

# THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE

By GERALD O'COLLINS

**T**O LOOK BACK on our theological past is to see how much christian theologians and philosophers have neglected the exploration of hope. Charles Peguy once suggested that while her two 'sisters', love and faith, were the concern both of medieval and of reformation thought, hope has remained the neglected little sister out in the cold. What has in fact been written on hope in this century has often been affected by individualism and quietism. In the essay on hope in his *Homo Viator*, Gabriel Marcel analyzes hope as 'I hope in you for us'. Here the community aspect 'for us' is added almost like an incidental afterthought. Bultmann's study of hope in Kittel's theological dictionary of the New Testament is affected by a spirit of quiet trust which interprets biblical hope as a patient waiting on God.

There are, however, signs that hope is being restored as the robust, responsible community spirit of God's pilgrim people. In this restoration, the marxist, Ernst Bloch, a man who describes himself as an atheist for the sake of God, has already played a considerable part. More than any other philosopher, Bloch has deeply influenced the recent renewed interest of catholic and protestant theologians in the theme of hope.

Born in Ludwigshafen in 1885, Bloch studied in Munich, Würzburg, Berlin and Heidelberg. During World War I his pacifist views led him to migrate temporarily to Switzerland. After attacking the Hitler regime in an article, he fled Germany in 1933; and from 1938 to 1949 he lived in the United States, where his greatest work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle, Hope*) was in large part written. He returned to Germany to take up a professorship at the university of Leipzig. In the aftermath of the hungarian revolution he fell into disgrace with the east german authorities who had come to view Bloch's form of marxism as dangerously unorthodox. While on vacation in West Germany in 1961, he heard of the building of the Berlin wall and refused to return to the East. Since then he has been living in Tübingen, where he has lectured and given seminars in philosophy.

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Hope is the key to Bloch's system of 'meta-religion', a vast attempt to inherit from religion – above all the jewish-christian religion – a revolutionary hope which has the courage to live for the future and a new world. Bloch is not satisfied with the attitude of so many critics who have dismissed religion as the product of fear and ignorance. For him the essence of religion is hope. Religion is the crown witness for hope as the primal characteristic of human existence.

Bloch seizes on what he calls the 'gospel of christian salvation' expressed in the words of the serpent to Eve in the book of Genesis: 'you will be like God' (*eritis sicut Deus*).<sup>1</sup> He finds in the future thrust of the *eritis* the 'most subversive word' in all religious myths.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of historical fact he thinks that it is through the jewish-christian scriptures that a consciousness of hope came into the world. Unfortunately, official christianity has tended to lose its genuine eschatological sense, abandoning its original confession of Yahweh as an Exodus-God and of Jesus as a suffering rebel and martyr. God is now worshipped as a transcendent, unchangeable creator 'above us', and Jesus has been transformed into a divine mediator of salvation. The proper, messianic fire of christianity has been extinguished, the churches have come to terms with the contemporary structures of society, and the enthusiastic expectation of God's kingdom has degenerated into a resigned hope for a dream-world beyond the grave.

Bloch's aim is to recall men to that genuine, eschatological hope in which God is not 'above' us but 'before' us. He insists on this future-directedness, even if for him the 'hidden God' of the future is in fact the still unattained 'hidden man': that ideal man who has not yet come to be. In his militant optimism, Bloch understands human rights and dignity by looking forward to the *eschaton*, and locating the golden age not in some idealized past but in a future for which we must struggle. In the closing words of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 'the true Genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end'.

The effect of Bloch's thought is to be seen in the writings of two german theologians especially, a catholic, J. B. Metz, and Jürgen Moltmann, a protestant.<sup>3</sup> These two, particularly Moltmann, are

<sup>1</sup> Gen 3, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Frankfort, 1964), II, p 49; cf *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*; in *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 5 (Frankfort, 1959), p 1504.

<sup>3</sup> The influence of Bloch on Metz is seen in the latter's lecture 'The Church and the World', which has been published in english in *The Word in History*, ed Burke, T. P.,

the leading figures in this new theological movement.<sup>1</sup> Bloch's influence on them is obvious in the matter of language. Over and over again, one finds them using his terminology. More important than this is the fact that they accept his analysis of human existence as corresponding best with scripture and the facts of experience. Bloch sees man as set within a world in process marked by a constant movement from possibility to new reality. Man's basic structure is to hope, to fear, to strive towards possibilities which are not yet realized. With this Moltmann is in agreement: men are beings set on the future and characterized before God in history as those who seek and hope.

Hence the one real problem of christianity is for Moltmann the future. Christian existence should be totally eschatological. The work of the theologian is not so much an anselmian process of faith seeking understanding nor an augustinian process of love coming to knowledge, but the reflections of a 'hope seeking understanding'. In acknowledging the centrality of hope and the future, Moltmann comes into conflict with the theologians influenced by Heidegger's existentialism, above all Bultmann and his school. They locate divine revelation in the preaching-event which calls forth my religious decision. There is only the decisive 'now' of revelation, no 'then', no 'later'. It looks as if historical distinctions become irrelevant. The gospel is pictured as translating us out of time, or bringing time to a standstill. This preoccupation with the present has meant that the existentialist theologians have individualized and spiritualized eschatology. The New Testament talk about what is to come for the whole world as well as for mankind has been interpreted a-temporally and in terms of the individual and his decision now. This interpretation Moltmann and Metz reject as a fatal reduction of eschatology. The New Testament requires us to hope for a real future, and that not merely for our individual selves but also for the whole world. Finally, the existentialist theologians have taken revelation in a formal sense by 'unpacking' the notion itself, and then explaining revelation as the disclosure of what is concealed or the unveiling of what is hidden from man. This is, however, to

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(London, 1968). Moltmann has edited and introduced a selection of Bloch's writings on religion, *Religion im Erbe (Religion in Inheritance)*. Both men contributed to the *Festschrift* for Bloch's eightieth birthday. Bloch's influence outside Germany is to be seen in the writings of the american protestant theologians Harvey Cox and Carl Braaten.

<sup>1</sup> Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (London, 1967) is the major work of the movement. He lectured during the winter of 1967/8 in the United States and is due to lecture in England this autumn.

miss the central biblical view that revelation occurs as the divine promise which calls human hope to life.

In the Old Testament, words and statements about God's revelation are consistently joined to statements of God's promise. Thus the divine manifestation comes to Abraham precisely by way of a promise to Abraham and his descendants. Likewise, Christ's resurrection from the dead is made known to us in a setting of promise. Here God reveals himself as the one who has raised and will raise the dead. We know God in the unfolding history of promise. Our hope for the future is possible precisely because of what has happened and has been received as divine promise. The past is remembered and transmitted as a promise of our future; recollection is a mode of hope.

God is known through his promises and their fulfilment as the faithful one. The secret of God is his fidelity. Man recognizes not simply the past story of divine loyalty to promise, but he anticipates 'the future of God' in a hope which this promise has called to life. In making this point, Metz and Moltmann appropriate phrases from Bloch's writings. God is the 'God before us' with the 'future as a constituent of his being'.

What we should hope for is something truly new. It will not be merely a disclosure of what is now present but hidden, nor a renovation, that is to say, a return to some original state of affairs. Men commonly take a 'greek' view of the universe in which there is 'nothing new under the sun'. They look for correspondences between the new and the old and try to conceive the future as a continuation of the past, understanding it on the analogy of what has already taken place. The future, however, sets us free for what is truly new, for what has not yet been. In the history of Israel, we see how the future went far beyond a mere re-enactment and confirmation for this people of what God had already done and revealed. Eventually there came the resurrection of Christ, which was the beginning of the end both for the world and for all mankind. In this event, by which christianity stands or falls, we recognize something which lacks any analogy from the past but which promises us our future in the coming lordship of Christ in the new creation. By their emphasis on the cosmic dimension of the resurrection, Moltmann and other theologians of hope differ sharply from Bultmann and his school, who concentrate on the proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen and on the birth of faith. This, Moltmann fears, is to obscure the full New Testament account of the resurrection as God's

action on the crucified Jesus, which promises the coming divine dominion over the world. What lies ahead is more than the disclosure of what has already happened and is now secretly present. All is not yet new; it has not yet appeared what we shall be.<sup>1</sup> Like the israelites, we must grasp God's revelation in the context of our promised future.

We have been looking at some features of the new theology of hope, contrasting it with the earlier existentialist theology, influenced by Heidegger. How successful is this new theology? What kind of objections can be brought against it? It is open to objection for its selective use of scripture. Thus Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* highlights Romans, 1 Corinthians and the Epistle to the Hebrews, but omits any reference to the Fourth Gospel. It is a real difficulty to reconcile the futurist eschatology of Hebrews, with its stress on the pilgrim people of God and on coming salvation, with the realized eschatology of John's Gospel, where individuals find salvation one by one in the here and now.

One clear advantage of the recent theology of hope is that it secures the continuity of the two Testaments by holding them together in a single scheme of promise. The earlier existentialist theology had involved Bultmann in a devaluation of the Old Testament dispensation and scripture. For him the Old Testament was chiefly a human document which presented us with a paradigm of human existence and a story of human failure. In place of this discontinuity Moltmann recognizes the link between the two Testaments in the history of promise. The danger is that the factor of continuity is so stressed that the history of Jesus becomes no more than a later stage of the Old Testament history of promise. Moltmann explains, however, that he is acknowledging something more than a mere progressive continuity. In Christ the divine promises from the past are not simply definitively fulfilled. They are raised to a quite new level in being directed now to all mankind and communicating the promise of a new creation in the resurrection of the dead. The gospel does more than fulfil the Old Testament history of promise; it takes it up into a new future.

One line of objection concerns the place of suffering and the cross in the theology of hope. Do the resurrection and our promised future so dominate that we may be in danger of forgetting the evils of the present, and of failing to take suffering seriously? Similar

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 3, 2.

criticism has been brought against Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary optimism. For his part, Moltmann is convinced that many German Protestant theologians have been so taken up with the cross that they neutralize our proper Easter hope for God's coming kingdom. Far from belittling suffering, this very hope should in a sense accentuate it. It is precisely because he does hope in this way that the believer is conscious of the deep difference between the evil which he experiences now and the future which he looks for. At the same time, the divine promise can enable us to believe and obey in the face of suffering, because we hope that the godlessness of the world will be overcome.

A key objection which has been raised against the work of Moltmann is that he wrongly interprets the New Testament passages about future events terminating world history. This talk is part of an obsolete world picture. The *parousia* of the Lord is to be understood as his presence, not his return. The *eschaton* is not to be interpreted with respect to the last things in the world process, but to the end of worldliness for the believer and his finding authentic existence now through the decision of faith. In other words, eschatology is a matter of things ultimate in importance, not things ultimate in time. Such an existentialist interpretation of New Testament eschatology would destroy the basis of Moltmann's theology of hope. In defence of his position he rightly argues that we can preserve the temporal intention of biblical eschatology without obliging ourselves to a naive literalism vis-à-vis the apocalyptic imagery employed. Through all the variations in their expressions, the scriptural texts indicate a future goal which gives meaning to the present. In the New Testament, the *parousia* of Christ is not his presence, but his future coming in messianic glory at the end of history.

In his use of St Paul, Moltmann accepts the view that a truly futurist eschatology lies at the heart of Pauline theology.<sup>1</sup> In Corinth the apostle faced the threat of an enthusiasm which so valued the present experience of grace that a proper eschatological hope for the future was obscured. St Paul reacted by reflecting on the perfect dominion of God through Christ, which is still to come.

In Christ all shall be made alive. . . For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to

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<sup>1</sup> Here he relies on the work of the German Protestant theologians, Ernst Käsemann and his student Peter Stuhlmacher.

be destroyed is death. . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.<sup>1</sup>

The world is not yet fully subjected to God. Our present enjoyment of the Spirit must be understood with reference to the future reality of God's rule, and to our coming participation in Christ's resurrection.

The striking advance which the new theology of hope represents is seen in its social context and ethical consequences. If we look at the social setting envisaged by Ernst Fuchs, one of Bultmann's leading followers, it hardly extends beyond the family, the church community, the village and the academic community. In a public discussion with Moltmann last year Fuchs significantly introduced 'village life' as criterion for assessing theological positions. He passes by the larger world of political and economic realities. His world is that of small children spreading love in a family, teachers in school with their pupils, the farmer with his cattle, the professor with his students. Behind Fuchs lies Bultmann's own abstraction from social conditions and the process of world history, together with a strain of romanticist reaction which would make the idyllically conceived village community the norm, as over against the large industrial city. Bultmann is concerned with the individual's knowledge of God and of himself apart from the world. The history of man as a person is set beyond ordinary history. God's word of revelation calls its hearer out of the world, to find an inner freedom which brings a relation to all worldly engagements expressed by the spirit of 'as if not'.

Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.<sup>2</sup>

In practice this meant, however, that Bultmann has preached a spirit of disengagement which is unproductive of political and cultural impulses. Take, for example, the sermon of 22nd June 1941, the morning on which the news came that the German army had

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15, 22ff.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 7, 29-31.

marched into Russia. The main point of the sermon was 'God's invitation', 'the call to a higher life'. 'It is the call to free ourselves from this world and to become centred in God's world'. Bultmann ended with an appeal for that 'inner detachment' by which we cling to God in 'calm trust'. His advent sermon of 1943 recommends a 'readiness to suffer for the good' in a spirit of 'trustful waiting on God'. When the war was over, his comment was: 'the point is not how we are to remove our trials but how we are to bear them steadfastly'. Going back to December 1938, we find him reflecting in a sermon to the university students of Marburg on the way 'human beings are sacrificed and crushed... in the process of setting up any secular order'. For 'that is the way things inevitably go in this world'. Christians 'feel as a painful burden the sorrows and the tears of those to whom violence is done'. But 'this is the unalterable way of things in this world... the way of secular government is a way which always leads through blood and tears'.<sup>1</sup> We see here how christian hope is turned into a patient waiting, even a dangerous quietism.

Moltmann, Metz and the other new theologians of hope, however, take account of man as they find him in the world, with all his social, economic and political relationships. By accepting God's promise man commits himself to live in such a world an existence based on hope. The renunciation of the world indicated by St Paul<sup>2</sup> is not a mere flight from the world, but is expressive of a determination not to be conformed to the existing world, in so far as it is preoccupied with its own concerns and self-satisfaction. The christian is estranged from the present world situation precisely because he hopes in that future world made known to him through God's promise. He seeks to change the world in expectation of the divine change. He finds present evil intolerable in the light of the future new creation. As a group, the christian people should show their eschatological orientation in everything from which and for which they live. Engaged in the apostolate of hope for the world, they refuse to allow themselves to be assimilated to the present, inadequate society. They seek to transform public life, becoming the source of fresh impulses towards the realization of justice, freedom and a fully human life. To hope is not then simply to count on God for the future, but also to commit oneself to certain

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<sup>1</sup> *The World and the Beyond, Marburg Sermons*, tr Knight, H. (London, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Cf 1 Cor 7, 29ff.



conduct in the light of that future. What is required is an attitude of creative expectation which sets about transforming the present state of affairs, because it is open towards the universal future of God's kingdom. This approach to christian conduct meets the criticism which Bloch rightly makes of christian hope as it is so often preached and lived, *viz.*, as a quietistic trust which lacks the will to change and attempts no remedy for present misery.

In one sense, there is less weight of ethical responsibility involved in Moltmann's christian hope than there is in the atheistic hope of his philosophical mentor. Bloch regards man as capable of creating in this world a utopian home. But human decision can also fail to measure up to the possibilities which history offers; the process which is reality does not imply an automatic advance. For Bloch the world is no less a 'laboratory of possible damnation' than it is a 'laboratory of possible salvation'. The outcome depends on man's intelligent loyalty to hope, which does not miss present opportunities either through nostalgically yearning for some lost paradise of the past or through a dull bourgeois realism that accepts the present situation as it is, without any appreciation of how an improvement might be effected. Bloch's marxist philosophy of hope makes man take the full burden of responsibility.

On their side, Moltmann and Metz rely finally on the fidelity of the God of hope (*Deus spei*), not on Bloch's 'God-hope' (*Deus spes*) to bring the longed-for future. To hope in God is to hope in the face of death. If we lacked hope in the face of humanity's last enemy, death, then all our social and political activity would be only an improvement in the living conditions of our prison in the world, but not an escape from this prison. While we are called to militant responsibility, the coming kingdom remains God's gift, not man's achievement. We must be builders and not simply theoretical interpreters of the future; but its 'awakening power' remains God himself. The absolute future cannot be understood as nothing more than an evolutionary extension of our own possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

In leading catholic and protestant theologians to a renewed interest in the theme of hope, Ernst Bloch has not been the sole extra-christian influence at work. We need think only of the part played by the marxist-christian dialogue sponsored by the Society

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<sup>1</sup> Metz, J. B., 'The Controversy about the Future of Man', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4 (1967), pp 226ff.

of St Paul. On the christian side, these meetings have seen a shift in the thought of Karl Rahner towards a greater involvement in the theology of hope. From the marxist side, they have brought christian theologians into further fruitful contact with Professor Roger Garaudy and others. Garaudy has also participated in discussions on Teilhard de Chardin, whose optimistic evolutionary views have proved effective in bringing themes of hope into the centre of theological interest. Yet another factor in the renewal of a theology of hope is the work of Vatican II, above all its constitution on the Church in the modern world, a document deeply concerned with the future of man. In that constitution the Council fathers declared that 'the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping'.<sup>1</sup> The christian must not succumb to a paralyzing uncertainty about the world's future. His hope in no way decreases, but rather increases, the weight of his responsibility to work with all men in constructing a world of peace and justice. Earthly progress, the Council agrees, is not identical with the growth of Christ's kingdom, but it is of vital concern to that kingdom.

No 'instant' virtue, christian hope grows through the experience of mastering despair in the concrete problems of life. Nor is it innocent conviction that things always tend to turn out for the best. It is hope in the face of evil and against this evil. It is the passion of the people of God for the coming kingdom. We must all work together to recover our full christian heritage of hope. It is an encouraging sign of our contemporary world that catholic and protestant theologians have already begun to do so under the common influence of Ernst Bloch, a marxist with the bible in his hand.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 32.