

**Is Hope a Scholarly Virtue?:
Reflections on Seeking Justice in the
International History of the Twentieth Century**

*Christopher Gehrz
Associate Professor of History
Bethel University*

Presented at the Conference on Faith and History – September 19, 2008

The seed for this paper was planted last fall, when a student raised her hand in class and said, "This is, like, depressing." It was hard to blame her: we were in the middle of a course on modern European history that had already seen the Reign of Terror, the rise of "dark satanic mills" in industrial England, the virtual depopulation of the Congo Basin under King Leopold II of Belgium, the death of over nine million soldiers in World War I, and a beginning to Stalin's purges. And we were just getting into World War II, with the Holocaust mere days away.

Then the paper germinated last spring. Since I was teaching a course on human rights in international history, this conference's twin themes of world history and history that changed the world came frequently to mind. But as we studied the past through this lens, most students seemed to conclude that the world most often defied change. To be sure, one of my goals was to bring academic rigor to the burgeoning passion for social justice among many Bethel students, but I was surprised how many ended up agreeing that "rights talk" was either an imperialistic construct of Western culture or, at best, hollow rhetoric expressing aspirations incapable of being protected for most people.

As I polish off the actual paper, I am again teaching modern European history – and looking ahead to teaching World War I in January and the Cold War in the spring... Ah, the joys of being an historian of the twentieth century!

It has been calculated that as many as 188 million people died of organized violence in the twentieth century, while millions more surely died because of recklessness or neglect on the part of the powerful.¹ As I return again and again to this century in my teaching, praying to find and inspire peace and justice, I sometimes feel like all I do is lead field trips to a massive, largely unmarked graveyard.

Or I feel like the Orthodox writer Frederica Mathewes-Green, driving past steeple after steeple on her way to worship one Pascha Sunday:

I wonder again how so many churches can bear witness to Christ in Baltimore, week after week, year after year, and Baltimore can still be so unchanged. Murder, robbery, drug use rise; basic civility steadily drops. Yet here are all these churches, all this prayer....²

How can we bear witness to Christ by studying history, when our studies leave the past unchanged? Must we simply lament with David, "Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?" (Ps 6:5, TNIV)

Is there hope in learning about history, or is my work unavoidably "like, depressing"?

The Christian Virtue of Hope

Now, in a sense I'm glad that my student was a bit depressed by the international history of the twentieth century. It shows she was paying attention, and maybe even taking seriously the historian's imperative to seek "imaginative understanding" with the

¹ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 649.

² Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 82.

denizens of the past. I want my students to grieve with the suffering and dying, and to abhor the injustice of regimes, ideologies, and economic systems that "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6, NRSV*).

But I think T.S. Eliot was right that "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."³ It's human (and not, I think, in a fallen sense) to regret that history "as it actually was" typically falls far short of history "as it could have been," "as it should have been," or, for Christians, "as it will be."

In short, my students often end up depressed precisely because they'd prefer to be hopeful. Undoubtedly, this is part of the zeitgeist that Barack Obama's historic candidacy has tapped into. Obama burst onto the national scene four years ago at the Democratic National Convention, giving the keynote address on a now-familiar theme:

Hope -- Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.⁴

Obama drew not only on American history and iconography in this speech, but biblical language and centuries of Christian tradition, in which hope joins faith and love as the so-called "cardinal virtues."

Though not an exhaustive list, the Pauline triad (1 Cor 13:13, Col 1:5, 1 Thess 1:3) has been central to any Christian discussion of virtue. At least since Thomas Aquinas, Christians have held them up alongside, or above, the four classical virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

(And before I imprudently attempt to define hope in five minutes or less, let me parenthetically shed light on where that definition comes from. While Christian thought

* Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets* (San Diego: Harvest, 1943; 2001 reprint), 14.

⁴ Barack Obama, "The Audacity of Hope," speech delivered July 27, 2004, Boston.

on hope spans the branches of the family tree – and this paper draws from Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed, and other traditions – I have been most influenced by a few sources. For the most part these should be clear from citations, but one source is more obscure and deserves a brief explanation. In recent research, I have been struck by the prevalence of a hopeful eschatology in my own faith tradition: that of the pietistic Swedish and Swedish-American revivals that founded the Evangelical Covenant Church – the denomination to which I have belonged since childhood – and the Baptist General Conference, which founded and sponsors Bethel University.)

So, what do I mean by hope? To be sure, it involves a *desire* for "things not seen," but it is not a vague feeling of optimism, a wish that things will "get better" or "work out." I have to agree with Peter Kreeft when he disdains what passes for hope in recent decades: "The concept of hope has been hopelessly trivialized by the modern mind, just as the concept of faith has. Just as 'I believe' usually means merely 'I feel', so 'I hope' usually means only 'I wish' or 'wouldn't it be nice if....'" A virtue that tepid would be little use to students of human history. Hope must be more resilient. By contrast to modern optimism, Kreeft insists that "...Christian hope, the theological virtue of hope, is not a wish or a feeling; it is a rock-solid certainty, a guarantee, an anchor...."⁵ Proposing hope as a political virtue in a recent essay for *Christianity Today*, my colleagues Dan Taylor and Mark McCloskey write, "Hope is an *expectation* of a future good that is mingled with the understanding that good is never guaranteed and that the obstacles are many."⁶ While it is appropriate to temper expectations based on

⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 177.

⁶ Daniel Taylor and Mark McCloskey, "How to Pick a President," *Christianity Today*, June 2008, 26. Emphasis mine.

experience, the Christian's experience of God revealed in Jesus Christ should ultimately lead to the most extravagant expectation of all: new life from out of death.

It should not go without saying that Christian hope is centered in the incarnation, resurrection, and future return of Christ. Covenant historian Karl Olsson puts it as well as anyone I've read:

Those of us who confess Christ as Lord believe that in him in a special way history has become hope. Because of the character of God as revealed in Jesus, we have hope that both history and what lies beyond it will be stamped by the character of God. Hence even when we mourn about our own mortality or the frailty of the institutions and societies of which we are a part, we do not sorrow as those who have no hope.⁷

In particular, the resurrection of Christ, the "firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18), anticipates the future resurrection of all those who believe in Him (1 Cor 15). To paraphrase Philip Yancey, resurrection reverses the irreversible, for hope in Christ desires and expects victory over death itself.⁸

But this hope is for more than one individual and her eternal destiny. Drawing from New Testament passages like Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15, and Revelation 21-22 (as well as the prophetic language of the Book of Isaiah), N.T. Wright extends the hope of resurrection to all of Creation:

What I am proposing is that the New Testament image of the future hope of the whole cosmos, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, gives as coherent a picture as we need or could have of the future that is promised to the whole world, a future in which, under the sovereign and wise rule of the creator God, decay and death will be done away with and a new creation born, to which the present one will stand as mother to child.⁹

⁷ Karl A. Olsson, "History as Hope," *The Covenant Companion*, February 15, 1977, 29.

⁸ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 211.

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 107.

Wright's dismissal of those who simply seek to "get to Heaven" echoes Jürgen Moltmann's "theology of hope." Quoting John Calvin, Moltmann does agree that faith (standing on hope) "hastens beyond this world," but he proceeds to explain:

[Calvin] did not mean by this that Christian faith flees the world, but he did mean that it strains after the future.... Yet this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities. Death is real death, and decay is putrefying decay. Guilt remains guilt and suffering remains, even for the believer, a cry to which there is not ready-made answer. Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind.¹⁰

This is the only kind of hope that historians can profess with any integrity, for a hope that is fixated on heavenly escape must to some extent neglect the death, decay, and suffering of this world.

I fear that I have already tested your patience for amateur theology, so let me close this too-short definition of hope by returning once more to the apologetic writing of Peter Kreeft, who sums up the case for hope and the other two cardinal virtues:

Faith, hope, and charity are, quite simply, the three greatest things in the world. We cannot possibly overemphasize their importance. Together they make up the "one thing necessary."... Nothing is more important than faith, hope, and charity because they make the difference between heaven and hell, eternal life and eternal death, and there is no difference as great as that.¹¹

But do they make the difference between Christian scholarship and non-Christian scholarship, or between excellent scholarship and everything else? Is hope a scholarly virtue?

The Intellectual Virtues

The scholarly, or intellectual, virtues seem to have enjoyed a recent resurgence of interest, especially among epistemologists. What are these virtues? Philosopher Neil

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, tr. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 19.

¹¹ Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, 167.

Cooper offers a long list of suggestions: curiosity, orderliness, accuracy and precision, nimbleness, thoroughness, pertinacity, judiciousness, courage, self-restraint, humility, openness, balance, clarity and simplicity, imagination and originality, tolerance and respect, rationality and consistency, and wisdom.¹²

Cooper's list seems uncontroversial and comprehensive, though we could certainly find other virtues without digging too hard. But we wouldn't easily find hope (or faith or love) on most of these lists. Even for virtue-epistemologists writing from explicitly Christian commitments, such as Jonathan Kvanvig, Robert Roberts, and Jay Wood, it is not clear that faith itself is an intellectual virtue, love is understood primarily as "love of learning," and hope seems to go unmentioned.¹³

And on the face of it, hope seems particularly out of place in our discipline. Historical methodology struggles to recover the past; can it verify or falsify expectations for future outcomes? Perhaps we may discern patterns or trajectories based on historical evidence, though it took less than a year of graduate school to dismantle my undergraduate assumption that history's chief value consists in its ability to "teach lessons" for the present and future.

Still, can I dispense with hope if it makes up part of Kreeft's "one thing necessary"? Shall I compartmentalize and treat hope as a virtue essential to everything but my calling as a scholar? Can I study history that, as Olsson puts it, has "become hope," but leave hope at the classroom door?

Advocates of faith-learning integration, like Arthur Holmes, would say no to all three questions. The whole project of Reformed integrationism seeks to undo the

¹² Neil Cooper, "The Intellectual Virtues," *Philosophy* 69 (October 1994): 459-69.

¹³ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Intellectual Virtues and the Life of the Mind: On the Place of Virtues in Epistemology* (Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

artificial separation of faith and reason, and there's reason to think Holmes would also seek to reintegrate hope. Back in the days when Bethel invited professors to give commencement addresses, he told the Class of 1967:

Some writers have suggested that [Christian thought] involves hope and I think they are right. For the virtue of hope should mark the Christian in this world. If we possess hope and we believe that life is not absurd but that it does make sense, that the world of nature and history are intelligible from the perspective of faith, then we may add a fourth characteristic of Christian thought that gives meaning to Christian higher education—it is redemptive.¹⁴

Hope could thereby provide the basis for an interpretive model, a way of making the world of history intelligible.

Reflecting on hope certainly leads me to be suspicious of two rival interpretive models: the "cyclical" understanding of history as a never-ending series of circles of rise and collapse and the "progressive" view of those who cling to the Enlightenment's promise that humans can learn to perfect themselves and their societies by their own reason. Hope in Christ explodes the closed cycles of the ancients, giving us purpose and resolution, and exposes the overconfident delusions of the moderns, sobering us when we rush to declare age after age building into the "best of all possible worlds."

Still, there are obvious limits to hope's ability to underpin an interpretive framework. While I firmly believe that resurrection is central to Christian hope, I'm hardly going to stand among the dry bones of Bosnia and Cambodia and try to ascertain which, if any (or, if all) of the dead will rise again. I agree with Holmes that hope provides redemptive meaning for those Christians working in higher education, but that shouldn't lead me to turn history into theodicy. (I hope that my laptop will explode if ever I argue that "God permitted catastrophe x in order to bring about

¹⁴ Arthur Holmes, "Christian Education in the Contemporary World," commencement address at Bethel College, June 1967, Carl H. Lundquist Papers [CHL], Baptist General Conference History Center [BGCHC], Bethel University, St. Paul, MN. Emphasis original.

redemptive outcome *y.*") And while I do see hope as culminating in that eschatological end at which God makes "all things new," I can't conceive of historians acting as soothsayers, fooling themselves into thinking that insights into the past give them auguries of the future. If epistemic hope indeed exists, it must be tempered by epistemic humility.

Perhaps more usefully, we could modify a famous idea from the Celtic tradition and seek historical "thin places," spots in space (and time) where heaven and earth don't seem quite so far apart.¹⁵ For example, if Christian hope entails the renewal of what God has created, historians may adopt a preferential option for the stories of those who have been good stewards of the physical environment, advocated for the poor and oppressed, or otherwise sought to restore the world to rights.

I already incline this way in my classes, and it was a key factor in leading me to propose and design a course on the international history of human rights. But I am leery of putting too much emphasis on the world-changers presented at this conference lest I add to what social psychologist James Waller calls "the Bonhoeffer effect." That is, when Christians too happily celebrate the undeniable courage of individuals like that famous German pastor-resister, they obscure the basic failing of the Church in response to evil.¹⁶ For example, in the Holocaust, rescuers like the Polish Catholics in the Zegota network and the Huguenot villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon were the exceptions; the vast majority of European Christians in the period 1940-1945 were either perpetrators of genocide or, *much* more commonly, bystanders who acquiesced (often knowingly) in the slaughter. I fear that the same is true of churches in Rwanda and the

¹⁵ Bishop Wright encourages something like this in calling for a renewed "theology of place" in the Church; Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 259.

¹⁶ James Waller, "Deliver Us from Evil: Genocide and the Christian World," keynote address, Lilly National Research Conference: "Christianity and Human Rights," Samford University, November 12, 2004.

former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. To emphasize the minority would be reassuring, but deceptive, distracting us from the full picture of the Church's inaction – and from the suffering of the victims.

Ultimately, I suspect that the traditional Holmesian model of integrating a theological concept with the philosophical underpinnings of one's discipline can only take us so far in understanding hope as a scholarly virtue. Going back to the comment that planted the seed for this essay, I am more hopeful (so to speak) about the possibilities of cultivating hope as a source of purpose for my students.

Scholarly Hope, Purpose, and Vocation

Not long before his death, Rodney Sawatsky promoted "The Virtue of Scholarly Hope" in the prologue to a terrific collection of essays by some of his colleagues at Messiah College. Drawing heavily from the work of Catholic scholar Walter Ong, Sawatsky proposed that hope provides a *telos*, an eschatological end, that can motivate and sustain Christian scholarship.¹⁷ This seems consistent with scriptural teaching that hope renews our strength (Isa 40:31) and inspires endurance (1 Thess 1:3), that it is a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb 6:19). Hope "[keeps] taut," in Eugene Peterson's evocative paraphrase, the "lines of purpose" in our lives (Col 1:3, *The Message*).

How does this work? I've found historical examples in researching the roots of my own tradition. What has surprised me most about Philipp Jakob Spener and the other Lutheran Pietists of 17th century Germany is that they lived amid the ruins of the most devastating warfare Europe had seen to that time and yet professed certain hope

¹⁷ Rodney J. Sawatsky, "Prologue: The Virtue of Scholarly Hope," in Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *Scholarship & Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-14.

that their churches and society would soon heal and become more and more like what God intended them to be.¹⁸ The Pietists could be so hopeful because they linked new birth with new earth. In their understanding of salvation, conversion through a personal experience of Jesus Christ brought about regeneration, enabling the individual to make faith active in love and work for God's kingdom within church and society.

Dale Brown sums it up well:

Spener believed the eschatological hope must become a present reality: the kingdom, which will be completely realized only in the future, must begin to penetrate present history through the renewal of the church, evangelistic endeavors, and various philanthropic and social missions.¹⁹

N.T. Wright revives this argument, connecting eschatological hope with the present-day mission of the Church and urging his readers to focus on the "categories" of justice, beauty, and evangelism.²⁰

Without going so far as to engage in "presentism" and be distracted from the exploration of the past, I do think that I, as a member of the church body bearing particular passions and gifts, must better understand my role in this hope-inspired mission – and help my students to do the same. In short, I would like to possess and articulate a clearer sense of vocational purpose as an historian. Yet every spring, as I teach our department's senior seminar and encounter history majors coming face to face with the prospect of finding a job (let alone a *career*), I feel keenly my own confusion about what history and vocation have to do with each other.

¹⁸ On Spener's eschatological hope, see K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), 176-81.

¹⁹ Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, rev. ed. (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Publishing, 1996), 86.

²⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, particularly ch. 13.

Traditionally, historians have lined up on the side of the liberal arts against attempts to make higher education more "vocational," but we need not be bound by the confines of modern vocabulary. Consider how Dorothy L. Sayers defines vocation:

[It] is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.... It is the business of the Church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred.... Let the Church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade—not outside it.²¹

What does it mean to serve God in the profession of historian? I'd start by thinking about how historical study can help us fulfill some of the general vocations of Scripture: "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19); "...do justice... love kindness... walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8); "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God..." (Rom 12:1). But what of more particular callings? Can historical methodology done well itself help the Church live out its hope-centered mission?

What do I tell my student who finds the international history of the twentieth century depressing and wants to know how it helps her cultivate a hope-filled vocation? Ultimately, I think she (and we) might need to live with mystery for an answer. I could speculate that historical study cultivates affections and abilities that might seem highly relevant to a vocation for doing justice or taking the Gospel to the ends of the Earth. But for all I know, the outspoken A student who wears a "Save Darfur!" T-shirt and adds International Justice Mission to her Facebook "Causes" application will never risk her own comfort to improve the life of another, while the bored-looking football player two rows back will one day be the next Francis Xavier or Mary Slessor. Here Jesus' words speak so clearly to me: "The kingdom of God is as if

²¹ Quoted in Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2004), 83-84.

someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how" (Mk 4:26-27).

Conclusion: Seeds of Death, Seeds of Hope

Measured in lives lost, the twentieth century is only getting more depressing. Hundreds of millions of shells fired during the two world wars remained buried, unexploded, in the farmland of France, and each year an average of ten Frenchmen die trying to disarm them.²² In 2006 another 5751 people around the world were killed or maimed by land mines, many planted last century.²³ Most frightening, while the world's nuclear arsenal has decreased dramatically since the Cold War, two years ago the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimated that 12,500 operational warheads still waited to emerge from their silos and inflict apocalyptic damage on cities around the world.²⁴ These forgotten shells, landmines, and warheads are like seeds of death, planted by the twentieth century one day to break the surface and unleash their wrath on the twenty-first.

But by God's grace I have the chance to plant another kind of seed. My friend Glen Wiberg, a retired Covenant pastor and writer, once borrowed an image from E.B. White to explain how God plants "seeds of hope" among his people. The autumn before his wife Katharine died, White watched her planting flower bulbs, "oblivious to the ending of her own days... calmly plotting the resurrection." Glen takes it from there:

What a provocative phrase: "plotting the resurrection"! Katharine was a member of the resurrection conspiracy, the company of those who plant seeds of hope, seeds of tomorrow under dark skies of uncertainty and impending death; people

²² According to a French parliamentary report; <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r00-429/r00-4294.html>.

²³ *Landmine Monitor*, 2007 Report; <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2007>.

²⁴ "Global nuclear stockpiles, 1945-2006," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 2006, 64-66.

going about their living and dying until, no one knows how, when, or where, the tender shoots of life appear, and a small piece of creation is healed. That's who we are as God's Easter people—those oblivious to the ending of our own days, calmly plotting the resurrection.²⁵

In the end, that's how I'm finding the virtue of hope in historical scholarship. I feel called to return to the dark-skied past, where I teach and write about wars, genocides, and other tragedies, planting seeds of hope in their gravesoil and expecting new life to somehow emerge.

²⁵ Glen V. Wiberg, "Plotting the Resurrection," in *Glad Hearts: The Joys of Believing and Challenges of Belonging: Voices from the Literature of the Covenant Church*, ed. James R. Hawkinson (Chicago: Covenant Press, 2003), 270. The E.B. White quotation comes from his introduction to the posthumously published Katharine S. White, *Onward and Upward in the Garden* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), xix.