

# Chapter 5

## Post-Kantian to Postmodern Considerations of (Theological) Hope

Ronald T. Michener

**Abstract** Hope found in the rational, empirical, epistemological optimism of Enlightenment-based modernism attempted to detach itself from its religious, Christian roots. This chapter will focus on post-Kantian and postmodern sensibilities that reject the modernist “myth of neutrality” and return to the theological roots of hope, even when for some, particular theological or Christian beliefs are renounced. To consider this, the chapter will highlight themes of hope found in precursors to postmodern thought: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marcel. Next, it will turn to the postmodern Derridean hope of John D. Caputo and offer a glimpse of the pragmatic hope of Richard Rorty. This will be followed by a consideration of James K.A. Smith’s critique of Caputo and Rorty, and his proposal for a phenomenological, determined hope.

### 5.1 Introduction

For Kant, Jürgen Moltmann quipped, the Enlightenment brought a “chiliastic solemnity” transitioning “humanity into the new era of pure faith in reason. . . . What had formerly been called the Kingdom of God became for Kant the symbol of the ethical goal humanity had endlessly to approach” (Moltmann 2004, pp. 10–11). The real religious question for Kant, Moltmann believed, was not about how we are connected with the past, but about hope for the future (Moltmann 2004, p. 11). Unfortunately, the hopes of progress stemming from the optimism and confidence of the Enlightenment, whether industrial, economic, political, or otherwise, were dashed in the wake of the World War One, World War Two, Auschwitz, the failure of industrialism to sustain third world countries, and the environmental crisis. But does this suspicion or dissolution of modern progress require the absence of hope for the future altogether? Moltmann’s response is prudent: “Today our hopes will have

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R. T. Michener (✉)

Department of Systematic Theology, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium  
e-mail: [ron.michener@etf.edu](mailto:ron.michener@etf.edu)

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to be cautious hopes, and hopes that count the costs. We have to hope and work for the future without arrogance and without despair” (Moltmann 2004, p. 16).

Hope, it seems, must be linked to time and expectation in the future. That is, hope is looking toward, or the anticipation of, some positive state of affairs beyond the present, without ignoring the past. Hope is thoroughly affirmative and sanguine rather than defeatist in its expectations. One would not normally speak in terms of “hope” with regard to the expectation of devastation, illness, or torture.<sup>1</sup> But modern hope, stemming from the ideals of Enlightenment confidence in human ability and reason, has been found politically, economically, and morally bankrupt. This is not to say that there are no signs of improvement in the living conditions of humanity. Indeed, most of us have enjoyed the benefits of modern technological developments, especially in terms of transportation conveniences, and communication and medical technologies. But such amenities have certainly not been universal or free from complications. Further, with such developments and “virtual” conveniences we are challenged with the meaningfulness of relationships with respect to bodily presence. Medical technologies equally raise questions as to the meaningfulness of being human in view of life supporting and life enhancing technologies.<sup>2</sup>

In *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium*, Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart submit, “the Enlightenment’s idea of progress was certainly to some degree indebted to the Christian eschatology it repudiated. It has often been seen as the secularized form of the Christian metanarrative” (Bauckham and Hart 1999, p. 9). Regardless, Mark Bernier points out that any reflections on hope are greatly indebted to the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 13:13 when he claims “hope” as one of the three essential, everlasting virtues next to faith and love (Bernier 2015, pp. 1–2). Any attempt to ignore or strip the religious-theological-eschatological dimension of hope is robbing it of its human context and origins. The hope found in the rational, empirical, epistemological optimism of Enlightenment-based modernism attempted to detach itself from its religious, Christian roots. Postmodern sensibilities, however, in their rejection of the modernist “myth of neutrality,” return forthrightly to the theological roots of hope, even if particular theological or Christian beliefs are disavowed. The utopian hope of modernism is, Bauckham and Hart submit, a “secularized version of the traditional Christian understanding of providence” combined with “a human assumption of the responsibility for creating the future which had previously been in God’s hands.” And they add, “Transcendence . . . is replaced both by immanent teleology and by human rationality and freedom” (Bauckham and Hart 1999, p. 14; cf. also p. 12).

But what then does a post-Kantian, even postmodern (theological) view of hope look like? It is to this question we turn in this chapter. To consider this, we will first

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, it is possible to imagine an aberrational use of “hope” in the sense of one who maliciously desires the ill-will of another. For Kierkegaard, this would not essentially be hope at all, but rather a “misuse of the noble word *hope* . . . for to hope is essentially and eternally related to the good . . .” (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 244).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the issues raised by Brent Waters with respect to posthumanism and medical technology (Waters 2009).

briefly highlight themes pertaining to hope from those we may consider precursors to postmodern thought: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marcel.<sup>3</sup> We will then turn to the postmodern Derridean hope of John D. Caputo and offer a glimpse of the pragmatic hope of Richard Rorty. This will be followed by a consideration of James K.A. Smith's critique of Caputo and Rorty, and his proposal for a phenomenological, determined hope (Smith 2004).

One may wonder why I have placed the parenthetical "theological" in the title of this chapter on postmodern notions of hope when another chapter (Chap. 7) is already devoted to the subject of theology and hope. My answer is twofold: First, if there is one thing we learn from the postmodern critique, it is that there is no unbiased, neutral perspective from which to view history, philosophy, or even hope. Our perspectives are embedded, situated, and conditioned by our inescapable context and backgrounds. My context as a professor and student of theology with particular Christian commitments affects my views of hope within a post-Enlightenment, postmodern context. My philosophical views are integral to my theological views. Second (related to the first), I believe we may not bifurcate postmodern philosophical notions of hope from their theological roots. As I will suggest, postmodern perspectives on hope are implicitly theological inasmuch as they are responses, reactions, and proposals to the eschatologically built hope of modernism (as previously noted above in Bauckham and Hart). With these factors in mind, I now turn to Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup>

## 5.2 Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

Mark Bernier's recent monograph, *The Task of Hope in Kierkegaard* (2015), is perhaps the most extensive and focused research on Kierkegaard's perspectives on the subject of hope. Bernier alerts us out this dearth of resources and attempts to correct it.<sup>5</sup> This is an ambitious task, since, as Bernier notes, Kierkegaard did not produce any particular writing on hope itself, so this must be derived from his diverse texts (Bernier 2015, p. 3).

Bernier argues that hope is "an essential element of Kierkegaard's framework" and is integral in connecting three of Kierkegaard's most important perspectives: "despair, faith, and the self." He makes three basic observations in his introduction. First, despair comes when one is unwilling to hope. Second, hope is critical to

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<sup>3</sup>I can by no means do justice to the breadth and depth of thought in these authors in the following brief descriptions and analyses. The purpose here is simply to highlight notions/themes of hope, either explicit or implicit in a selection of their writings.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Michael Milona for helpful remarks on a previous draft of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup>Bernier does, however, point out some exceptions and also notes that during the writing of his monograph there has been some resurgence of studies in this regard (see Bernier 2015, p. 2n5).

“becoming a self.” Third, faith is what undergirds the “ground for hope” (Bernier 2015, p. 3).

Bernier notes that the most extensive examination of hope in Kierkegaard is found in *The Works of Love* (Bernier 2015, p. 88). In the first six chapters of Part Two of *The Works of Love*, Kierkegaard heads each chapter with a Scripture reference (mostly from 1 Corinthians 13) referring to a different attribute of love. For example, Chap. 1 speaks to love building up (1 Cor 8:1); Chap. 2 is about love believing all things (1 Cor 13:7), Chap. 3 (most relevant for our discussion) pertains to love hoping all things (1 Cor 13:7). Kierkegaard’s perspective and explication of hope is best understood in this Christian and “biblical” context. Near the beginning of this chapter, Kierkegaard provides this definition of hope: “To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to hope, which therefore cannot be some temporal expectancy but rather an eternal hope” (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 234). Bernier seems to agree with John Davenport in thinking that this eschatologically centered hope in Kierkegaard does not require it to have specific “Christian content” (111).<sup>6</sup> However, Bernier’s later comments seem to modify this perspective when he affirms that Kierkegaard’s understanding of ultimate, victorious, eschatological hope is taken “in a decidedly Christian sense, with the overtones of a Christian afterlife” (Bernier 2015, p. 112). After citing Kierkegaard on this matter, Bernier even adds: “Kierkegaard is therefore unapologetically Christian in his approach to understanding authentic hope” (Bernier 2015, p. 112).

Peter Kline offers appears to offer a similar interpretation to Davenport by suggesting that Kierkegaard has an “apophatic approach to hope” (Kline 2017, p. 137). As Kline puts it:

If anticipation relates to the future through the projective power of consciousness, filling the future with determinate content, expectancy holds itself open before the future as absolute, the future withdrawn or absolved from any determinate apprehension. What faith expects is simply time as openness, time as the beginning. This is to expect “an eternity” and “victory.” But again, the eternity and the victory here are nothing determinate. “The person who expects something particular or who bases his expectancy on something particular,” Kierkegaard writes, “does not have faith” (137–38).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps we should suggest a happy medium. We must not confuse Kierkegaard’s call for the ridding of particular expectancies for with the absence of his overall expectancy of Christian faith. Kierkegaard continues his thoughts several lines after the brief quotation included in Kline’s citation above (from *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*). Writing from a third-person perspective as the “person of faith,” he says: “‘My soul is not insensitive to the joy or the pain of the particular, but, God be praised, it is not the case that the particular can substantiate or refute the expectancy of faith.’ God be praised! Time can neither substantiate nor refute it, because faith expects an eternity. . . . But there is one expectancy that will not be disappointed . . . this is the expectancy of faith, and this is victory” (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 27–28).

<sup>6</sup>Bernier refers to John Davenport (2008, p. 249).

<sup>7</sup>Cline cites this from one of Kierkegaard (1990, p. 27).

For Kierkegaard, Bernier submits, hope is either “mundane” or “authentic” (Bernier 2015, p. 3; cf. also pp. 88–92, 103–121).<sup>8</sup> This “authentic” or eternal type of hope for Kierkegaard must not be confused with the triteness of mere desire in normal conversation, especially among youth looking with excitement toward days ahead. Eternal hope is more mature and deep. Since authentic hope is eternal hope it “has range enough for the whole of life; therefore there is and shall be hope until the end” (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 235). Again, one must keep in mind that the backdrop here for Kierkegaard is thoroughly Christian; he is speaking of the eternality of *Christian* hope where “Christ is the way” (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 233). Furthermore, as mentioned above, Kierkegaard is situating his Christian understanding of hope in the broader context of love: “But love, which is greater than faith and hope, takes upon itself the work of hope or takes hope upon itself as the work of hoping for others. It is itself built up and nourished by this hope of the eternal and then acts lovingly in this hope towards others” (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 233; cf. also Bernier 2015, p. 213; and Fremstedal 2012, p. 57). Roe Fremstedal adds that “Christian hope” for Kierkegaard is a gift from the Holy Spirit and is reliant upon God’s grace and forgiveness. One may “hope against hope” when one understands she is powerless and in need of God’s mercy (Fremstedal 2012, p. 54).

Like Bernier, postmodern philosopher/theologian Mark C. Taylor expressed a similar position with respect to Kierkegaard: “This universal condition of inauthentic selfhood can only be overcome by the belief in God as the ground of infinite possibility, and the belief in God as the ground of one’s future life. In other words, authentic human selfhood presupposes the belief in God as omnipotent” (Taylor 1973, p. 232). Further, Taylor claims, for Kierkegaard, “the individual must believe that God will annul his sin, thereby re-establishing the possibility of salvation. But the only way in which the sinner can be related to forgiveness is in hope” (Taylor 1973, p. 232). Hence, the eschatological hope of Kierkegaard is about reaching ultimate selfhood before the eternal God. Hope is seen in terms of possibility, rather than the impossibility of hope for one immersed in despair (Bernier 2015, p. 112). As we will see below, this is in stark contrast to John D. Caputo’s postmodern notion of hope that is characterized by hope of the impossible.

Although this is only a cursory glance at Kierkegaard’s perspectives on hope, we may see how he is moving away from the general, depersonalized, economic-political utopian hope of the Enlightenment. Hope is not abstract and impersonal, it is radically existential, personal, and is integrally related to love of God and others.<sup>9</sup> It is not, however, thoroughly postmodern. With Kierkegaard, the personal

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<sup>8</sup>Bernier suggests in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, that the distinction between wish (which Bernier classifies as the “mundane”) and hope is unclear. Nonetheless, within the “framework of mundane hope” in Kierkegaard, he “does intend for there to be a distinction” (Bernier 2015, p. 106). Furthermore, “mundane” hope for Kierkegaard is not at all genuine hope. See note 1, above. Bernier nuances “mundane” hope in a section titled, “Mundane Wish vs Mundane Hope” (Bernier 2015, p. 106). Cf. also Roe Fremstedal’s distinction between Kierkegaard’s “heavenly hope” and “earthly,” “temporal,” or “natural” hope (Fremstedal 2012, p. 52).

<sup>9</sup>See Bernier (2015, pp. 212–214).

self is still front and center. With the advent of postmodern thought, the entire notion of the self is challenged. This, as we will see, greatly colors and shapes one's perspectives on the nature of *personal* hope.

### 5.3 Nietzsche (1844–1900)

If Kierkegaard is seen as a positive, even enthusiastic example of post-Kantian (theological) hope, Nietzsche is often regarded as one who disfavors hope and is marked by hopelessness. A quick search on the Internet will locate the following popular quotation from Nietzsche that lends favor to this view: “Hope . . . is, in truth, the greatest of evils for it lengthens the ordeal of man.” The full quotation in context appears in section 71 of Nietzsche’s *Human All Too Human*:

Pandora brought the box containing evils and opened it. It was the gift of the gods to men, a gift of most enticing appearance externally and called the “box of happiness.” Thereupon all the evils, (living, moving things) flew out: from that time to the present they fly about and do ill to men by day and night. One evil only did not fly out of the box: Pandora shut the lid at the behest of Zeus and it remained inside. Now man has this box of happiness perpetually in the house and congratulates himself upon the treasure inside of it; it is at his service: he grasps it whenever he is so disposed, for he knows not that the box which Pandora brought was a box of evils. Hence he looks upon the one evil still remaining as the greatest source of happiness—it is hope.—Zeus intended that man, notwithstanding the evils oppressing him, should continue to live and not rid himself of life, but keep on making himself miserable. For this purpose he bestowed hope upon man: it is, in truth, the greatest of evils for it lengthens the ordeal of man (Nietzsche 2015a, section 71, Kindle Edition).<sup>10</sup>

Certainly this section from Nietzsche does not announce hopefulness. But when the quotation is displayed within its larger context, it does give a nuanced impression. Pandora’s box was presumed by mankind to contain happiness, instead it was a box of assorted evils. All evils were released from the box barring one: hope. Hope is evil because ultimately happiness never arrives. But, such false “evil” hope ironically keeps mankind alive, as Zeus intends. So mankind continues to live with gritted teeth, facing whatever comes along.

With this in mind, thinking about hope in a Nietzschean context must be nuanced. Certainly, Nietzsche abandons the eschatological, “authentic” Christian hope of Kierkegaard.<sup>11</sup> But he is not replacing this abandoned hope (along with the God to which Kierkegaard’s hope was attached) with some new form of salvation. Bruce Ellis Benson argues “that Nietzsche—far from seeking a new soteriology—is

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. also the following quote: “Hope, in its stronger forms, is a great deal more powerful stimulant to life than any sort of realized joy can ever be. Man must be sustained in suffering by a hope so high that no conflict with actuality can dash it—so high, indeed, that no fulfilment can satisfy it: a hope reaching out beyond this world. (Precisely because of this power that hope has of making the suffering hold out, the Greeks regarded it as the evil of evils, as the most malign of evils; it remained behind at the source of all evil.) (Nietzsche 2015a, section 23).

<sup>11</sup>Although Nietzsche is not engaging with Kierkegaard himself in his writings.

seeking to overcome the perceived notion that we need some sort of salvation. Not only does he wish to be free from the God of Christianity, he also wished to be free from the very idea of redemption” (Benson 2008, p. 7). Benson suggests, however, that Nietzsche is not an atheist or nihilist in the sense in which he has customarily been branded. In fact, Benson maintains that Nietzsche “remains a kind of theist throughout his life, even though he moves from one god to another” (Benson 2008, pp. 6, 7).

Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God is not “an onto-theological claim made by an atheist” Graham Ward argues, but a way of proclaiming the death of the God of modernity. ‘God’ is a metonym, standing for an approach to philosophy embedded in modernity that seeks metaphysical grounding for everything. Nietzsche reveals that there is no such ultimate grounding (Ward 1997, pp. xxviii, xxix). The point that there is no grounding, however, does not necessarily lead to nihilism or complete hopelessness.

Nietzsche’s brand of hope apart from God may be considered what Gilbert Hottois calls “Le nihilism affirmative”—affirmative nihilism (Hottois 1998, p. 231).<sup>12</sup> Although Benson may not agree with the term “nihilism” applied to Nietzsche, he agrees that Nietzsche does not escape the affirmative “logic of Christianity.” But rather than the “kingdom of heaven” having an eschatological and soteriological focus as something beyond this life, for Nietzsche, it is about “getting back into life’s true rhythm . . . from a decadent rhythm to one that is truly life *affirming*” (Benson 2008, pp. 7, 8, italics original).<sup>13</sup> To face life after Christendom’s God, after modernity’s god of progress, requires strength of mind, courage and will. This is found in Nietzsche’s notion of the “overman” (*Übermensch*)—which is, as Benson submits, “characterized not so much by strength of body . . . but by strength of character, depth and creativity” (Benson 2002, p. 86). As Nietzsche puts it: “There are still hopes . [sic] the breeding of superior men” (Nietzsche 1911, p. 28). I will avoid the controversial discussion about what Nietzsche may have been proposing with regard to eugenics. I simply point this out to illustrate that Nietzsche’s view of the overman, the human being who masters self-discipline and effort, will be able to face the horrors of life through such mastery and by being resilient and maintaining a stiff upper lip.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Hottois, however, does not directly identify Nietzsche’s perspective here with the notion of hope as I am suggesting. On this idea of an affirmative nihilism, Hottois writes: “La destruction des vieilles valeurs et des anciens tabous est donc aussi joyeusement iconoclaste, acte prospectif qui rend possible de nouvelles créations, l’invention de valeurs inouïes, la découverte d’autres interprétations de la vie, du monde et de l’homme” (Hottois 1998, p. 231).

<sup>13</sup>Whether or not Nietzsche himself succeeds at such affirmation is a question that Benson addresses and develops in his book, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (2008, esp. pp. 189–216).

<sup>14</sup>Willard Huntington Wright spells this out well in his preface to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, with reference to how the overman fits in with Nietzsche’s perspective of eternal recurrence: “The eternal recurrence . . . concerns the possibility that all events in one’s life will happen again and again, infinitely. The embrace of all of life’s horrors and pleasures alike shows a deference and acceptance of fate, or *Amor Fati*. The love and acceptance of one’s path in life is a defining characteristic of the

Nietzsche expresses this resolute hope of the overman through the words of Zarathustra:

And that is the great noon when man stands in the middle of his way between beast and overman and celebrates his way to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the way to a new morning. Then will he who goes under bless himself for being one who goes over and beyond; and the sun of his knowledge will stand at high noon for him.

*“Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live”*—on that great noon, let this be our last will.

Thus spake Zarathustra. (Nietzsche 1976, pp. 190–191, italics original)

Although this “hope” may seem dour as it falls on the heels of the death of “all gods” it remains, nonetheless quite optimistic in tone with words such as “celebrates,” “new morning,” and “highest hope.”

Paul Carus provides insightful comments with respect to the overman as it relates to Nietzschean hope:

The highest summit of existence is reached in those phases of the denouement of human life when the overman has full control over the herds which are driven into the field, sheared and butchered for the sole benefit of him who knows the secret that this world has no moral significance beyond being a prey to his good pleasure. Nietzsche’s hope is certainly not desirable for the mass of mankind, but even the fate of the overman himself would appear as little enviable a condition as that of the tyrant Dionysius under the sword of Damocles, or the Czar of Russia living in constant fear of the anarchistic bomb. (Carus 2015, Kindle Edition)

Enviably or not, Nietzsche is not abandoning life itself, nor advocating a defeatist nihilism. He is articulating a type of hope, but it is a hope that stems from the abandonment of a false, hope that seeks escape from the adverse conditions of life. His hope knows the true secret of Pandora’s box. Happiness is not to be found in its contents.

Thus, although their conclusions are radically different, we can nonetheless see how both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard’s notions of hope are theological in orientation. Kierkegaard’s hope of affirmation is a personal, existential hope in the eternal God, away from the artificial hope of modern progress and reason. Nietzsche’s hope of negation is hope that stems from the ridding of God or gods that have blinded us from the reality of being human, a human that must rise above, in spite of it all, with the will to power, to be the overman.

I will now turn to another affirmative theistic proponent of post-Kantian hope: Gabriel Marcel.

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overman. Faced with the knowledge that he would repeat every action that he has taken, an overman would be elated as he has no regrets and loves life. Opting to change any decision or event in one’s life would indicate the presence of resentment or fear. Therefore, the overman is characterised by courage and a Dionysian spirit” (Wright 2015).



## 5.4 Marcel (1889–1973)

Gabriel Marcel has both similarities and differences with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. As William Desmond observes: “Like Nietzsche he acknowledged the godless condition of modern man. But unlike Nietzsche, he did not see this condition as gain for human freedom but as the sign of a catastrophic loss or refusal” (Desmond 2004, p. 143). Marcel appreciates Nietzsche’s “honest diagnosis about our godlessness, but not his proposed solution in the Overman” (Desmond 2004, p. 143). Marcel believes that there must be something beyond ourselves (143). We can see ties with Kierkegaard in that Marcel does not link religious faithfulness to objectivity. Faithfulness is linked with hope that is not tied to being absolutely certain (Desmond 2004, pp. 142–143). For Marcel, hope is a “process” and a “mystery” having character traits of “humility,” “modesty,” and “chastity” so it must not be placed under the rational scrutiny (Marcel 1962, p. 35). Unlike Sartre’s existentialism, Marcel refuses to dismiss God from his journeying with respect to hope, even if one does not prove God in some objective sense. Like Kierkegaard, God must not be made into an object of proof (Desmond 2004, p. 142). Unlike Kierkegaard’s existential emphasis on the individual self, however, Marcel emphasizes a hope that is community centered: “. . . there can be no hope which does not constitute itself through a *we* and for a *we*. I would be very tempted to say that all hope is at bottom choral” (Marcel 1973, p. 143). Previously, in his work *Homo Viator*,<sup>15</sup> he wrote of a “remedy of communion”:

“I hope in thee for us”; such is perhaps the most adequate and the most elaborate expression of the act which the very ‘to hope’ suggests in a way which is still confused and ambiguous. “In thee—for us”: between this “thou” and this “us” which only the most persistent reflection can finally discover in the act of hope . . . (Marcel 1962, p. 60)

With this in mind, Brian Treanor comments: “It is impossible to rise to the level of hope in a solitary or selfish egoism. Only love can hope, for hope takes place on what might be called the plane of *agape*” (Treanor 2006, p. 86, italics original).<sup>16</sup>

Hope that is set in the context of community and love, reflects the move away from “[t]he self-absorption arising out of Enlightenment individualism” (Doede and Hughes 2004, p. 172).<sup>17</sup> Along with the rejection of a self-centered notion of hope, Marcel’s hope of otherness also rejects Enlightenment self-confidence placed in the “unlimited power of reason” and is represented by “humility rather than hubris” (Treanor 2006, p. 267). In this regard, particular hopes are indeterminate and lack

<sup>15</sup>Marcel’s book, *Homo Viator* (i.e. “man on a journey or “man as a wayfarer”) devotes an entire chapter developing a metaphysic of hope. As David Elliot points out, the term “Homo Viator” was previously used by Thomas Aquinas to describe the human being as a “wayfarer,” one “journeying through this world to the heavenly city” (Elliot 2014, p. 101).

<sup>16</sup>Of course, it may be the case that there are gradations of loving actions between selfish egoism and purely *agape* focused love. Thanks to Michael Milona for this insight.

<sup>17</sup>Doede & Hughes also refer to Bauckham and Hart (1999, p. 62).

certainty, being centered more on the journey rather than some particular destination (see Treanor 2006, p. 267).<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Marcel's view of hope was undirected or satisfied to remain in the void. As Desmond aptly notes: "The howl of Nietzsche's Madman was heard by Marcel, but he also heard a different music. With neither Marcel nor Nietzsche had the horror of this howl been cheapened into the postmodern kitsch it has now become, with the chirpy nihilists who blithely claim to be at home in the wasteland" (Desmond 2004, p. 143). Unlike Nietzsche's abandonment of the attachment of salvation to hope, Marcel's hope is certainly a hope of salvation: "The 'I hope' in all its strength is directed towards salvation. It really is a matter of my coming out of a darkness in which I am at present plunged, and which may be the darkness of illness, of separation, exile or slavery" (Marcel 1962, p. 30). Commenting on this hope-centered salvation of Marcel, Pius Ojara affirms: "Hope gives invincible assurance that the tragedies of current life do not have the final say on life" (Ojara 2007, p. 22. See also p. 21).

Marcel's salvation-visioned hope is also linked (as a response) to despair: "The truth is that there can strictly speaking be no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively or victoriously overcome" (Marcel 1962, p. 36). When despair tempts one to give up on life, one's thoughts may be drawn to the love of another. In this, hope and love are connected (Ojara 2007, p. 26; cf. also pp. 27–28). As Ojara puts it: "Herein lies the spiritual economy of intersubjectivity or genuine human kinship. . . . In its élan hope locates itself in a dimension of perpetual novelty that fosters and celebrates life with others; it is not fatigued" (Ojara 2007, p. 26).<sup>19</sup> Hope ultimately transcends the finiteness of despair and the difficult problems of life (Ojara 2007, pp. 27–28); it is an "unconditional quality" (Ojara 2007, p. 29) that "has a transcendent foundation in being and, ultimately, in the absolute Thou" (Ojara 2007, p. 30). For Marcel, hope transcends all conditions because "absolute hope" comes from "the infinite Being" from which all is derived (Marcel 1962, pp. 46–47).

This existential, indeterminate, yet radically affirmative view of hope in Marcel provides a fitting segue into postmodern notions of hope. As mentioned above, I will consider the Derridean nuanced hope of John D. Caputo, and very briefly mention the undetermined pragmatic hope of Richard Rorty. These reflections will occur in dialogue with James K.A. Smith's critique of both Caputo and Rorty, while also considering Smith's phenomenological, determinate hope.

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<sup>18</sup>In a conversation between Marcel and Paul Ricoeur, Ricoeur notes: "We have come to see that hope and journeying are not two different things, but that hope is what makes the passage something more than just simple wandering" (Marcel 1973, p. 255, cited in Ojara 2007, p. 23).

<sup>19</sup>Here Ojara draws upon Marcel's "Desire and Hope" in *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*, Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O'Connor, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 283, 278.

## 5.5 Postmodern Hope: Caputo, Rorty, Smith

### 5.5.1 *Caputo's Hope-Filled Deconstruction*

John D. Caputo is perhaps the foremost theological translator of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. For Caputo, as with Derrida, deconstruction is radically affirmative and hope-filled.<sup>20</sup> Caputo's appropriation of Derrida has been frequently marked by themes of hope.<sup>21</sup> Like Kierkegaard and Marcel, Caputo's hope is forthrightly theological, but also wildly indeterminate and radically unorthodox—as he admittedly borrows from Derrida, it is “religion without religion” (Caputo 2015, p. 20).

Caputo's theologically colored hope is illustrated in this following affirmation: “Scriptures are songs of hope, calling for the coming of the kingdom, which is always to-come” and “[t]he name of God is a nickname for hope, for hope against hope” and (Caputo 2018, p. 320). Hope, for Caputo, is about a call to justice and goodness, not about some entity or metaphysical judge. Using the name of “God” is to name an “event of our faith in the transformability of thing, in the most improbable and impossible things, so that life is never closed in, the future never closed off . . . and gives hope where everything is hopeless” (Caputo 2006, p. 88; cf. also Gschwandtner 2013, pp. 243, 243n2). Caputo's postmodern hope may be derived from his religious appropriation of Derrida's apocalyptic deconstruction and its accompanying notion of the messianic. Christine Gschwandtner deftly points out that Derrida is not putting forward “any particular messianism but a certain messianicity. . . . The coming of a Messiah then haunts deconstruction, although this coming is always infinitely deferred” (Gschwandtner 2013, p. 249). The concept of the messianic, in Caputo's perspective, is “the impulse of expectancy in concrete expectations, the structure of hope in determinable hopes” (Caputo 2002, p. 127). But, the messianic never ultimately pans out into a concrete, specified event itself—it is always unsettled and undetermined and “divorced from any particular, determinate messianism (i.e., any determinate religion or tradition) and thus is without any determinate expectation for what is ‘to come’” (Smith 2004, p. 218, italics original).<sup>22</sup> In this regard, the messianic is about constant, ongoing anticipation of what may come, understanding that it ultimately will never (at least completely) arrive. It is a perpetual invitation to come, without the resolution of reaching the destination. Hope, one might say, is reduced to the process (of hope) itself.

Caputo's appropriation of Derrida's messianic colors his emphasis upon the radical indeterminacy of hope. Hope is not hope for a particular thing; it is not

<sup>20</sup>As Caputo insists: “The apocalyptic tone recently adapted in deconstruction is upbeat and affirmative, expectant and hopeful, positively dreamy, dreaming of the impossible” (italic “a” in “adapted” in original) (Caputo 1997, p. 98; cf. also pp. 195–196).

<sup>21</sup>For instance, see Caputo (2006, 2013, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>Derrida's notions of messianic, messianicity, and messianism are complex. Smith refers to Derrida (1994, p. 59) for an explanation. See also Caputo (1997, pp. 117–118, 272–273, 2002, pp. 126–128).

hope in some literal return of Christ nor hope in the reality of an embodied afterlife. It is always a hope “in hope itself” where the future is never closed and complete but is always open for more to come (Caputo 2002, p. 127).<sup>23</sup> The postmodern God, for Caputo, does not show up “in the bound volumes of theology but in loose papers that describe a more underlying and insecure faith, a more restless hope, a more deep-set but unfulfilled promise or desire, a desire beyond desire that is never satisfied. . . . God does not bring closure but a gap” (Caputo 2013, “Preface: The Gap God Opens”).

Of course, a hope with the lack of any future closure may appear not only “restless” but also nihilistic. That is, it would be an unsettled, uncertain hope, absent of determinate meaning or ultimate eschatological purpose. Indeed, Caputo warmly embraces a nihilism of sorts when it comes to postmodern hope. Drawing approvingly upon Lyotard, Caputo looks “nihilism in the eye” as “grace”—a word he confesses to stealing “from the toolbox of classical religion, here refitted do service in our incredulous, postmodern world” (Caputo 2015, p. 44). Caputo calls the embrace of life and hope a “nihilism of grace” (Caputo 2015, p. 171).

Although expressly nihilistic, It is clear that Caputo’s postmodern, undetermined hope is not simply gloom and doom. The absence of hope, for Caputo, “is not a postmodern condition, it is a *postmortem* condition” (Caputo 2015, p. 43, italics mine). That is, while we (humans) remain alive, there remains the possibility of hope as we smile at life. As Caputo insists: “The smile gives us grounds for hope, albeit groundless grounds, for hoping against hope, for smiles can turn into frowns, and laughter into tears, which means that hope, an audacious hope, knows how to smile through our tears. This smile does not last forever, but that does not refute the smile; it makes it all the more precious” (Caputo 2015, p. 42). Caputo desires to put his roots in the here and now of everyday life. He wants to embrace daily embodied presence, living life to the fullest. And, in spite of life’s difficulties, in spite of evil, it is ultimately important to learn “how to smile” in the face of the impossible (Caputo 2015, pp. 41–42, 185–186, 199; cf. also Caputo 2006, p. 181). Caputo’s postmodern hope is effectively summarized near the end of one of his recent books, *Hoping Against Hope*: “I honor the audacity of the old Enlightenment, dare to think, *sapere aude*, but I love a second audacity even more, dare to hope, *sperare aude*, by which the first is haunted. . . . Hope dares to say “come,” dares to pray “come,” to what it cannot see coming” (Caputo 2015, p. 199, italics original).

### 5.5.2 Rorty’s Social, Pragmatic Hope

Richard Rorty’s pragmatic social hope is neither explicitly nor implicitly theological, but it nevertheless may be argued that it is an atheistic response to the overarching

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<sup>23</sup>Caputo puts it another way: “Hope is always hope in hope, hope against hope, hoping like hell” (Caputo 2002, p. 148).

metaphysical narrative of Christian hope. Rorty aims to replace the onto-theological vocabulary of Christian theology and Greek philosophy with a more relevant vocabulary for today (Rorty 1999, p. xxii). He refers (albeit pejoratively) to the subject of Christian hope multiple times in his work *Philosophy and Social Hope* (which includes a chapter, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” and another, “Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes.” Rorty’s critique is thoroughly pragmatic; he does not claim empirical evidence to discount Christian faith. Yet, for Rorty, Christ has not returned, and Christian evangelicals claiming to be “a New Being in Christ” do not appear to be as transformed as “we had hoped,” although this does not deny the authenticity of their experience (Rorty 1999, pp. 201–202). Rorty contends: “We have been waiting a long time for prosperous Christians to behave more decently than prosperous pagans” (Rorty 1999, p. 202). Ultimately it is pragmatic action for justice that matters instead of a theoretical metaphysical paradigm.

Rorty does not think we can “take either Christian or Marxist postponements and reassurances seriously,” but this does not mean that we cannot seek hopeful “inspiration and encouragement” from the New Testament and the Manifesto” (Rorty 1999, pp. 202–203).<sup>24</sup> But in order to seriously appropriate the New Testament’s social justice morality, in contrast to seeing it as prophecy, one must hope for a democratic redistribution of “money and opportunity in a way that the market never will” (Rorty 1999, p. 249). Ultimately, we need to take the “morally flawed” other worldly aspirations of the New Testament writers and turn them into this worldly, social convictions (see Rorty 1999, p. 207; cf. Smith 2004, p. 204)<sup>25</sup> It is the “hope for social justice,” for Rorty, which is “the only basis for a worthwhile human life” (Rorty 1999, p. 204). Rorty refers approvingly to the Social Gospel Movement that stemmed from theologians Paul Tillich and Walter Rauschenbusch, which put social justice first and foremost over debates between theism and atheism (Rorty 1999, p. 206).

### 5.5.3 *James K.A. Smith’s Critique of Indeterminate Hope*

James K.A. Smith questions both the indeterminacy of hope in Derrida (on which Caputo’s hope rests) and the basis of hope for Rorty. Based upon his phenomenological analysis of the structure of all notions of hope, Smith argues that both perspectives are unable to provide authentic perspectives on hope (Smith 2004, pp. 204–205). Instead, Smith insists that a viable postmodern hope lies not in a

<sup>24</sup>Rorty also expresses caution in this, as he believes that both Christianity and Marxism can be coercive and damaging (Rorty 1999, pp. 204–205).

<sup>25</sup>The moral flaw lies in the “suggestion that we can separate the question of our individual relations to God—our individual chance for salvation—from our participation in cooperative efforts to end needless suffering” (Rorty 1999, pp. 207–208).

return to the immanent progress narratives of modernity, but in the transcendent, eschatological Christian hope in God and in God's revelation in Jesus Christ (Smith 2004, pp. 226–227).

Borrowing features of phenomenological analysis from Husserl, Smith contends that intentionality, constitution, and horizonality are all essential for hope. Hope is always intentional in that there is always something to which hope is directed. Further, it is constituted by a sense of particular meaning that allows one to place such hope “within horizons of meaning.” As Smith adds: “Without the horizons, there is no constitution; without constitution, there is not object of hope; and, without an object of hope, there is no hope” (Smith 2004, pp. 206–208). Following from this, Smith claims that any notion of hope must contain the following five “structural elements:” (1) Someone who hopes; (2) An object of hope; (3) The action of hope; (4) A ground for hope; and (5) Fulfillment of hope (Smith 2004, pp. 207–209).

Smith concludes that the postmodern hope expressed in both Derrida (and Caputo, by implication) and Rorty fail to contain all of these structural elements. The messianic “*à-venir*” advocated by Derrida and Caputo is completely indeterminate, and must remain so (Caputo 1997, pp. 96–97, italics original; Smith 2004, pp. 217–218).<sup>26</sup> But if this is the case, Smith wonders how it is possible to hope for that which is indeterminate (Smith 2004, p. 219). After all, Smith contends: “One cannot wait for (literally) nothing” (Smith 2004, p. 223; cf. also Hughes 2004, pp. 103–104). That is the question: Is it really possible to hope without hope being directed toward *something*? The implicit answer to this question is not to say, however, that the content of Christian hope is *completely* determinate and specified. As Robert Paul Doede and Paul Edward Hughes submit: “The telos and content of hope (an inherently futural verity) remain largely indeterminate—even within the Christian eschatological vision” Yet, Christian hope is still directed toward “an eschatological re-envisioning of the fallen created order” (Doede and Hughes 2004, pp. 172, 171). Smith concurs when he asserts that Christian eschatology looks toward a fulfillment of justice that is “both *continuous* with the present order, as a redeeming of creation, but also *discontinuous*, insofar as it represents a revolutionizing of fallen structures” (Smith 2004, p. 225, italics original). In this sense, hope is not oriented towards a specifically determinate outcome, but is situated in a broader context of God's promise to renew creation and make all things right.

For Derrida and Caputo, a determined hope will act itself out in violence and exclusion of the other. But Smith insists that simply because hope is broadly determined does not necessarily imply it will result in violence to the other. If hope is situated within the context of the finite human being, accepting that there are various degrees of what is determinacy and indeterminacy (as in a Christian

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<sup>26</sup>One caveat: Smith points out that Derrida is less reluctant than Caputo to admit some sort of eschatology or determinacy. For example, “we know it is a *democracy* to come” and not a “*theocracy*” to come” (italics original, Smith 2004, p. 222. Smith also refers to Caputo 1997, p. 142).

eschatological vision) then violence need not be linked to determined hope (Smith 2004, pp. 221–222). Further, the Christian hope is not simply about personal redemption, but about the renewal of creation and ultimate justice from tyranny and exploitation (Doede and Hughes 2004, p. 171).

Nevertheless, it is important to learn to critically appropriate the worries of Derrida and Caputo. If our hope is expressed with overconfidence in eschatological particularities “we risk theological hubris,” while ignoring “the incomprehensible mystery that lies at the center of existence and the end of history” (Hughes 2004, p. 104). To help avoid such “hubris,” Kevin L. Hughes suggests that we can learn from the “disciplined speech” of the apophatic tradition to help us navigate our expressions of hope “between the presumption of claiming to know too much and the emptiness of knowing nothing at all” (Hughes 2004, p. 103). Of course, navigating such waters is not easy. A Christian theological hope is a hope in God making all things right in the promise of resurrection and new creation because of Christ; but the particulars on how and when remain unknowable. This avoids the modern arrogance and unquenching desire to lay claim on knowledge, while avoiding the “hope” of endless postponement found in the deconstruction of Derrida and Caputo.<sup>27</sup>

Rorty’s pragmatic hope, on the other hand, according to Smith, has a determinacy to it in terms of its vision for justice, equality, and democracy. It is through “fraternity” where “equity” is made possible. Hence, Smith’s critique does not focus on Rorty’s indeterminacy with respect to hope, but in Rorty’s lack of “ground” for his notion of pragmatic hope. Smith asks: “Is there a ground for this expectation? Or is it merely a false hope, perhaps a delusion?” Smith claims that Rorty does not argue his point except by pointing to the “historical narrative of progress” (Smith 2004, pp. 213–215).<sup>28</sup> For Smith, Rorty is elsewhere unclear and even pessimistic on his position with respect to the ground of hope in history (Smith 2004, p. 216). Nonetheless, Rorty still asserts: “The utopian social hope which sprang up in nineteenth-century Europe is still the noblest imaginative creation of which we have record” (Rorty 1999, p. 277, as cited in Smith 2004, p. 216). Is this all we have? In what particular sense can this narrative (overall) be portrayed as “progress”—moral or otherwise? In view of the events of the past century (as highlighted above), can this historical narrative sustain a vision of hope? It is understandable why Smith is doubtful as to whether Rorty’s hope may truly be considered hope at all (Smith 2004, pp. 216–217).

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<sup>27</sup>See Smith’s comments on hope and “horizons of expectation” in this regard (Smith 2004, p. 223).

<sup>28</sup>Smith refers to Rorty (1999, pp. 232, 203).

## 5.6 Concluding Reflections

Some may reject Christian hope because it is hope expressed within a particular narrative framework. However, simply because Christian hope is particular and broadly determinate does not itself disqualify it from being a viable rendering of postmodern hope (see Smith 2004, p. 227). And, as Smith argues, Christian (post-modern) hope certainly seems to fit within the general phenomenological structures of hope. In fact, a robustly postmodern hope recognizes the modernist fallacy of neutrality, realizing that our expressions and phenomenological dispositions are situated within our context as human beings. In this regard, all expressions of hope in one way or another will be particular in orientation, Christian or otherwise. The question that Smith raises, however, is whether such expressions are phenomenologically fitting.

I have elsewhere suggested that hope is an aspect of our humanness, although it is not anthropocentric, that is, it is not “grounded in human potential, but it is a hope beyond hope grounded in the eschatological promise of God” (Michener 2007, p. 216).<sup>29</sup> Of course, the ultimate and specific purposes of God are always beyond our grasp, which is clearly present in the words of Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes. We wander onwards in life facing the enigmas and “troublesome paradoxes of life” in view of the mysteries of God, and in that journey, we continue to hope in that mysterious God that is beyond our reach (Michener 2007, p. 219).

At the same time, we must take Caputo and Rorty’s provocations regarding hope seriously, even if we disagree with their sustainability. Caputo’s challenge to find hope in the smile of everydayness, in the face of evils which beset the world, is indeed a call to intentional goodness and charity in the particulars of life. As Caputo insists: “The promise of the world is not extinguished by evil, not suffocated by suffering and setbacks, not abolished by the cosmic forces, but grows like a root that makes its way through rocks to find a nourishing soil. It is the hope, the chance, the faith that the future is always better, not because it is, but because that is what we hope and that is what hope means” (Caputo 2013, p. 247). Caputo reminds us that if hope is only in what is to come, while ignoring possibilities of hope in the present, then hope seems to lose an important connection to everyday practices of virtue that must be directed toward fellow humans and creation. Likewise, Rorty’s challenge for hope in justice and equality of human beings must not be overlooked today simply because of an Christian eschatological promise of renewal. It is critical to recognize how today’s actions of social justice are concrete and necessary expressions and instantiations of Christian hope. Seeking and hoping for making right the wrongs of social injustice are not contrary to, but indicative of, the broadly determinate, postmodern hope of Christian eschatology. As William Katerberg aptly states: “The refusal to resolve with finality the deepest questions that humanity can pose—whether historical, political, or spiritual—arguably is an indispensable aspect of any radical form of commitment and openness that is at once transforming,

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<sup>29</sup>Here I refer to Grenz and Franke (2001, p. 251).



alienating, unnerving, and hopeful” (Katerberg 2004, pp. 72–73).<sup>30</sup> The both/and of the determinate and indeterminate, the hope for present justice and future reconciliation, human limitations and God’s transcendence—all must be considered together. These tensions call us to both: “responsible action and trust” providing “an invitation to hope for the ultimately satisfying end that only God can give” (Bauckham and Hart 1999, p. 43). This is a postmodern hope that provides consolation for the past, motivation for the present, and joyful expectancy for the future.

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<sup>30</sup>Katerberg credits Michel Foucault for the shape of his thinking in this regard (Foucault 1984).

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**Ronald T. Michener** (Dr. Theol., Faculté Universitaire de Théologie Protestante de Bruxelles) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Systematic Theology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (ETF), Leuven (Belgium). He has been a regular editorial reviewer for the Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics series for the Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics at ETF. His work concentrates on areas of dialogue between postmodern philosophy and Christian theology. He is the author of *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2013), and co-author, with Patrick Nullens, of *The Matrix of Christian Ethics: Integrating Philosophy and Moral Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

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