

What is hope?

'Hope' is broadly defined as 'desire for something to happen',¹ while Feuerbach described hope as 'faith in relation to the future'.² However, this merely reflects the desire of something to happen in the future, without necessarily being Christian-orientated. The eschatological hope for the future of the world deserves a stronger and more detailed, specifically Christian definition. For A. T. Hanson, Christian hope was always hope in 'life everlasting', based on the same faith and trust in Christ which the Christian has for the present life. Thus, he wrote, 'The Christian hope is not hope in a divine transformation scene which alone enables us to tolerate life in this vale of tears. It is the inevitable consummation of the life lived in Christ on earth'. For Hanson, this meant resurrection from the dead rather than a Platonic immortality of the soul, and it meant that any 'ambiguous or agnostic' approach to everlasting life was not a true reflection of the Christian gospel. Having said that, he was certain that it was not a physical body which was resurrected though he advocated the '*via negativa*' in describing the life everlasting:

When we confess the resurrection of the body, we do not mean the resurrection of the physical elements which compose the flesh; we do not mean a re-absorption into the infinite; we do not mean the continued existence of one element in human nature which is indestructible. We mean the enjoyment by the human personality of that communion with God which can be partially experienced here, in conditions which make a much closer communion possible, but which do not obliterate the distinction between the creature and the Creator.³

During the twentieth century, some theologians suggested that the concentration on the life to come does insufficient justice to the Christian hope. Thus, for John Macquarrie, for example, hope is, for Christians, 'a total hope, and it touches all aspects of human life, both individual and social'.⁴ Rather than deal with the concept of hope in these abstract terms, Macquarrie deals with it in practical terms. Defining hope as more of an 'attitude' than a 'feeling', his approach determines how the feeling of hope affects people in a physical sense, and how it affects their actions. He believes that hope can only exist when freedom exists, as there is then 'an open road along which we can choose to move'.⁵ In other words, the feeling of control over action and destiny empowers humankind with the

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. Georg Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 236.

³ A. T. Hanson, 'The Christian Hope', in Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 159-61 [p. 160].

⁴ John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1978), p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

hope that a difference can be made. In any situation where there is choice, there is also hope.

Macquarrie also relates the concept of hope to what he calls the 'dynamic of action'.⁶ This is essentially the feeling that change can be achieved in the world, but only at a cost. If change is guaranteed by God's intervention, then there will never be an impetus to try and bring it about. There will be a similar lack of impetus if there is no possibility for change, and the world is destined to decay. As a result, there has to be the feeling that the world can change for the good as a result of *human action* which has to be achieved through effort. Thus, while eschatological teaching involves the power of God and his dominance over the world, it is human beings on the planet who create and enact the hope that the world will improve. This point is also related to Macquarrie's final observation about hope, which is that it must emanate from the sense that there is something highly unsatisfactory about today's world on a moral and social level. Visions of the future can be contrasted with the world as it actually is. These hopes drive human beings, and provide the spark and dynamic of action that are needed to move forward. And so the reasons for hope come full circle, as the ability to move forward provides the feeling of freedom that plays a large part of hope.

Hope can therefore be defined as 1) not a singular feeling or emotion but a general state of mind; 2) an attitude that develops out of this state of mind that includes a more positive outlook on the world and the ability to change it for the better; 3) which is influenced by the feeling of control and potential influence on both individual and progressive events; 4) the feeling that this control can be used to affect the world in a positive way; 5) and the creative 'spark' that pushes humans to do this. Macquarrie's vision of hope is a positive and pragmatic one, because it outlines the ways in which it is possible for human beings to alter their state of mind, so that change for the better can be attained.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.