a cultural level we live in a world that cultivates an ethos of individualism and the near invincibility of the human self. The autonomy of the self-sufficient subject so characteristic of modernity does little to engender hope. The modern myth of progress persists in seducing the human spirit and this is especially evident in economics and the exploitation of the earth's resources. The world of modern

science continues to hold out spurious promises of 'salvation'. The privatization of religion by modernity has had the effect of marginalizing hope. Most of all the culture of modernity is a culture of *amnesia*: the forgetfulness of evil and suffering within history and in particular a forgetfulness about death in the past and the present. A culture that covers over evil, suffering and death is a culture that no longer requires the resources of hope.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, in the light of this bleak picture to find theologians expressing serious concern about the state of hope at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, Johann B. Metz confesses 'I have become . . . deeply troubled by something I might call a widespread God crisis, a crisis of hope'.[1] Metz goes on to say that a Christianity that has lost sight of the endtime has already come to an end. Metz is also critical about the existence of endless empty time in the modern world. Maureen Junker-Kenny talks about 'the large scale reduction of collective hope in a better future' as a characteristic of western society in the late twentieth century. Part of the problem is the presence of 'a process of disillusionment and disenchantment which has set in since the sixties and seventies when hope was to the fore'.[2] Edward Farley suggests that hope was one of the great words of power within the Christian tradition. Today, however, he sees hope as 'a deep symbol in decline'.[3] The centrality of hope within Christianity, therefore, is in need of historical retrieval and theological reconstruction. However, before this retrieval takes place we need to know what has gone wrong with hope. What are the theological reasons behind this decline of Christian hope?

Theological reasons behind the decline of hope

One way of answering these questions is to say that hope has not been radical enough in the twentieth century. By this I mean that hope has had a soft focus, being far too sunny in outlook, and too much influenced by an evolutionary outlook and social Darwinianism. Within traditional theology there has been too much optimism and not sufficient hope against hope. Hope comes into its own when humans are faced with radical evil, destruction and annihilation. This does not mean that we cannot hope without these negative experiences but it does mean that the negative is one of the midwives of hope. There are close connections between the experience of apocalypse and the response of hope – and no human being is altogether immune from the imminence of apocalypse.

A second factor in the decline of hope today is the existence of a series of damaging dualisms within modern theological discourse. These dualisms include the separation of heaven and earth, body and soul, spirit and matter, nature and grace, the temporal and the eternal. As a result of these dualisms Christian hope has been perceived as other-worldly, purely spiritual, apolitical and futuristic. It was this perception of hope that produced Karl Marx's criticism of religion as the opium of the people. An attempt to respond to Marx took place at the Second Vatican Council which sought to promote a closer unity between this world and eternity.[4] This response of Vatican II opened the way for the development of liberation theology. The praxis of liberation and the work of justice, however, presuppose a theology of hope and this has not been forthcoming in most theologies of liberation, with the possible exception of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

A further theological difficulty with hope is the issue of anthropology. The way we understand the human self is of importance to the creation of a viable theology of hope. The modern understanding of the human self is in a state of crisis. Anthropology is undergoing a transition from seeing the individual as a body and soul that become separated at death to an understanding of the self as an entity that is radically relational from beginning to end. This relational side of the human self is the basis of hope. The independent, self-sufficient and detached subject is unable to hope and ultimately has no need of hope because, as we shall see, the solitary ego cannot hope.

Another problem with hope is that it has become isolated from the other theological virtues of faith and love. It is remarkable how much theology simply ends on a note of hope, almost as an appendix, without any mapping of the shape and content of hope. Hope needs to be relocated within the mainstream of a theology of faith and love. Morality, especially social morality, without hope is bloodless and faith without hope is going nowhere and is ultimately unredemptive. A balanced theology of faith and hope will issue in love, and this love opens the way to the reception of God's gift of salvation.

A final factor affecting hope is the divorce or separation that has taken place between hoping in God and hoping that God will, for example, transform the world. The personal act of hope in God is deeper than any expression of that act of hope in propositional statements. The necessary tension between these two aspects of hope has broken down with the result that the aspect of *hoping that* has assumed a prominence and life of its own that has become divorced from hoping in God. An example of this breakdown can be found in the separation

that presently exists between the advent of the end in Christ (*eschaton*) and the last things (*eschata*) of death, heaven, hell and judgement. Without attachment to the dynamism of the personal act of hope, different formulations of the content of hope are in danger of distorting the depth of the personal act of hope.

In looking back over the twentieth century it becomes clear that it has not been a century of hope but of optimism. The optimism in question was founded on the ethos of modernity: an ethos that was individualistic, privatizing in its attitude to religion, inflated in its universalist claims, and suspicious of trust. The failure of this optimism, so apparent at the end of the twentieth century, has generated a sense of helplessness in the face of so much evil, suffering and man-made death. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that there is an increasing awareness that we are now living at the end of the modern era and 'that the enterprise begun with the Enlightenment is exhausted and finally winding down'.[5]

Reconstructing hope

It is against the background of this analysis of the state of hope that we can set about reconstructing a theology of hope on the eve of a new millennium. This reconstruction of hope can only be outlined in embryo here. The outline will begin with some philosophical approaches and then go on to say something about the importance of anthropological aspects of hope. This double approach will provide an important point of entry for theological consideration.

At the philosophical level Paul Ricoeur argues that hope 'is not a theme that comes after other themes . . . but an impulse that opens systems'.[6] Hope is a form of protest against the premature closure of philosophical reflection, an attitude of resistance against the finality of objective knowledge. Hope therefore is not just an idea that comes at the end but more a point of departure that keeps human thought open. The logic of hope within philosophy is based on the logic of excess and abundance given in nature, history and human creativity as opposed to the logic of identity, repetition and reproduction. Within this logic emphasis is placed on the elements of the not-yet, the much more, and a passion for the possible. A philosophy of hope seeks to acknowledge the limits of all philosophical systems, refusing to be seduced by the transcendent illusion of absolute knowledge or the dialectic of rational reconciliation. Ricoeur sees within this refusal to close thought elements of both irrationality and rationality. Irrationality is to be found

in the element of 'in spite of' in the face of failure, suffering and death. At the same time this irrationality must be informed by the rationality that arises from the excess of sense over non-sense and unexplored meaning over meaninglessness. Within this perspective hope is much less an object and far more a disposition and approach to life. Hope, therefore, calls into question the adequacy of all rational systems of thought, preferring to keep open what is all too often prematurely closed. Reason requires hope if it is to flourish and hope requires reason if it is to be taken seriously.

This philosophy of hope exists in sharp contrast to the claims of modernity with their penchant for closed systems of scientific and instrumental rationality. Whatever one makes of the emerging diversity and playfulness of post-modernity – and it seems too early to make a judgement on this movement – it must be noted that there are certain characteristics of post-modernity that are at least sympathetic to a philosophy of hope. Post-modernity, in reaction to modernity, calls into question absolute systems, recognizes the presence of the unexpected, prefers the particular over the universal, and affirms the unknowability of reality. In the words of Jean-François Lyotard, 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate differences and save the honour of the name'.[7] Hope resists the binding narratives of modernity, preferring to be surprised by the new and expectantly open to the future.

The key role of anthropology

At the level of anthropology, that is, our understanding of what it means to be human, it is equally important to go beyond the individualism of modernity. Hope cannot take place at the level of the isolated and the independent individual. In the words of the Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, 'Self knows that self is not enough'. An important first step in hope is the personal act of trust addressed to the other. Hope, especially hope as trust, is integral to the human condition. Without trust between human beings there is a breakdown in relationships and communications. This does not mean that trust must be blind. To the contrary, trust must include an element of suspicion but cannot be bound exclusively by suspicion. Without some form of trust and self-surrender human beings remain imprisoned and fearful of any movement outwards towards others, whereas with trust and self-surrender the self is freed from the confines of self-enclosure and the possibility of action is opened which is one of the underlying suppositions of hope.

It is impossible, therefore, to hope alone. Hope begins with the discovery that I am not alone, that I am related to others, and that I coexist within a community of other human beings. Hope arises out of a discovery of the 'priority of the "we" in the human "I" '.[8] Without some awareness that the human species is organically one and therefore interdependent, interrelated and interconnected there can be no hope. It is only in and through relationships with other human beings that the individual can venture forth in hope. Relationships with others have the capacity to empower the individual to act, and action is one of the suppositions of hope. Hope arises, therefore, out of the individual's awareness that he or she belongs to a community. While it is always the individual who hopes, the personal act of hope is sustained by an awareness of the self as a self-within-community. Hope, from an anthropological point of view, is therefore a protest against the temptation towards human isolation and a critique of the existence of the solitary ego. The personal act of hope is a strong statement that no individual is condemned to live and die alone. A theology of hope therefore requires an anthropology that is committed to the relational character of human existence. Part of the relational dimension of personal existence is cosmic and part of it is also theological. We can only allude here to the cosmic dimension of existence for the sake of completion without, however, spelling it out. For example, it is increasingly clear from a rereading of Genesis and listening to the impulses of contemporary cosmology that the human is cosmic dust in a state of self-conscious freedom.

Anthropology is an important bridge to theology and an essential plank in the task of repairing hope today. In affirming the relational character of human existence an important opening exists for reference to the mystery of God as the relational Other. Indeed the radical relationality of the individual derives ultimately from God. The God who creates and sustains the individual in existence is the Christian God of trinitarian relationality. To be made in the image and likeness of a God who is relational is to be relational at the core of the human condition.

The Jewish and Christian doctrines of creation must be part of any theology of hope. The God who creates and sustains the human being in historical existence is the same God who completes and fulfils the human being in eternity. While the doctrines of creation and consummation exist ultimately on different planes, nonetheless there is a close theological relationship between origins and endings that cannot be severed. An appreciation of the action of God in creation and in history is one of the sources of hope in the present and the future. The God who

reveals God's self in creation and history is a God of promises. This is borne out in the historical experiences of exodus and exile by the people of Israel.

The experiences of exodus and exile are intensified in the life of Jesus who offers new hope to the world. This new hope is expressed in terms of announcing the reign of God as present and future, as 'already' given but 'not yet' fully realized, as imminent but also transcendent. This tension between the present and the future comes to finality in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross calls into question both the Jewish and Greek understanding of God. The resurrection reverses and reorders the apparent collapse of the life of Jesus on the cross.

The coming into being of Christian hope embraces the darkness of the cross without being overwhelmed by it. The affirmation of resurrection, in any one of its many different expressions such as exaltation, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and living again, is a refusal to accept the cross as the last word. A hope-filled unity emerges out of the self-emptying of Jesus on the cross and fullness of new life, between the darkness of Calvary and the light of glory, between the experience of self-surrender and the gift of new life. The specific shape of Christian hope, therefore, is cruciform: the cross is at the centre of Christian hope. The specific colour of Christian hope is a 'bright darkness'; darkness is an essential ingredient of Christian hope. The specific rhythm of Christian hope is a paschal movement of dying and rising, of de-centring the self to re-centre the self.

If we are to make these connections between the self, creation and history, and the possibility of Christian hope, we must have recourse to the much neglected faculty of memory.

The power of memory

It is important to state as a matter of principle that there is no hope without memory and no future without remembering the past. It is impossible to sustain hope in the present without reference to the past. The human capacity to remember keeps the past alive and active in the present. We live out of memories and these memories include both negative and positive aspects of the past. Those who forget the past are bound to repeat it in the present and this is often a reason for despair, cynicism and apathy which are the very antithesis of hope. Furthermore it must be noted that memory enables those who live in the present to

realize that often the thing necessary for evil to take place in the present is for good people to do nothing.

In recent times there has been a recovery of the importance of memory and its capacity to activate hope in the present. This new appreciation of memory has been brought to the fore in part by the Frankfort School of Critical Theory through the work of people like Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse who have in turn influenced the political theology of Johann B. Metz.

For Benjamin it is important to keep history open and not to see it simply as closed and finished. This can be done through the power of memory. Benjamin argues for a memory that acts out of empathy with those who have suffered and endured injustices in the past. The memories of those who have suffered in the past can influence and reshape our understanding of present history.

For Herbert Marcuse remembrance of the past can give rise to dangerous insights about the present. Memory can break the grip of the given upon the present and overcome the tyranny of so-called established facts.

Memory, therefore, enables us to realize that the way we are is not necessarily the way we have to be in the present or the future. Memory calls into question the modern shape of the present, especially the specifically modern myths of endless progress and evolutionary empty time. In brief, memory can creatively interrupt the present and in doing so has the capacity to awaken hope in alternative styles of individual and social existence.

From a theological point of view it is Johann B. Metz who has taken over these views and woven them into a political theology of hope. For Metz it is the dangerous memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ that has the power to disrupt and transform the present, reminding us that the reign of God can break through into the present as it did in the ministry of Jesus and especially in his death and resurrection. Likewise, Metz is anxious to highlight how the memory of Jesus shows us that time is not fated to be empty time in the present or in the future. In this way, through the power of memory, the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost, has the capacity to reawaken hope in the present for the future. The memory of Christ transforms human hope into a Christian hope with a focus on the unity of the death and resurrection as the cruciform shape of the coming reign of God in the present and the future.

The importance of imagination

In emphasizing the power of memory to activate hope it is also necessary to invoke the creative capacity of the human imagination. For memory to have its full impact in generating hope, appeal must also be made to the role of the imagination. Memory and imagination work together in the genesis of hope. This link with imagination becomes apparent when we realize that the logic of hope is not the logic of inference but of imagination.

Imagination has had a bad press in the twentieth century. For many it is associated with childish and fanciful projections. For others it has been outlawed by the methods of modern science in spite of the fact that these methods depend on particular constructions of the imagination.

Important advances have been made in rehabilitating the role that imagination plays in human understanding through the work of Mary Warnock in philosophy and James P. Mackey in theology. The kind of knowing and understanding required of hope is the kind of knowing and understanding generated through the use of imagination.

Mary Warnock suggests that a certain loss exists today among those who fail 'to see through objects in the natural world to what lies behind them'. This loss results in a certain joylessness since 'each thing is what it is and suggests nothing further' with the result that there are 'no intimations of immortality or infinity'.[9] In contrast, for Warnock, it is 'the imagination which supplies . . . hints, which treats objects of sense as potential symbols'.[10] Warnock also holds that a central function of imagination is the ability to perceive the universal within the particular, and in this way imagination is able to represent the meaning of the whole by attending to the part.

It is imagination, therefore, that enables people to see symbolically beyond the world as given to us in sense experience. Imagination has the capacity to see more than meets the eye and this in turn is something that generates joy, a quality that is intrinsic to the experience of hope itself. The joining of hope and joy is important to any theology of hope.

James P. Mackey distinguishes three related types of imagination that are helpful in the reconstruction of a theology of hope. There is first of all the ordinary, reproductive and conservative imagination; this imagination orders and organizes our everyday knowledge and understanding of the world around us. This is the imagination that receives and integrates the great variety of experiences and images we receive into a meaningful myth. The conservative imagination enables

us to hold together apparently contrary experiences within the overriding picture or myth.

In addition to this everyday exercise of imagination as integral to all knowing, there is also the creative imagination which enables us to go beyond the familiar, to see the world as suggestive of something unfamiliar and therefore capable of symbolizing something more. This exercise of creative imagination takes place in the worlds of art and science. The creative imagination is able to point towards the finality of nature in science and the interiority of works of art.

Thirdly, there is the religious or theological imagination which goes beyond the limits of conceptual thought to embrace the unknown 'objects' of religious faith which Kant summed up as freedom, immortality and God. In making this move the religious imagination engages in a process of affirmation, negation and further affirmation of the negation in and through the dynamism of the human spirit. This activity is often referred to as the work of the analogical imagination which Aquinas, among others, invokes as central to theological discourse. What is important for the religious imagination is the dynamic capacity of the human spirit to hold together both the affirmation and negation in a new unity of symbolic and transcendent meaning. In this way the religious imagination is able to perceive the infinite within the finite, the eternal within the temporal and the divine within the human. In each one of these examples there is a dynamic movement by the human spirit from the particular to the universal, from the concrete to the ultimate, from the relative to the absolute.

The purpose of this all too brief digression on imagination is to recover the forgotten role of imagination within all knowing and understanding, with particular reference to the knowing and understanding of hope. Hope today is in need of a new, creative imagination. This new template of the imagination, as it were, must be able to hold together in a meaningful whole the apparent contradictions and conflicts that attach to the exercise of Christian hoping, especially in regard to the unity and tensions that can and should exist between the historical and transcendent, life and death, darkness and light, sorrow and joy, the present and the future.

At present, impulses for the exercise of this new and hopeful imagination seem to be more forthcoming from the worlds of arts and science than from religion and revelation. The imagination exercised by the new cosmologies of science coupled with the concerns of contemporary ecology seem to echo and resonate with some of the ancient biblical eschatologies in their prophetic and apocalyptic expressions.

The imagination in question therefore must be able to hold together in a creative unity moments of destruction and transformation (apocalypse), elements of disintegration and reintegration (death and resurrection), the interaction of the present and the future (the prophetic).

It is surely instructive to note that the imagination within the biblical eschatologies combines the cosmic, historical and personal elements. Further, both the Jewish and early Christian imaginations affirm the priority of the whole over the part and of the corporate reality over the individual. The imagination required of a new theology of hope must be able to embrace the importance of the cosmic, the historical and the personal dimensions within a new unified vision that transforms the modern preoccupation of the individual assuming the centre of the stage at the expense of the community and the cosmos. The future destiny of the individual will only make sense in the context of the future destiny of the whole of humanity and creation. This is surely the point that Paul is trying to make when he says 'For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised'.[11] Similarly, Christian hope is not based only on the solitary resurrection of Jesus from the dead but on the communal hope of the community of disciples who refused to accept the cross as the collapse and closure of all that Jesus stood for. What is distinctive about Christian hope is the solidarity between the community of disciples and the reality of Jesus as crucified and risen.

Hope and praxis

The invocation of memory and imagination in the reconstruction of Christian hope is only of value to the extent that it enables hope to issue in a new creative praxis capable of addressing the needs of humanity, society and the earth in the present. If there is anything clear at the end of the twentieth century it is the increasing burden of responsibility that rests upon humanity for the future of the world. Equally clear is the fact that Christianity is not a gnostic religion simply committed to knowing the truth but rather a religion obliged to do the truth in love, faith and hope. This double observation, namely the responsibility of humanity for the future of the earth and the practical nature of Christianity, sums up the real challenge facing Christian hope in the present. Hope must give rise to a new praxis of liberation and that praxis of liberation must continue to reform hope and in doing so prevent premature closures within the theological understanding of Christian hope.

What James Mackey says about the imagination in general applies with particular force to the imagination that shapes hope: '. . . it is the

peculiar strength of imagination to be able to see simultaneously what is and what yet might be for the best, to engage at the same time the most creative of human passions and consequently to lure into action and sustain commitment'.[12] Christian hope must be able to stir up human passions and to lure into creative action the community of disciples of Jesus in the next millennium.

A hope that does not embrace action for justice and social transformation in the name of the reign of God is not a Christian hope. Without this commitment to the praxis of liberation in the present, hope will remain a harmless appendix to Christianity. Hope without praxis, that is without individual, social and ecological praxis, is not Christian.

In conclusion, the retrieval of Christian hope is one of the urgent imperatives facing all Christians on the eve of the new millennium. This retrieval calls for a new imagination and praxis within the Christian community. To ignore this challenge would be to short-change the healing dynamism of the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Dermot A. Lane is President of Mater Dei Institute of Education, part-time lecturer in the Irish School of Ecumenics and parish priest of Balally in Dublin. He is author of *Keeping hope alive: stirrings in Christian theology* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin; Paulist Press, New York, 1996).

NOTES

1 Ekkehard Sehuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig (eds), *Hope against hope: Johann B. Metz and Elie Wiesel speak out on the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p 7.

2 Maureen Junker-Kenny, 'Introduction' and 'The search for hope today: religious and cultural expressions' in Maureen Junker-Kenny (ed), *Christian resources of hope* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1995), pp 7 and 28 respectively.

3 Edward Farley, *Deep symbols: their post modern effacement and reclamation* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp 95–96.

4 *Gaudium et spes*, 38–39 and *Lumen gentium*, 48.

5 Paul Lakeland, 'Does faith have a future?', *Crosscurrents* (Spring 1999), pp 63–71 at p 64.

6 Paul Ricoeur, 'Hope and structure of philosophical systems' in *Figuring the sacred: religion, narrative and imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp 203–216. This article was originally published in 1970.

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The post modern condition: a report on knowledge*, trans G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p 82.

8 This phrase is borrowed from Hans Urs von Balthasar who uses it as an anthropological point of departure in his Christology. See *Theo-drama*, vol 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp 407–409.

9 Mary Warnock, 'Religious imagination' in James P. Mackey (ed), *Religious imagination* (Edinburgh University Press, 1986), p 147.
10 *Ibid.*
11 1 Corinthians 15:17.
12 James P. Mackey (ed), *Religious imagination*, 'Introduction', p 23.