

Robert W. Jenson

Second Thoughts about Theologies of Hope

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For a systematic theologian, a conference on ‘theology of hope,’ even with an adjective, must have something of a retrospective character, the call to a conference on the matter must mandate something of a second look. The movement of the 60s and 70s has now its place in theological history, for better or worse; its themes and questions are standard items of ecumenical theological discourse. What do we now think of them? What are we now to do with them? The situation will inevitably lend a certain historical cast to my paper—even once or twice an autobiographical cast.

To take this partly backward look, and simultaneously to avoid a merely antiquarian exercise, I will explicitly structure the paper by the questions posed in the announcement of the conference, which do in fact show the character of second thoughts about a known phenomenon. And it may in any case be the task of the systematic theologian on the roster, to address the conference questions head on. I will try to build one of the questions upon another, to make a more or less coherent discourse.

Two of the questions can, it seems to me, be answered with dispatch—even flippantly—but the answers have nevertheless considerable methodological import. So I will put them at the beginning, to make a sort of prolegomena..

Can eschatological hope survive Marxist and ecological, and other such criticism?

The quick and flippant answer to this question is, Certainly it can; the real question is, Can Marxist and other such projections survive criticism from an *authentically* eschatological viewpoint? But now see what

that smart-aleck answer displays, a turn-around of whose critique trumps whose.

The gospel by its missionary nature lives always in conversation with the antecedent religion and religious wisdom of each time and place where the church finds herself, a conversation that is always at once constructive and mutually critical. In the strain of Christian history that leads to such things as theologies of hope, the great interlocutors have, of course, been the theologians of Olympian-Parmenidean revelation, the famous 'Greeks', Plato, Aristotle and their epigones. The exchange has been notably fruitful, also and in some aspects especially during the period of modernity just behind us.

But insofar as this conversation is mutually critical it is, of course, always discomfited by the question, Which critique trumps, if it comes to that? Who settles the question about truth, Socrates or Isaiah? Despite rhetoric about 'openness' and the like, we have to choose and always do choose, especially when we claim not to. For we cannot float above the conversation as if we were the Olympian-Parmenidean deity itself—or perhaps G. F. W. Hegel—though those who make each move regularly accuse those who make the other of trying to.

The choice was perhaps especially urgent in modernity, and for the most part Christian theology in the period chose the one alternative. For the most part, modernity's theology was 'mediating' that is, it accepted that Western modernity's wisdom finally trumps. It took modernity's religious and metaphysical prejudices for foundational truth, and it therefore cut its understanding of the gospel to fit them. Despite my pejorative description of this move, I do not mean to say it was unproductive. A century earlier, I suppose I would myself have been a mediating theologian. Moreover, the West's standard religious and metaphysical assumptions, that is, our particular derivatives of Socrates' theology, are themselves not conceivable apart from the gospel's long history in the West, which introduces a nice complication, much explored by historians of thought. Nevertheless, I do indeed think modernity's dominant theology made a wrong step.

Which brings me to the point of all this for now. Some of us who have spoken much of promise and hope have in part been moved by a contrarian methodological intention: to plant a stake in territory irretrievably displaying the gospel's *offense* to Western modernity's received wisdoms. It is arguable that Enlightenment has found precisely the gospel's promises especially indigestible; the bourgeoisie being dedicated to stability relieved by bouts of random revolt. Just so we set out to make assertion of the gospel's promises a conscious criterion of our thinking, in my case not the only criterion, but a decisive criterion.

What then of specifically Marxist critique? Is the Kingdom of God pie in the sky by and by? That depends, surely, on whether the promise

of the Kingdom is *true* or not, a question Marx did not entertain. Marxist ideology-doctrine maintains that all metanarratives—as we are now likely to call them—are founded on interest, so that the question of truth does not arise. Except of course for the ideology cast by—or rather for—the proletariat. We need not, I think, be much bothered by this latter claim, it being an only feebly disguised *petitio principii*: the reason the proletarian meta-narrative is supposed to be in good faith when others are not, is that it is the final one. Which, since the narrative is eschatological, is the same as to say, because it is the true one.

The situation between Marxist eschatology and Christian eschatology is thus quite simple: we have two sets of eschatological promises, both of which claim to be true and at least one of which must be false. So why would we think the gospel-promise is a true one? Because Christ is in fact risen, and must therefore make good his claim to be Lord.

An aspect of what is sometimes called ‘post-modern’ thought is willingness to accept the irreducibility of one’s own starting point or points. If we are Christian, it is willingness to take the fact of the Resurrection as a warrant also in discourse with those who do not think there is such a fact, *and* not to suppose that this necessarily terminates mutual intelligibility or persuasion or even resultant change of conviction. The will to unabashed assertion of biblical promises surely partakes of this mood; there is some affinity between at least my sort of ‘theology of hope’ and certain aspects of post-modern intuition.

As to ‘ecological’ critique of biblical eschatology, I do not know what that would be, but there is indeed a *cosmological* critique, which has so triumphed in the cultural mind that it is scarcely recognized as critique of something. The universe, current cosmological speculations propose, is doomed either to fall back from the big bang into a concluding big crunch and singularity, or to thin out indefinitely into what would still be a sort of field but hardly anything like a universe. Or, as theorists who cannot quite stand either scenario dream, perhaps our universe may be so doomed, but never mind, there are many parallel universes and new ones can bubble up in the quantum field at any time. In none of these scenarios is there room for events fulfilling the gospel’s promises.

And here I cannot be flippant; but were I to undertake a serious discussion, it would take all this paper and several more. A continuing group sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry, where I now work, is just finishing a four-year study of this very problem, led by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, and a volume of essays will be published. What I myself have to offer is now available in the second volume of my Systematic Theology, and I will not rehearse it here.

For now, let me simply say that in my judgment Christian theology must in this matter venture a very drastic reversal of critiques. Who,

after all, has decreed that the narrative spun by current cosmology is the encompassing story of reality, within which room must be found, or not found, for other narratives? We must, I think, follow the lead of Enlightenment's most constructive and robustly trinitarian Christian theologian, Jonathan Edwards, who by a non-mechanistic construal of Newton and Locke found room for *their* narrative within the *triune* narrative. :

We come to the second announced question that I will use prolegomenally.

What is the proper place of eschatology in Christian theology at the beginning of the new millennium?

To this question too there is a quick and impertinent answer: the same place as in the old millennia. Which is more soberly to say, the systematic place of eschatology in Christian theology is not a variable. A theology that did not examine why and for what Christians may and must hope, and make the results of that examination normative for the resolution of other questions, would not be Christian theology at all. Therefore there is a way in which the designation 'theology of hope' is superfluous, there being no other kind.

But of course, what in one time and place may need no explication may in another become very puzzling, indeed something essential to Christian theology may at a theological time and place nevertheless be quite innocently suppressed, even inevitably suppressed, only at another theological time and place to be grasped as new opportunity. During modernity, the gospel's eschatological character either was suppressed so far as possible or, if it broke out, tended to take rather bizarre forms.

Thus Friedrich Schleiermacher, the great inspiration of neo-Protestant theology and now of much European and American Roman Catholic theology, reported 'the church teaching' about the return of Christ, the resurrection of the flesh, the last judgment and the eternal Kingdom, accurately and with considerable analytic acuteness, and then as his own teaching had only a warning about church teaching, that it cannot 'yield knowledge'.¹ It cannot yield knowledge, because knowledge about the course of the universe is the province of the sciences, which were thought to present a universe impervious to change of such magnitude and character as church teaching predicts.

And for an example of what a more biblically stubborn mediating theologian could be driven to, we may think of Richard Rothe, who, bound to the standard mechanistic construal of material reality and to

¹ *Der Christliche Glaube*, v. 2, §163.

the idealist metaphysics often correlated to it, yet hoping to salvage something of biblical hope, seized on the idea of 'organism' as something at once spiritual and natural, so that one could think of a spiritual-natural organism. Then to accommodate the biblical hope of resurrection and such, he posited a 'Holy-Spiritual natural organism,' which in the life of faith 'ripens' under 'the material garment'; the resurrection is then that this organism, now ripened, casts off the old garment.²

Insofar, then, as I would now be willing to speak of 'theology of hope' as a specific phenomenon, and to confess myself to it, it was and is methodologically a reaction. Theology of hope is a biblical theology in the sense that, against the practice of modern theology, it does not think the deliverances of Enlightened religion or of ideological interpretations of scientific procedures or results must always trump, that it does not suppose that truth taught by Aristotle or Newton is more foundational or comprehensive or natural than truth taught by Isaiah or John. And it chooses eschatology as a specific ground to hold in part because this locus was a chief victim of mediation in the period just behind us.

So I come to the question with which I will begin more material discussion.

How is the End related to the Beginning?

The first course of lectures I attended as what Americans call a graduate student was one of the first given by Wolfhart Pannenberg as a *Privatdozent*. I was there not because he was famous, which he was not yet, but because he was lecturing on the history of 19th-century German theology, and as an American in Germany I was aware of my shortcomings. It was a brilliant course, even though, as it turned out, it did not get much beyond Schleiermacher, Schelling and Hegel. It is something Pannenberg said about Hegel that provokes this reminiscence. If only, Pannenberg said, Hegel had not finally held history within the iron bracket of Spirit as timeless rationality, the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* would indeed have marvelously conceptualized an essential feature of Christianity, that is, its appropriate construal and ontological placement of history. But as it is, when you get to the end of the *Phänomenologie*, you discover there is nothing in the End that was not there in the beginning. Spirit's venture into its opposite and recovery of itself therein turns out to have been repristination rather than creation. After all the heavy dialectical lifting, history after all turns out only to illustrate essentially timeless truth.

² *Dogmatik* (Heidelberg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1870, posthum.), 3:103–104.

But even in his error, I want to go on to say, Hegel is revelatory. For his bracketing of history by timeless reason does conceptualize something in Western theology, namely a pervading error. Our theology has regularly, if sometimes subliminally, construed the End as a repositioning of the beginning, and Hegel's great error was that he only too faithfully followed tradition. To put the bluntest possible point on it, we have seen God's history with us, in Israel and Christ, as a repair job. It is surely the understanding of what in my country we call Sunday-school, and of most elite theology when you get down to it: God made a world and it was good; but then something went wrong, and God undertook restorative measures.

Whether Sunday-school or Hegel—or Schleiermacher or Rothe—what is at work here is the understanding of eternity and time which has attracted and confused Christian theology ever since those Greeks became its interlocutors: the posit of eternity as the sheer negation of time, and so of eternal being as constituted above all by 'impassability,' by immunity to the threats and possibilities that time brings. Note also the language one must use to characterize this sort of eternity: it is, of course, the *future* which can *bring* something, and so the future to which eternal being so construed must be immune. The theology of Olympus and of the Goddess' revelation to Parmenides was moved by passion to keep deceitful hope in its box, for the truth, they thought they knew, is that the future devours its children. Remember only the final line to which all the mighty tale of the *Iliad* brings us: 'And so that is how they held the funeral for Hector, tamer of horses.' Eternity as the Greeks construed it is salvific precisely as it is supposed to be the guarantee that time's hastenings have no other end than their beginning, that whatever happens on the fields of Troy where time and its hopes are disappointed, the gods remain unchanged—and because, perhaps, if we can join with them, we can share some of their immutability.

But it would be a very uninteresting *story* about which the maxim could be true, that in my beginning is my end, and no story at all that wholly neutralized the future's possibilities in advance. Aristotle observed this about stories, which is why he wanted no story-telling about reality—he would have agreed with the Chinese that 'May you live in interesting times' is a curse.

All of which is, just by itself, a sufficient argument that the eternity revealed to Homer and Parmenides will not do for Christian theology. For the story the Bible tells is interesting, and for better or worse it does let hope out of the box. And then it claims to be about the real world, indeed, first to constitute the real world for our habitation.

Readers will after all this anticipate my answer to the present question. If the gospel is true, the End is *dramatically* related to the beginning, or what is the same thing, historically related. God does

not create a cosmos, which thereupon is shocked into movement so as to have a history. God creates precisely a history, which is a universe, an intelligible whole, because it has an intended end. God creates a temporal sequence, which is a whole because it has a plot, because it has a beginning and an end and between them a reconciliation.

It is often supposed that the Bible contains no metaphysics, no provision or suggestion of concepts for a general interpretation of what can be real. But this is supposed only because it is antecedently supposed that the Greeks' material metaphysics are the only possible one, which surely they are not. If we take the notion of metaphysics formally, it is plain that the Bible provides and supports a rich and coherent description of what is and can be real.

And that brings us back to Hegel. I have agreed with Pannenberg that Hegel would indeed have brilliantly conceptualized the understanding of time demanded by the gospel, if only he had not at the last moment capitulated to Parmenides (as for him represented by Aristotle). One reason for giving Hegel the benefit of this doubt, is Hegel's acute discernment of the *sort* of sense history makes, in Scripture and indeed in experience, and his refusal—up to the last moment—to subordinate this logic to some other. The logic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, if it is not employed to constrain what is possible but is grasped rather as possibility's own pattern, is surely indeed the logic of specifically historical being. Thesis and antithesis are the conflicts definitive of temporality, whether in the life of an individual, a civilization, or all creation. And the notion that thesis and antithesis are sublated by and into each new future, is precisely to the biblical point. Moreover, if what God creates is a history, then history's sort of logic defines being, as Hegel almost said.

Indeed, whatever *could* be an end of history? If we got to history's end, what might we discover? That time and discourse had simply stopped? Why would anyone want to get to that point? And is the notion even intelligible?

Since what God creates is a history, the one conceivable end of history must be again a sublation, now into the only thing left to be taken into, God. An end of history, if not a sheer nothing, can only be temporal history's sublation into the infinite history that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are between them. Whether or not proofs of God work, that say the chains of causation have to start with something uncaused, it is, I suggest, plain that the chains of historical sublation do not make a whole history unless they eventuate in a sublation that is not himself sublated. Thus the doctrine of *theosis*, the doctrine that our end is inclusion in God's life, is not simply the brand of eschatology preferred by the eastern churches; it names the only *possible* 'end' of a *creation*, the only possible end of being that is history and drama.

This can be said, of course, only of a God who indeed is himself a history, only of the God who is the archetype of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, only of the triune God. We can be taken into the life of only such a God as has a life to be taken into.

The problem with Hegel was not that he thought of history's final sublation into an infinite living sublation, the triune God, but that he misconceived this God, that his doctrine of Trinity was bad. And here again his error is but the conceptualization of pervasive theological error. We have at bottom supposed that the Father fulfills the definition of God in such fashion that, so far as concepts can carry us, he could have been God on his own. And this supposition has a kickback: it compels a construal of deity that an isolated 'Father' could indeed instantiate, that is, a construal of deity by the beginning rather than the end, by perdurance rather than freedom, by timeless reason rather than history's reason. The problem with Hegel is that, despite his grandiloquent talk of *Geist*, he like most Western theology did not make the biblical Spirit's role decisive for his construal of deity. His God, despite all his rhetoric and the insight behind it, is timeless reason, it lacks life, and therefore the sublation of history into his God is after all a return to the beginning and very much like death.

But that we can fix—not in Hegel to be sure but in our own theology. The tradition has described the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, and for the most part has done so as if this bond were not itself a someone, as if the Father and the Son loved each other in any case, and 'the Spirit' was a subsequent name for that love. But the Spirit unites the Father and the Son in love only in that he is an active agent who *intrudes* to reconcile them, only in that he is the third party who gives himself to both, just and only so freeing them for each other.

So how is the End related to the Beginning? Neither as its restoration nor yet as its development. Neither mechanist nor organicist ideologies will help us here. Indeed, we will understand how the End is related to the Beginning only in the context determined by them, only as the Spirit gives himself to us as he does to the Father and the Son, so that in the church we become able to understand freedom and love. With God, and therefore with his creation, the beginning occurs only as it is freed for the end beyond it, and the end occurs only as love for all that already is.

So –

Does a theology of hope diminish the living presence of God?

We all, of course, have the worry behind this question. Its root is the feeling that emerges in such expressions as 'Well—we can only

hope...,' the feeling that hope is somehow a weaker relation to the future than some other. But what would that other relation be? Control, perhaps? By which we try to deprive the future of its futurity? By which, in the case of God, we try to restrain his *living* presence? To make it indeed his dead presence? Our distrust of hope is an illusion, cast by our fear.

In the triune God, whose life is constituted by the futurity of the Spirit, there occurs the archetype of all that we call hope. And since this God is the Creator, what can only be grasped by hope is just so the most surely real, the most available present. It does not usually seem so to us, but our perceptions are not the measure of reality, if there is God.

I have been trespassing on my next question:

How does one name the God of hope?

I am trying to build these questions one upon the other; therefore you will again not be surprised at my answer. We name the God of hope 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. It is not, of course, that we first conceive a God of hope, and then look around for ways to name it. It is rather that the biblical God is uniquely identified as Father, Son and Spirit and that as we come to know this specific God we find that he can appropriately be described as a God of hope. How does this work out?

Father, Son and Spirit are biblical names for the *dramatis dei personae* that in fact appear in the Bible's telling of God's history with us. And the 'trinitarian relations' by which in classic trinitarian doctrine the identities of the three are constituted—that the Father begets the Son and the Son is begotten, that the Father breathes the Spirit and the Spirit is breathed—are slogans for plot lines of this story. If we ask what may be the being of this God, as one God, we can therefore only answer that he is the life, the history, that occurs between these *personae* and that has this plot. He is not a something or even a someone who has a history; no one has this history except the three. This God simply *is* the life lived between Jesus and the one he called Father, in the Spirit who liberates them for each other. And of course there is no life or history without hope, without the future's opening of possibility and the courage to meet that future without fear.

The foregoing is about God, not yet about us. The triune God is not first the triune God as a God of *our* hope; he does not need us to be the God of hope. The pattern of argument is ancient in theology: we identify true divine attributes by inquiring how 'justice' or 'love' or some similar predicate may be conceived as real in God without supposing the existence of creatures. If we keep the trinity of God firmly in mind, we find that the argument works excellently for 'full of hope'.

Indeed, if we amplify the tradition as earlier demanded, and give the Spirit his biblical due, we may find that 'full of hope' is the great illuminating attribute of God. Christian hope, therefore, is nothing other than a certain participation in the life of God—which would be another way to approach the previous question.

'How do we name the God of hope?' The interrogatory sentence could of course mean something quite different than the question just discussed. It could mean: 'How is it possible to do this at all, to attach language to such a God? And if it is possible, by what exertions do we manage it?'

The great insight here is that there is no problem. The God who can be full of hope, the triune God, is the Father, Son and Spirit of the story Scripture tells; that is, to our present point, he lives his own life as that same history into which he takes us. Thus we come to know him in the way in which we come to know each other, as we live together. And since this common life embraces a far wider span than our little three score and a few, we rely on documents as we do in any such situation.

I do not, of course, deny that God is mystery, only that there is a problem about knowing the mystery. I have lived with my wife for forty-five years, and she becomes more mysterious daily; but there is no problem about how I know her and her mystery. And I have lived with God at least since my baptism sixty-eight years ago; it is no trope to say I know him, and what I know is the mystery of the hope that he is for himself and for me.

So we do in fact address God, and name him to each other, every day in the church. 'Our Father in heaven...' we say, simply because by baptism and in Eucharist we are one with his Son Jesus so that we do in fact live with this Father. If we think there is a problem—and we do of course—it is because we are subliminal unitarians. A monadic God, whose otherness from us can not include us, could indeed only be known by laboriously obtained glimpses and named by projections and metaphors pressed from such experience. And should we construe our relation to such a God as hope, that would indeed much impede the cognitive effort. For with such a God, to say we can only hope in him would be to say he was simply not yet available to us. Were I a unitarian, or even fashionably an Arian, I would indeed fear to construe God by hope.

We are already talking about alternatives, and so I come to the last of the questions I take from the announcement:

What are the alternatives to God being a God of hope?

It must be put as plainly as possible: the only alternative to faith in a God who can decisively be so named is, at least for us modern western-

ers, sheer *lack* of hope, that is, nihilism. Every theology is an apologetic theology, it is molded to a diagnosis of its time and place. If we ask again, and now plumbing for rock bottom, Why did theologians suddenly start making so much of hope? the answer, I think, is that we began to lose hope, began to fear that Nietzsche was right. Every historical time and place is characterized—precisely if the theology of hope is right—by waiting for some advent. The advent looming on *our* horizon is the advent of nothingness, the hour of Nietzsche's last man. It took a while for the century's catastrophes to make us see that, but finally post-war prosperity turned the trick.

The question has occupied me from the first time I wrote a paper for a more or less scholarly society: What happens to a culture whose self-understanding was once enabled by the gospel, when it turns against that gospel? I do not think my preoccupation with this question betrays overmuch nostalgia or romanticism; I do not suppose that there was some period when folk were more Christian or faithful than they are now. Humans, I imagine, are about as faithful and unfaithful to communally acknowledged goods and virtues at one time as they are at another. I refer only to the much-researched multiplicity of ways in which the West's acknowledged goods and virtues were those proposed by Scripture and actual in its narrative. That they have always been honored mostly in the breach is beside my present point.

We have been taught by Scripture to construe history by its End, in accord with a final sublation into an infinite history. What when those so taught no longer believe there is such history to be taken into? Then we will of course see, precisely nothing for us and our world finally to be taken into, and all the little sublations that make up our temporal existence will confront us with that void.

In other terms: we bourgeois have wanted a world to live in that is palpable, reliable, coherent and adapted—as it is currently fashionable to say—to our flourishing. *And* we have each individually wanted to be the autonomous definers of what constitutes coherence and flourishing. That we cannot have it both ways is in itself apparent; but only after staring long into the emptiness that opens between them have we taken fright.

Whether actual nihilism is possible is arguable. But life under the shadow of its threatening advent must be possible, since we are living it. This shadow is the apologetic context of at least my sort of 'theology of hope'.

It was perhaps more by its title than by its material positions that Jürgen Moltmann's book once reminded Christian theology of one of its own necessary tasks: to construe the true God as the God of hope and so foster hope in the lives of believers. We have been reminded. I doubt that books like Moltmann's—or Gerhard Sauter's *Zukunft und*

Verheissung or Carl Braaten's and my joint volume *The Futurist Option*—will again be written. But it is to be hoped [!] that we have not only been reminded of a essential aspect of the theological task, but will remember it and carry on with it.

Abstract

Christian eschatological hope is capable of surviving the criticisms of Marxists and cosmologists and retains its traditional position as an essential part of systematic theology. Hegel's understanding of the relation of the End to the Beginning is erroneous. The God of hope must be understood in trinitarian terms as a God who has a life and a history. There is no alternative to faith in a God of hope other than nihilism.

The Nature of Hell

*A report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on
Unity & Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE)*

These days, popular notions of hell tend either to consign it to the realms of fantasy, or to reserve it for the very worst of villains. The biblical picture is quite different, but even very conservative Christians disagree on certain aspects of that picture.

Evangelicals have traditionally held that unbelievers will be condemned without exception to eternal conscious punishment. However, increasing numbers of evangelical thinkers are declaring sympathy for 'conditional immortality'—a position which emphasises that God's final punishment for sin is death rather than everlasting torment, and that God's promise of a re-created universe cannot be squared with the classical understanding of hell. This is a form of the more general doctrine of 'annihilationism', which sees hell as a realm of destruction rather than endless retribution. For some, this shift represents a dangerous dilution of evangelical faith. For others, it offers a much-needed corrective to a harsh misunderstanding of God's purposes.

These and related issues are tackled in this report by a special Working Group of the Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE). The report aims to be biblical and pastoral, and to be accessible to interested lay people as well as to theological specialists.

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