

Chapter 7

Hope in Theology

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Abstract As social, civic, and global anxieties mount, the need to overcome despair has become urgent. This chapter draws on St. Thomas Aquinas and virtue ethics to propose the theological virtue of hope as a powerful source of rejuvenation. It argues for the necessary place of theology in reflection on hope due to the religious origins of hope as a central human aspiration and virtue capable of resilience. The virtue of hope, it is suggested, sustains us from the sloth and despair that threaten amid injustice, tragedy, and death; it provides an ultimate meaning and transcendent purpose to our lives; and it encourages us “on the way” (*in via*) with the prospect of eternal beatitude. Rather than degrading this life and world, hope ordains earthly goods to our eschatological end, forming us to pursue justice and social tasks with a resilience and vitality that transcend widespread cynicism and disillusionment. While hope ultimately seeks the kingdom of God, it can be concluded that it contributes richly to personal happiness and the common good, even in this life, and that this may be affirmed by those who do not share the theological premises.

7.1 Introduction

Over the past decade in Western society a growing sense of crisis has made the search for hope take on new urgency. As polarization in society and politics increases, many who pay attention to current events struggle to find reasons for hope. Yet the quest for hope must contend with the fact that it is not a commodity which meets ordinary supply and demand relations. Hope cannot be sold to us by pharmaceutical companies, or packaged for delivery by an online retailer. It confounds our ordinary consumer and technological means for procuring what we want, making it both necessary and elusive.

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117

The question therefore arises: where may hope in a meaningful and durable sense be found? Proposals here vary and are sufficiently familiar, ranging from populist politics and psychological techniques to revolutionary progressivism and scientific technocracy. But before offering solutions, we do well to reflect on the origins of hope as a moral concept in our society and on the particular contours which that origin gave to its expression. This confronts us with an unavoidable and important fact: that hope as a moral concept is tied to religious history.¹ Trying to understand the general shape of hope in Western culture while ignoring the impact of religion would be like trying to understand democratic modernity while ignoring the impact of the French Revolution. If moral concepts cannot be wrenched from their histories without some loss of understanding, a serious interest in hope must begin by addressing its theological origins in a meaningful way.

This is especially so when hope is thought of as a *virtue* and therefore as resilient, rather than as a temporary mood, attitude of optimism, and so forth. Since virtues are stable character traits which prove durable over time,² to have hope in this form would be a great advantage. As is well-known, pagan antiquity affirmed a variety of virtues as essential for the good life, such as the “cardinal” virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Conspicuously absent from such lists is a virtue of hope, which was added to the standard list of Greco-Roman virtues through the rise of Christianity. St. Paul famously wrote that “faith, hope, and charity abide, these three” (1 Cor 13:13). In time these would be categorized as the three “theological” virtues set alongside the four cardinal virtues.

Given its far-reaching biblical pedigree, hope’s place in this triad is well-merited. From beginning to end, the Old Testament is saturated with hope in God. “Hoping against hope” (Rom 4:18) Abraham founds the Chosen People and becomes their paradigm of piety. Amid slavery in Egypt and the Babylonian captivity, Israel is sustained by a hope in God which shows astonishing firmness. The Book of Psalms voices total confidence in God, pictured throughout in hope-specific metaphors—as a refuge or fortress to shield us, or an eagle that will lift us up—all this despite injustices, deportation, and tragedy. The New Testament likewise depicts hope as tenacious, describing it “the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb 6:19), and telling believers to put on “for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess 5:8).

Both before and during Christ’s lifetime, hopes for a Messiah were at fever pitch. The disciples projected these onto Jesus, but on the cross such hopes seemed mocked and ruined. Against that grim background, the Resurrection of Christ surprised his disciples with dazzling intensity, impressing on believers the ultimate vindication of hope. The Easter mystery and the belief in Christ’s second coming inspired the belief that nothing—not even death—could prevent the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Born in this context, Christianity came into the world not just as a generic religion of hope; but as an unprecedented movement of confident, rejoicing, and triumphal

¹At least in Western history, a fact that is a commonplace in the literature. For a historical sketch of hope, see Elliot (2017, pp. 1–38). See also Moltmann (2010); Van Hooff (2014).

²See Elliot (2016) and Snow (2009).

hope. Patristic, medieval, and later theology take by comparison a more sober approach, but only in the sense that they moderate the joyful triumphalism with warnings against presumption and counsels to spiritual vigilance.

Although its precise form has varied over time, until quite recently hope in the Western tradition was believed to make a crucial contribution to the good life and to helping us face the enigma of death. But in a multidisciplinary setting this can no longer just be assumed. Academics outside theology may be inclined to ask what *relevance* there is today in distinctly religious as opposed to other forms of hope, and to wonder whether it is likely to prove a foolish distraction. Yet one need not denigrate ordinary earthly hopes to see that theological hope has a unique value from which innumerable people have and continue to derive solace. One of these has to do with the disconsoling limits of human agency.

Earthly existence exposes us, our loved ones, our neighbours, and the whole human community to a variety of tragic circumstances: poverty, disease, hunger, violence, pain, loss of livelihood, injustice, broken relationships, illness, decline, and tragedies of all kinds. In its final extremity it exposes us to death, that on naturalistic terms is the final and irrevocable parting from those we love most, the permanent loss of all that we cared and worked for in this world. Whether by sudden existential shocks or the slow attrition of the years, we are vulnerable to the threats of demoralization and despair, what J.S. Mill called “the disastrous feeling of ‘not worthwhile.’” Even our best efforts to overcome these ills are doomed to “reach beyond our grasp,” and fall well short of our praiseworthy aims.

Hope changes our perspective on suffering, discouragement, injustice, tragedy, and death. By making clear that our present situation is not permanent and by relying on grace to sustain us, hope precludes undue dejection and despair. As Isaiah says: “They that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall take wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Is 40:31). Instead of seeing their lives as the product of cosmological chance, the hopeful see themselves as created by a God of love who wills their beatitude from eternity. Hope can therefore provide an ultimate meaning and transcendent purpose to our lives, and encourage us with the prospect of ultimate reconciliation and lasting beatitude.³ Recent work in empirical psychology affirms the personal benefits of religious hope.⁴

But it is precisely this transcendent quality of religious hope that brings us to a familiar set of suspicions. In biblical terms, the hopeful ultimately seek membership in a heavenly *civitas*, believing that “here we have no lasting city, but seek one which is to come” (Heb 13:14). Since these “cities” may represent competing loyalties—most dramatically seen in martyrdom—this forces us to think through the relationship between those identities, and the prospects for social and ecclesial tension they

³In no way does this *prove* the theological claims of hope. As Matthew Arnold wrote: “Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread.” But I do think it illustrates something in the human condition that hope speaks to, both historically and, for believers, normatively.

⁴See Snow (2013).

involve. Moreover, theological hope may seem to regard this world as a dissolving phantasmagoria or sinking Titanic, and critics have been quick to twist the knife on this point. “The country of the Christian is not of this world,” Rousseau wrote disparagingly. “This short life counts for so little in their eyes” that for Christians “the essential thing is to get to heaven” and out of “this valley of sorrows”.⁵ Christian hope, critics argue, devalues the world and prompts Christians to identify with their own parallel society of the Church at the expense of worldly memberships. Those who wish for stronger hopes in society may therefore view theological hope as a positive menace: an obscurantist force prone to reinforce alienation.

This chapter will push against this view and argue that Christian hope makes an important contribution not just at the personal but also at the social level, and that this can be recognized and appreciated even by those who do not share the theological premises. In giving this account I will draw on St. Thomas Aquinas, whose overall model of hope I regard as rich and persuasive. (Elsewhere I explain why I do not take my lead from the valuable but limited “theology of hope” of Jürgen Moltmann.)⁶ Without aiming at an overall theory of social identity or Christian citizenship, I will argue that virtuous hope does not detract from this life and world but acknowledges their integrity and honours their goodness; taking up and ordaining the earthly projects of prudence, justice, charity, and other virtues to the eschaton itself. The social achievements of the hopeful, I propose, may at their best be not just a movement towards, but a foretaste or premonition, of the perfect social happiness proper to redeemed humanity.

This gives added reason for the hopeful to be socially invested and work for justice and reform. The lives of the saints and great reformers suggest this may be done with a refreshing lack of cynicism that corresponds to the spiritual “youthfulness” (*iuventas*) traditionally ascribed to hope, and compared to which despair is a kind of spiritual senility. Theological hope, I suggest, can powerfully help us to sustain vitality and curb demoralisation when the results of our personal and social endeavours prove flawed. In a period threatened by various forms of despair, such hope is a vital resource we would do well to consider.

⁵Rousseau (1986 [1762]).

⁶I readily acknowledge that anyone interested in Christian hope is deeply in Moltmann’s debt. Along with Wolfhart Pannenberg, he helped to rescue eschatology from the image of an embarrassing conversation-stopper that the demythologisers had given it. In addition, Moltmann’s biblically rich account refuses hope’s equivalent of cheap grace at all points by its stress on social praxis, and by founding hope on Christ’s Resurrection rather than on some baptised optimism. Yet Moltmann’s account is implicated in a lot of Hegelian metaphysics and Marxist politics that many will find uncongenial. Moreover, his pantheism with its developing and disempowered God cannot ensure that the eschaton ends happily rather than tragically. The ironic result is that Moltmann deflates hope in crucial ways, making the search for alternatives important. See Elliot (2017, pp. 46–54).

7.2 Origin and Concept of Theological Hope

The concept of hope obviously has a history, but it has also changed the very idea of history. Early Christians believed that the powers of sin and death had been conquered by Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. Hope therefore looks forward to the time when God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). But since the kingdom of God will not be fully ushered in prior to the return of Christ, who will “make all things new” (Rev 21:5), Christianity has a provisional view of history. We are in transition between what the New Testament calls the “ages” or *aiones*, but that transition is from the old *aion* of sin and death to the new *aion* where the kingdom will be fully manifest. The risen Christ is the first fruits of a “new creation” (Gal 6:15) in which evil and suffering have no power.⁷ So rather than thinking of it as a *past* event, from the Christian perspective it would be more satisfactory to see the Resurrection as “ahead of the times,” so to speak, and incomparably newer than the old *aion* whose bad news still litters the headlines. For Christians, the Resurrection therefore remains not just good, but (what is too easily forgotten) “news.”

This vision helps to account for the remarkable intensity of early Christian hope. As Peter Brown notes, early Christians were intoxicated with hope, and even the seeming collapse of civilization that was the fall of Rome did not sober them up.⁸ Later patristic and medieval theology tempered this earlier enthusiasm with warnings against presumption and counsels to ascetic patience. Of particular interest to my account in this history is the role of the great thirteenth century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas. He inherited a millennium-long tradition of Latin theology whose greatest authority was St. Augustine and whose medieval benchmark was Peter Lombard. In his *Sentences*, Lombard defined hope vaguely as a form of expectation, but left its practical (and therefore its moral) role unclear.⁹ This was not unusual. The conceptual neglect of hope had been going on for centuries. Of the three theological virtues, it was easier to describe an act of faith or charity than to describe an act of hope. Partly due to this, hope has historically been kept in soft focus as the junior partner of faith and charity, consistently valued but conceptually underdeveloped.

In contrast to this, Aquinas took a serious interest in hope from early in his career, and sought to clarify its nature and role with some thoroughness. He defines hope’s object as a “future good possible but arduous to attain” (*bonum futurum arduum possibile haberi*).¹⁰ We hope for goods which we do not yet have, and which we may but are not certain to get.¹¹ Hope therefore combines desire and uncertainty, and may oscillate between joyful anticipation and anxious longing.

⁷See Stanley B. Marrow (2002); Richard B. Hays (1996, pp. 169–181).

⁸Brown (1981).

⁹Merkt (1981).

¹⁰Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

¹¹See Elliot (2017); Merkt (1981); Doyle (2012).

Although Aquinas wrote at length on hope as a passion or form of affect, he did not set great evaluative store by it. The passion of hope itself—which Aquinas thinks conspicuous among “youth and drunkards” (*iuvenes et ebrii*)—should not be confused with hope as it appears in the will.¹² Specifically Christian hope for Aquinas is a *virtue* rather than a feeling, attitude of optimism, and so forth.¹³ The virtues themselves are firm dispositions or *habitus* to act well. Aquinas quotes his Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to state that “virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise”.¹⁴ But unlike the natural or “acquired virtues” (*virtutes acquisitae*) which humans themselves attain through habituation and effort, hope is one of the supernatural or “infused” virtues (*virtutes infusae*) gratuitously poured out by the grace of God. Like faith and charity, hope is also a “theological” virtue in that its immediate object is God (*theos*). But whereas faith knows God as first truth and charity loves God as the universal good, hope seeks God as our personal good—namely, as the source of perfect and lasting happiness in eternal life.

Aquinas says that hope does this in two ways, making its object two-fold. The first aspect is “eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of God”.¹⁵ This is the “final cause”¹⁶ or end for which hope longs, and it denotes a “stretching forth of desire”¹⁷ towards “eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of God Himself”.¹⁸ As this suggests, hope is the virtue which answers to St. Augustine’s famous phrase, “You have made us for yourselves, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (Augustine 2005 [400]).¹⁹

Hope’s second object is “the divine assistance. . . on whose help (hope) relies”.²⁰ This is hope’s “efficient cause,” and it “attains God by leaning on his help,”²¹ that is, on his “omnipotence and mercy”.²² This is how Aquinas puts what we would describe in plainer terms as asking God for help to do your duty or become a better

¹²At the same time, Aquinas notes that volitional hope may overflow into and stimulate the passions, often giving rise to feelings of hope. *ST II-II.25.5.2* (Aquinas 1981 [1265]).

¹³Historically, the concept of hope as a discrete and focal virtue originates with hope as a *theological* virtue. But this does not, of course, imply that no secular form of hope could count as a virtue in any sense. Nor am I arguing such, though I think losing the distinct value of theological hope would be a considerable loss. Even in terms of conceptual history, it would be a bit like “Hamlet without the Prince.” Yet a proper treatment of this question is beyond the scope of this paper given that I am treating the theology of hope.

¹⁴“*Virtus est quae bonum facit habentem, et opus eius bonum reddit.*” *ST I-II 55.3*.

¹⁵Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

¹⁶Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

¹⁷Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

¹⁸Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

¹⁹“*Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te,*” Augustine (2019, 1.1).

²⁰Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

²¹Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

²²Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

person, seeking forgiveness, praying for strength, relying upon God to get through illness or tragedy, and so forth.

The basic practice of hope, therefore, might be summarized as a combination of *longing* and *leaning*. By hope we long for God as the source of our beatitude, and this corresponds to hope's final cause. By hope we also lean upon grace to sustain us through the joys and challenges of our earthly pilgrimage, and this corresponds to hope's efficient cause. Understood in these terms, the virtue of hope sustains agents from the twin threats of presumption and despair, the two vices opposed to hope.²³

7.3 Not "of the World"?

Aquinas believes that we may attain partial happiness in this life, but that the ultimate goal of hope is the beatific vision of God in the next. So important is this trajectory of hope toward eternal beatitude that it imparts a unique identity to those who have it. Just as we classify human beings as *homo sapiens*, the medievals classified the Christian as *homo viator*: the human "wayfarer" who is "on the way" (*in via*) or on the journey to arrive in the heavenly homeland (*in patria*). Such thought draws on various New Testament passages, such as the claim that Christians are "pilgrims and strangers on the earth" (1 Pt 2:11) and the admonition to desire "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:13–16). As the second century Epistle to Diognetus would later famously say: Christians are "in the world but not of the world." (Mathetes, 130).

If matters ended there, hope might lead us to reject all earthly goods and worldly endeavours as nothing but harp-strumming by the waters of Babylon. Some read in this light St. Paul's admission that the Christian community is disproportionately poor, uneducated, and lacking in worldly success (1 Cor 1: 26–27). Christianity's "cultured despisers" at times fasten onto this point in a polemic to unmask hope as a self-deceiving hatred of life. This polemic itself has an ancient pedigree. The familiar tale, tweaked and varied by Celsus, Voltaire, Gibbon, Hume, Nietzsche, Marx, and others, generally goes this way. Christians are fixated on heaven because the world has not been kind to them. Having missed out on happiness here, they console themselves with the wish-fulfilment fantasy of the hereafter, and avenge themselves on the happy, healthy, and fortunate by declaring their worldly joys bankrupt. Instead of having to admit that they are failures, hope licenses Christians to convert their wretchedness into a moral trophy and promissory note of heaven while indulging the sweets of resentment towards the "worldly"—that is, towards everybody else—by passive aggressive moralising and hints of divine punishment. The

²³Whereas despair consists in believing that hope's object is impossible, hope's second opposed vice is presumption, which comes in two forms. The first occurs when one refuses to seek God's grace or forgiveness out of either self-reliance or self-righteousness. The second occurs when one refuses to repent or perform good works in the belief that salvation is easy or guaranteed, and therefore requires no moral or spiritual toil. See *ST II-II* 20, 21.

world-renouncing hope of Christians turns out to be nothing more than a case of cosmic sour grapes.²⁴

While people who know Christianity know that this is a caricature, some may suspect that there is a real point here which has been grossly stretched. Fears that the hope debunkers have something of a point also helps to account for the neglect of hope by Christian ethicists who dread the jeer of “pie in the sky”. What must be established is how the hopeful should regard created goods and earthly projects granted that they have in some sense redirected their core aspirations from those objects and towards God as the supernatural end. If, as the Nicene Creed states, Christians “look forward to . . . the life of the world to come,” where does that leave this life and world?

To examine this I will address several distinct but related questions. The first is whether theological hope permits us to *identify* with human society in specific forms, such as culture and nation, or whether hope simply alienates us from these. The second is whether theological hope gives its own reasons to *benefit* the earthly city, rather than just being indifferent to it.²⁵ The third is whether hope may seek the *redemption* of our social identities themselves in the eschaton. I will argue in the affirmative for all three.

For the hopeful, eternal happiness in the kingdom of heaven, the beatific vision of God “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12), is our central aspiration. But taking my cue from Aquinas, I will suggest further on that hope may invest itself in the social body as a “proximate end” that is referred to God as our “ultimate end.” That relation invests hope deeply in justice and earthly concerns, but rather than crudely instrumentalizing these as a ladder to heaven, it implies that our social identifications may themselves be redeemed.

At first this may seem highly improbable. Christianity has historically viewed “the world” in some sense as a tension, a problem, or even an adversary. In Luke’s Gospel “the children of the world” are sharply distinguished from “the children of the light.” John’s Gospel calls the devil “the ruler of this world” who must be “cast out” (John 12:31). Later in the same Gospel, Christ says that the world cannot receive the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17), and ominously tells his disciples “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me first. . . because you are not of the world. . . therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18–19).

But it is not immediately clear why the world should be described so pejoratively. Did not God create the world and call it very good? More baffling, how is one to reconcile “for God so loved the world” (John 3:16) with the injunction “love not the

²⁴For a discussion of this polemic, see Elliot (2017, pp. 92–103).

²⁵Without opposing it, I am not here using the term “earthly city” here in the Augustinian (normative) sense of the city of man opposed to the city of God, but in the merely (descriptive) sense of all of the neighbours with whom we share bonds. The former has in view those defined in advance as lacking grace, and therefore unsusceptible to the agency of hope. The latter does not address this question, since it is describing our neighbours generally, whom Christians will hope are in a state of grace (or, at the very least, that as many as possible are or will come to be). Concerning Augustine’s own terminology, see Speck (1996).

world” (1 John 2:15)? The fear that there something quasi-Manichean is going on here makes it tempting, but facile, to ignore the tension. Most of the tradition interpreted this ambivalence through 1 John 2:16: “all that is in the world... the desire of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not of the Father” (1 John 2:16).²⁶ This makes clearer that “the world” in the pejorative sense refers not to the physical earth, the human race, or human culture. It is shorthand for the widespread pursuit of materialistic ends such as wealth, status, lust, and power.

In general terms, this is “the world” that Christians are “in” but are not supposed to be “of”. But that very alienation may free us to be “for the world” with respect to justice and other social goods which worldliness by its nature impedes. This opens up the possibility that hope may be *contra mundum* in a highly qualified sense that frees us to be *pro mundo* in another and much more important sense. Later, I shall try to fill out what this looks like.

Nevertheless, the New Testament does appear to commend alienation of a serious kind. Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham are said to have “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13). This is not credited to their own idiosyncrasies, but is represented as highly reasonable: “They desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb 11:13–16). The early Church reinforced such trends, though there were notable exceptions: e.g., St. Paulinus of Nola, St. Ambrose, Orosius, Prudentius, and even (in some respects) St. Jerome, each of whom reconciled their ardent and ascetical Christianity with an affirmation of Rome as a providential carrier of cosmopolitan ideals, civic norms, and Christianity to the nations. But such views are minority reports amid the more general trend toward worldly alienation.²⁷ I noted earlier the second century *Epistle to Diognetus*, which famously said that Christians “reside in their own homelands, but as if they were foreigners... they are in the world but not of the world” (Mathetes, 130). The impression can be that the hopeful do not see themselves as really belonging to earthly society in any thick sense. Honouring Caesar and paying taxes would not

²⁶This interpretation has garnered the support of much biblical scholarship. In addition to Marrow, Brown (1995, pp. 293–328). For a shorter treatment, see Vawter (1968, pp. 407–409).

²⁷Prudentius is by far the most positive of these figures in terms of viewing his Roman society (at its best) and the Christian Church as mutually compatible and reinforcing (see Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum*, II, 578–636). But such connections are by no means lacking in related figures, and often come into sharp focus negatively: e.g., as howls of lament over Rome’s painful, protracted downfall. In *De excessu 1.30*, St. Ambrose referred to Rome’s decisive military defeat as “the destruction of the entire globe, the end of the world... more bitter than any death” (*totius orbis excidia, mundi finem... omni morte acerbius est*). He is only outdone in his rhetoric by St. Jerome, for whom the sack of Rome was not just the end of the world, but also the defiling of God’s holy temple and the loss of a second Jerusalem (St. Jerome, *Epistola CXXVII*, 12). We are a far cry here from St. Augustine’s assessments of the situation in *De Civitate Dei*. See Averil Cameron, “Remaking the Past,” in *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World*, ed. Peter Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 1–20, and especially p. 7; Noel Lenski, “Initium mali Romano imperio: Contemporary Reactions to the Battle of Adrianople,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 127 (1997), pp. 129–168; and more generally, Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), pp. 39–41, 58–67.

necessarily alter this. Even a determined commitment to justice and charity in society might not. You can benefit a place without claiming membership within it, or at least any membership that deeply matters to you. So does hope, seriously followed, encourage alienation from family, town, community, culture, and civil society more broadly?

7.4 *Homo Viator* as a Citizen of Two Cities

Certainly hope in its more pessimistic, dualistic, and Platonic inflections does heavily alienate. But Aquinas strikes a quite different tone. The Dominican Order to which he belonged were formed in part to combat the Cathars, a Manichean revival movement of sorts which took the world and the body to be evil. Partly in response to this, Aquinas laboured heavily to explain the good of creation and embodiment. As the medieval historian R.W. Southern says:

The work of Thomas Aquinas is full of illustrations of the benign congruity between reason, nature and faith. He reversed the ancient opinion that held that the body is the ruined habitation of the soul, and held with Aristotle that it is the embodiment in this life of the soul's being. Man indeed. . . needs supernatural grace, but his final Redemption can be seen as the completion of the perfection which was his by nature at the Creation.²⁸

Of course, Aquinas also sees the world as marred by sin, harried by temptations, and even beset by demons.²⁹ He is not at all a moral Pollyanna. Nevertheless, he views such evils as extrinsic to the created nature of the world itself, which remains essentially good and a work of divine wisdom. Moreover, his account of embodiment views human beings as fully inserted in local and social space. Drawing on Aristotle, he construed humans as body-soul composites or psychosomatic unities, stressing our essential embodiment so far as to bluntly state that “My soul is not I” (*anima mea non est ego*), and insisting that death breaks human nature apart, making necessary the Resurrection.³⁰

If we are essentially embodied beings our identity will be importantly shaped by the time and place of our lives, making our earthly and social identities true parts of ourselves from which we cannot escape. Alasdair MacIntyre put the point well:

For the Platonist, as later for the Cartesian, the soul, preceding all bodily and social existence, must indeed possess an identity prior to all social roles; but for the Catholic Christian, as earlier for the Aristotelian, the body and the soul are not two linked substances. I am my body and my body is social, born to those parents in this community with a specific social identity.³¹

²⁸Southern (1997).

²⁹See, for instance, ST III 41.1, 114.1.

³⁰Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

³¹MacIntyre (2007).

Taken alone, this point does not get us very far, but it does prevent a wrong turn at the outset. It entails that the effort to identify with a dualistic conception of the self which transcends social space is ruled out as strictly incoherent.

Moreover, Aquinas holds that we have an essential inclination toward sociability. Upon this the virtue of justice is built. One sub-virtue of justice is *pietas*, which he takes from Cicero filtered through Augustine.³² *Pietas* demands that reverence and regard be shown to our parents as the primary sources of our “birth and upbringing.” Piety, he believes, is demanded by the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, and it is owed by extension to non-parental sources of life, support, and nourishment. In addition to parents, *pietas* should be “given to our native land (*patria*)... This includes honour to all our fellow-citizens and to all the friends of our native land”.³³ So not only is it impossible to escape one’s social identity, the failure to acknowledge indebtedness to the community that helped nourish and rear you is strictly unjust.³⁴ The implication is that the Christian hopeful really are “dual citizens” of a sort. *Homo viator* may seek eternal citizenship in the city of God, but he owes honour to the earthly city analogous to the honour shown toward parents. Since disowning that city, like disowning one’s parents, is perhaps the grandest gesture of refusing honour, the effort to renounce membership in one’s culture and society is from this perspective both incoherent and unjust. So even apart from the contextual improbabilities it would involve, one cannot respond to the hope/world tension by simply transferring one’s social membership out of one’s *patria* and into the Church.³⁵

If piety and social hope commend membership in one’s society, then hope requires persistent integration where possible. On Aquinas’ reading, Christ himself did this, conforming to the local “manner of living” in part by attending dinner parties and not refusing a glass of wine.³⁶ The hopeful may do so by any number of social and cultural practices which express and reinforce membership in their people. These should not imply fantasies of superiority, but rather a sense of fellowship and familiarity. Understood in this way, even necessary criticism of one’s society or country can be a medium of outreach. Objecting to vicious values, practices, habits, and institutions may partly cause alienation in a certain sense of the word; but then this is a form of communication summoning one’s people to recognize vicious and dehumanizing practices for what they are. That summons may itself be charitably

³²Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

³³Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

³⁴Obviously, family and country are not the only sources of individual and social birth and nourishment. But they are representative and serve as convenient book-ends between which we may place other social groups, from one’s town and neighbourhood to one’s *alma mater* and home parish.

³⁵Stanley Hauerwas has sometimes been accused of doing this. See, for example, Stout (2009, pp. 140–161). For Hauerwas’s denial of the sectarian charges made against him, see Hauerwas (2010, pp. 3–21).

³⁶Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

expressed: specifically, as a form of fraternal correction which Aquinas saw as an act of charity.³⁷

The cases of Dante and Rudyard Kipling are illustrative. Defending his home country from charges of injustice, Kipling wrote: “If England was what England seems. . . ‘Ow quick we’d chuck ‘er! But she ain’t!” This suggests that identification with one’s country may be dropped if one judges it to be on balance corrupt. Far better is Chesterton’s claim that “Love for one’s country implies for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health”.³⁸ Not only does piety commend this approach; charity and hope do as well. Charity, which wills the good of the beloved, does not cease to will that good just because the beloved is not ideal. The pattern is the reverse, as suggested in the biblical phrase: “God showed his love for us in that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8, emphasis added). A corollary is that commitment to one’s homeland or country may persist even if one strongly disagrees with its political, economic, or other policies.

But some have called into question the wisdom of such identification. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre suggested that those who wish to continue “the tradition of the virtues” should treat contemporary society roughly the way St. Benedict’s monks treated the dying Roman empire. The crucial moment came when “men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and sought new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness”.³⁹ In full agreement with this view, Stanley Hauerwas has suggested that the modern nation has become less of a country than a corporation. The United States is by his reckoning little more than a militaristic plutocracy, so that the call to make the ultimate sacrifice for your country sounds to him “a lot like being asked to die for the telephone company”.⁴⁰

Hauerwas’ quip captures an important facet of modern society, but it is also necessary to distinguish the civic people and one’s homeland from the overlapping nation-state and political institutions. The love of home, land, neighbour, and a shared way of life which shapes cultural expressions and local practices is prior to any specific economic, political, or bureaucratic arrangement. Obviously the two exert much mutual influence and concretely overlap in many ways. But we should distinguish them roughly the way we distinguish between a person and an office.⁴¹ While I think a great many of MacIntyre and Hauerwas’ criticisms of modern life hit their mark, the separate point needs to be made that our social and civic bonds are not coterminous with the sprawling institutional bureaucracies that govern economic and political life. Refusal to cooperate with certain policies and practices of the latter does not require repudiation of one’s commitment to the former. Recognizing this

³⁷Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

³⁸Chesterton (2011 [1917]).

³⁹MacIntyre (2007 [1981]).

⁴⁰Hauerwas and Willimon (2008).

⁴¹I am indebted here to discussions by Wolterstorff (1983, Chap. 5), and Stout (2009, pp. 296–300).

fact also helps to disentangle piety from jingoism. That disentanglement in turn makes clear that love and honour of one's homeland neither requires nor condones injustice to those outside it.

In contrast to Kipling, there stands Dante's committed membership in his native Florence. In the heavenly court he is investigated on hope by St. James, like a "bachelor candidate" (*baccialier*) at a university answering questions in an oral exam.⁴² Dante is not only asked what hope is, but "how much of it thrives in your mind".⁴³ We then discover that Dante possesses the theological virtue of hope to a degree unparalleled on earth. Beatrice vouches for him that "There is no son of the Church Militant/ With greater hope than his" and "this is why he is allowed to come" to the heavenly court "before his fighting days on earth are done".⁴⁴ Dante tells St. James that his epistle "instilled me with this dew" of hope, "till now I overflow and pour again your shower upon others".⁴⁵ Dante is, among other things, a missionary poet, and the *Divine Comedy* (again, among other things) is his great sermon on hope.

Dante not only passes his "exam" with a *summa cum laude*, but is singled out as (so to speak) the star student of Christian hope on earth. Given that he is a dishonoured exile from his home *patria* of Florence, we might expect him at this point to bury all thought of his homeland forever. But he does the opposite. Though second to none in hope for the heavenly *patria*, Dante continues to tenderly love his earthly *patria*, calling it "my sweet fold where I grew up a lamb".⁴⁶ Instead of indulging in alienation, he imagines himself back at the baptismal font in Florence where he was baptized, and pines to return home.

Nevertheless, Dante criticizes the city severely at times (Florence has, he insists, "become as venal as a whore").⁴⁷ He also refuses to bend to the corrupt elites who alone could recall him to Florence, instead remaining "a foe to the wolves that prey upon it now".⁴⁸ But crucially, such social criticism and partial alienation flow from the anxious piety of a loving son, not from the aloof disdain of a disowning one. In short, Dante is personally *invested* in Florence.⁴⁹ Zealous for membership both in his native city and the heavenly city, Dante is an exemplary case of *homo viator* as a committed dual citizen. He refuses the temptation to renounce either citizenship just because the dual commitment involves real tensions. Social criticism uttered from this moral space will stem from piety's solicitude and love's anxiety, not the clinically detached and aloof moral disgust of those who feign flight from and

⁴²Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴³Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁴Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁵Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁶Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁷Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁸Dante (2003 [1320]).

⁴⁹See Najemy (1993).

abdicate responsibility for their society—a move which inevitably frays social bonds and foments cynicism.

On this model, the reasonable attitude to civic membership is therefore one of virtuous ambivalence. A judicious balance must be struck between affirming and denouncing, integrating and objecting. When criticism is necessary it should be expressed in terms of fraternal correction and therefore in the temper and mode of charity; making alienation itself, to the extent it is unavoidable, part of one's communication and outreach: one that summons to moral accountability while signalling the intention to lovingly persist in identifying with one's home and society even amid, and not just until, the onset of serious tensions.⁵⁰

7.5 Hope's Ordination of the Earthly City to the Eschaton

Granted that the hopeful amid ambiguities may continue to identify with the earthly city, just what stake does the virtue of hope have in that city, and how might hope benefit it? Though it is marred by sin, Aquinas emphatically believes in the essential goodness of creation. Beyond this, he thinks we may enjoy a rich, if limited, happiness in this present life, and that we should “rejoice in hope” at the approach of eternal life (Aquinas 1981 [1265]).⁵¹ The result is that hope, for Aquinas, does not fit into a narrative meant to make this life and world look unrelievedly bleak. There is a distinct social interest to hope as well. Aquinas observes that we cannot pray for something without hoping for it, and notes that the Our Father includes not just “thy kingdom come” but seeks “our daily bread.” He concludes that theological hope may therefore seek earthly goods, but with one caveat, and one qualification. The caveat is that earthly goods are hoped for “with reference to eternal beatitude” (*in ordine ad beatitudinem aeternam*), meaning we should only seek them in that kind and degree which is compatible with and conducive to eternal life⁵² (Though this may come in very ordinary-looking packaging, as in “our daily bread”).

The qualification is that they are hoped for as “secondary” rather than as “primary” objects of hope, which rules out the idea that God might be deemed a lesser good, or even instrumentalized for purely temporal ends.⁵³ For Aquinas, earthly goods, from those of subsistence to our relationships and the most pressing goals of justice, are fully compatible with theological hope insofar as they are virtuously

⁵⁰Though I disagree with the Emersonian pragmatism he offers, I am at this point indebted to Jeffrey Stout's discussion of principled alienation (Stout 2009, pp. 298–300).

⁵¹ST I-II 5.3, *Super Romanos*, 990.

⁵²Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

⁵³Aquinas wrote that “hope regards eternal happiness chiefly, and other (i.e., temporal and created) goods, for which we pray God, it regards secondarily and as referred to eternal happiness.” (*spes principaliter quidem respicit beatitudinem aeternam; alia vero quae petuntur a Deo respicit secundario, in ordine ad beatitudinem aeternam, ST I-II 17.3.*) For a full treatment of this subject, see Doyle (2012, pp. 119–144).

sought. Just as importantly, they may participate in theological hope as secondary final causes ordered to our ultimate final cause. As Joseph Merkt notes, Aquinas connects the secondary or created goods for which one should hope with the theological virtue of hope. Thus Thomas Aquinas establishes a relationship between the material/political world and hope. He understands that in some ways the material/political world is a cause of hope and an object of hope.⁵⁴

The consequence is that earthly projects may *participate* in our overall movement to the beatific vision, hope's ultimate end. This occurs in many respects, two of which are relevant at present. First, how we conduct earthly projects figures importantly into whether we will attain the beatific vision, and in what way, quality, or condition. Put bluntly, Aquinas thinks that refusing justice and charity in the belief that you can just focus on heaven is the vice of "presumption" opposed to hope, which puts one's salvation in jeopardy. Second, this model allows us to hope that our flawed earthly projects may be redeemed and perfected by divine mercy in the *eschaton*. The things we loved and cared for will be "fulfilled" rather than "abolished" in a pattern of glory perfecting grace as grace perfects nature.⁵⁵ Were this not the case, it might suggest that everything we care about in the world is, *in itself*, a waste of time from the perspective of hope; and surely that is a thought too many. Instead, a cosmic fulfilment and reconciliation of earthly projects is envisioned: the swords will be beaten into ploughshares, Christ will make all things new, every tear will be wiped away, we will see "the healing of the nations" (Rev 22: 2).

Through the mediation of charity we may also hope for our neighbours' beatitude, and therefore for the beatitude of our fellow believers, fellow citizens, and the human race generally.⁵⁶ Since that beatitude is meant to begin in this life, though imperfectly,⁵⁷ commitment to the common good and the happiness of our society is incumbent upon the hopeful. As the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* states:

The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.

Society is the occasion not just for the exercise of cardinal virtues like prudence and justice; it also has ample scope for theological virtues such as charity. If heaven were eremitic, hope itself might lack any role here since it would then have nothing but incidental interests in social existence. But Christianity has always regarded the eschatological end itself in social terms: as a *patria*, a city, a communion of saints.

⁵⁴Merkt (1981).

⁵⁵Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

⁵⁶ST I-II 17.3.

⁵⁷See for instance ST I-II 5.3, 69.2, and Celano (1987).

Since the social body may be referred by hope to our ultimate end, society is part of hope's interests.

7.6 The Heavenly *Patria* and the Beatific Vision

Gaudium et Spes speaks of social reform and work for the common good as a "foreshadowing of the new age." Social reform at its best may not just move toward the perfect friendship of the beatified communion of saints, but constitute a foretaste or premonition of it. *Gaudium et Spes* states: "after we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood, and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, *we will find them again*, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured (emphasis mine)". In this vision, the beatified communion of saints "will find", so to speak, the fullness of social fruition whose beginnings they helped set in motion on earth. This helps to bury the view that hope, in the end, envisions the sheer destruction of our temporal and earthly identities, and therefore cannot be motivated to care much about them now.

Hope construes the Christian as a wayfarer or *viator* on the most important journey possible. But plainly that journey begins, as epic poetry begins, *in medias res*. We are born entangled in a story that has already been going on for some time, and acquire at birth layers of social identity bound up with family, town, history, culture, language, nation, and so forth. The maxim that grace perfects rather than abolishes nature suggests, by extension, that the life of grace perfects and does not abolish social nature. Charity informs hope, and Aquinas says both that one's fellow citizens rank extremely high in the "order of charity" (*ordo caritatis*), and that this order remains in the heavenly "homeland" (*patria*): "Nature is not done away, but perfected, by glory. Now the order of charity is derived from nature.... Therefore this order of charity will endure in heaven".⁵⁸

Hope perfects our sociability in part by gathering Christians together as a pilgrim people jointly seeking the kingdom. Yet even in the Church our local social identities remain, and grace builds upon these. So what might the perfection of this social nature by grace ultimately look like in terms that hope can aspire to, and work towards?

It has been suggested that the resurrection of the body may include the resurrection of social identities as our "larger body": in its vision of the heavenly city, Revelation 22 says of the tree of life that "the leaves of the tree were given for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2), as though, to borrow the biblical idiom, they will be "fulfilled" rather than "abolished".⁵⁹ It intriguingly adds that something about the nations in their redeemed form will persist as an adornment or quality of the

⁵⁸Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

⁵⁹Lewis (1960, p. 187).

heavenly city itself: “the glory and the honour of the nations” shall be brought *into* the heavenly city (Rev 21:26). The biblical scholar Robert Mounce interprets this as developing Isaiah 60’s claim that the “wealth of the nations shall come” to Jerusalem (60:5). But whereas Isaiah is referring to “the choicest of earthly treasures,” the author of Revelation makes the wealth “symbolic” of spiritual riches related to “human culture,” here treated as an object of love and redemption.⁶⁰ So while the hopeful should not expect an earthly kingdom or secular utopia, the belief that our social identifications may be long-term objects of redemption gives added reason for the hopeful to be socially invested and work for reform.

Both because they are important in themselves, and because religious hope is often regarded with unease or suspicion, I have in this chapter devoted a good deal of space to social considerations. But it is important to stress that hope, as a theological virtue, has God (*theos*) as its basic object and primary concern. In that sense, even an afterlife paradise full of happy family reunions or Arcadian delights absent God would be wholly insufficient.

Hope’s tale fittingly ends with the wayfaring theme in consummation. When the journey is finished, *homo viator* becomes *homo comprehensor*: one who has “grasped” or “laid hold of” (*comprehendit*) the perfect beatitude that comes through seeing the face of God.⁶¹ In this “beatific vision” of God’s divine essence, we do not just know God through created effects; we know the very essence of God through the light of glory bestowed upon us. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). This everlasting contemplation of goodness itself is the greatest possible perfection and activity of the intellect, and it produces utter and complete joy in the will, a *torrens voluptatis*.⁶²

Yet Aquinas rightly notes that friendship befits creatures with a social nature, and so he adds that the glorified saints will “see one another and rejoice in God at their fellowship”.⁶³ As the concept of the “communion of saints” (*communio sanctorum*) implies, perfect beatitude is social rather than individualistic. The heavenly Jerusalem is not regarded by the Christian tradition as a long row of hermitages, but as a *civitas* united by perfect fellowship and love in the new creation. In *Paradiso*, Dante symbolizes the Church Triumphant in precisely these terms, with humanity depicted

⁶⁰Mounce (1998).

⁶¹Using scholastic terminology, Aquinas describes the beatific vision in terms of perfection, actuality, and activity (*operatio*). What is potential rather than actual is imperfect, and so happiness considered as perfection is a pure activity or operation. The beatific vision of God’s divine essence is our most perfect activity. In it we do not just know God through created effects; we know the very essence of God through the light of glory bestowed upon us. See ST I-II 3.2 and, for a full-length treatment, Leget (2005).

⁶²*Torrens voluptatis* (“torrent of pleasure”) is a phrase from Ps. 36:8 in Aquinas’ Vulgate translation of the Bible.

⁶³Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

as a vast “white rose” and the angels as a “hive of bees” flying back and forth from God to the rose, transporting his love.⁶⁴

In keeping with the New Testament, Aquinas says we are called to become “fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God”.⁶⁵ In its beatified form, the communion of saints is thus the consummation of the social body as referred by theological hope to the eschaton. Given this and our irreducibly social identity, it follows that even if, as the New Testament says, “here we have no lasting city (Heb 13:14)”, it would be wrong to think that our earthly city is unimportant to who we are or what we should care about, either in this life or in the life to come.⁶⁶

7.7 Conclusion

Given such considerations it is therefore no surprise that so many Christians conspicuous for theological hope have also been conspicuous for social hopes. We need only consider the great medieval saints who tirelessly advocated and worked for the poor, the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the civil rights movement, and other great reformers who sought first the kingdom of heaven and yet contributed to the earthly city in extraordinary fashion. Trust in God and hope for eternal life helped them elude burnout amid setbacks, and avoid becoming hateful to those resisting them. But plainly, their hope for the kingdom of God did not just coexist with their pursuit of justice and reform; it helped motivate, sustain, and shape it.

Without denigrating this-worldly forms of hope, theological hope adds something of tremendous value in its own right, one with the power to address many of our discontents. The vice of despair has collective expressions: howls of pain that take form in the available outlets of anger and division, as even a casual glance at social media and our political moment shows. The great exemplars of hope responded to similar challenges with a vision that gives to this-worldly projects a transcendent horizon and stake while sustaining the hopeful with the confidence that divine help will not be lacking and that grace is operative in their contexts. The paradox is that this ability to keep pursuing arduous goods after so many conventional optimists and political “realists” have called it a day makes hope a magnificently dynamic force for social reform. In a period when severe civic and social anxieties threaten many with despair, this can only be good news.

⁶⁴“As they entered the flower, tier to tier
each spread the peace and ardor of the love
they gathered with their wings in flight to Him” (Paradiso xxxi, l. 16–18).

⁶⁵Aquinas (1981 [1265]).

⁶⁶For a treatment of this verse and theme, see Hays (2009). Portions of this chapter have been re-worked from my *Hope and Christian Ethics* and reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press (copyright 2017).

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