

Hope for Europe

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The Hope For Europe (HFE) Working Group

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THE REVELATION OF HOPE

by David Aikman

How is it that there is so much Christian literature on love and faith but so little on hope? Why is hope important? Why has it been a neglected issue, at least in recent years?

In Ancient times, the near East was full of great civilisations, e.g. Babylon and Egypt. As archaeologists discovered their treasures, it was seen that the ancient Jewish civilisation was only a small component in a larger picture. It was an accident that the Jewish version of events prevailed. Perhaps the survival of the Jews had been haphazard.

Of course, nothing in Jewish history was accidental. The survival of the Jews was entirely because of God. God was not interested in one theory or another about himself. He was not interested in promoting an idea about himself. He wanted to reveal himself, and his character to the world. The way to do this was to choose a people and then to take a very long time to reveal himself to them. It was not possible for people to grasp his character in a short time.

We take the character of God for granted: his holiness, his power, his constancy, his unflinching concern for his people, his unlimited capacity to forgive etc. But, in ancient times, God's character was radically different to any other god's. The countless gods of the near East were full of human foibles and weaknesses. They were also territorial, whereas God is universal. God is amazingly different. The Jews were called to say to the world "Stop sacrificing your children, committing adultery, lying etc.". They were to tell the world to listen to God's precepts. Fate was nothing, God is the just and holy One, exalted above all things. Yahweh is morally unique, absolute, incapable of human flaws, powerful and terrifying and yet personal, the Lord of all.

Why did God reveal himself to the Jews and, through them, to the world? According to Leo Baeck, the answer was "to form a new humanity and the future". "Judaism aims at a new world".

God is creator of all, and Lord of all, he is in charge of all history until the end. We take all this for granted but it was revolutionary in ancient times. Ancient ideas were that history was cyclical or that a golden age had passed and that decline was inevitable or that life was controlled by fate. In contrast, Judaism contained a hope.

According to Milton Steinberg, Jewish hope has three aspects:-

1. The expectation of the ultimate vindication of the Jews in following God.
2. The hope in the survival of the individual human soul.
3. The hope that all of society would be regenerated into something better.

"The revolution of hope is all the greater because, with time, hope of the Kingdom overflowed not only Judaism and the Jews but all churches and creeds to become in the end the common property and inspiration of all men of good will, whether devout or irreligious".

The revelation of hope was the promise of the coming Messiah and the coming Messianic age. Even now, despite the collapse among the intelligentsia of Europe and North America of the literal belief in the Kingdom of God, there is still a widespread assumption that an almost utopian age is perhaps a little bit beyond the horizon. Liberals think just a little tinkering is needed for problems to be eliminated. Radicals believe that utopia can be engineered through violent assault on the status quo.

As for the Messianic hope, Reformed Jews now imagine it simply as a general improvement in human behaviour. But more conservative Jews still patiently wait for a true Messiah. Even the secular rulers of modern Israel found themselves thinking of hope. The title of their national anthem means "The Hope", the same word for hope which is the most commonly used word in the Hebrew scriptures.

We all know well Chapters 29 - 31 of Jeremiah... ""For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."" The Lord was addressing the captives in Babylon, living through a dark time, "future" referred to the very end. Later the Lord declares, "Your children will return to their own land" and "I will be their God and they will be my people". This is part of the Messianic promise, a time when we will live with God in intimate relationship. It was a historic hope but is also a spiritual hope.

The REVOLUTION OF HOPE

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the Eternal broke into the temporal, it was an eruption in dramatic form of the kingdom of God within the kingdom of humanity, an incarnation of the ageless in the historical.

The Good News is about forgiveness and fellowship with God. This fellowship links us to the Messianic hope, the hope that brings life to us. It is also the whole conception of God's plan for humans all through the ages. (See Romans 16 v 4 and Acts 26. Paul's hope was in what God had promised Israel).

All the aspirations for godliness in the Old Testament, all the longings for communion with God, all the anguished yearnings of the prophets, all these things are answered in the Incarnation and in the lives of Christians. As the Temple curtain tore into two at the moment of Jesus' death, access to God was made possible. This is our hope (Hebrews 10 v23).

Hope is not abstract. In Paul's epistles, it is very concrete. Hope links together the two parties of the covenant. God is Man's hope. Therefore, Man hopes in God. Hope is intricately involved in divine action and human response.

The word "hope" is not really found in the four Gospels for hope is there in the person of Jesus. But Matthew quotes Isaiah 42 v1-4, clearly identifying Jesus as Man's hope.

Faith, Hope and Love, the three theological virtues, are to turn people's hearts to God. They are to infect the whole of our conduct as Christians. According to Hebrews 11, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. The hope vindicates/justifies/explains the faith by which we seize it. Therefore hope is needed first, before faith and love. (See Titus 1 v1-4, 1 Thessalonians 1 v3).

What is hope? Imagine being lost in a wilderness at night. It is dark, you have no compass, there are wild animals around, you are cold and scared. The only thing to do is to try and walk in a straight line and look for a sign of human habitation. Eventually you see a faint glow of light over the brow of the next hill. You now know that safety is nearby because light means that people will be near. Something inside you immediately lights up. That is hope. You are not there yet, you must still walk a little further, but you know that you are nearly there.

1 Peter 3 v 15 says that we must always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have, not the faith or love we have. It is the starting point of the journey to God. (See also Romans 5 v2-5 and 12 v12). Paul wants us to know and understand the hope we have (Ephesians 1 v 18-19), our firm and secure anchor for the soul.

Hope is the distinguishing feature of Christianity compared to any other belief system. It is far more evident in Christianity than in any other religion or philosophy. In New Testament times, the two other prevailing philosophies did not offer hope. Stoics were educated, civilised, thoughtful, and kindly but were grieved at the condition of humankind and were unable to do anything else but live in quiet dignity. Meanwhile, the Epicureans simply sought pleasure. So people were cynics or hedonists. Christianity changed the prevailing attitude. We take it for granted that for a thousand years, Europeans have lived at least within the theoretical structure of the existence of hope.

In the King James' version of Acts 17, the Christians are described as the "men who had turned the world upside down". In fact, they had turned the world the right way up! We should be confident. The pagan, cynical world is not normal, it is not how the world was designed to be. (Also be encouraged because the word pagan meant country dweller. Christianity was always an urban religion).

Hope was strong in the early Church. Clement, Bishop of Rome, wrote in AD96 that we should attach ourselves to God with this hope. Augustine wrote "You do not hope as the gentiles hope. They hope for the vanities of secular life, you for eternal life with Christ".

Hope is essential to missionary passion. We can get fired up by other ideas, like sin and judgement but that leads to legalism and discouragement. The most successful missionaries have been inspired by hope.

Every human yearns for hope, even if (s)he does not know what hope is. In his book "Religion and the Rise of Western Culture", Christopher Dawson writes of "an unrest that refuses to be content with the unchanging law of social condition which rules oriental cultures". Talking of Europe, "It is because its religious ideal has not been the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself into humanity and to change the world". Dawson also shows that this unrest is to be found in humanist culture, despite secularism and naturalism. This is a definite Christian element in humanism.

Again, Europeans take for granted the fact that the freedoms, the richness, the fermentation of ideas that have spread all over the world are the consequence of 1000 years of spiritual discipline and intensive cultivation of the inner life. In Europe, there has been a unique dualism of spiritual and temporal power, leading to a tremendous impact on European culture, i.e. cultural leadership has been independent from political power.

(Dawson) "European history is the history of a series of renaissances of spiritual and intellectual revivals which rose independently, usually under religious influences and were transmitted by a spontaneous process of free commitment".

The great Cathedrals were built with the hard work of freely committed Christians, rarely with the support of the State, and sometimes with its opposition. Europe will be re-Christianised again in the same way - very hard work.

But be encouraged.

The REVIVAL OF HOPE

We simply take for granted the Christian heritage of Europe, that there is a church in every village, a cathedral in every great city. Was it always this way? No.

European intelligentsia has been bored and disaffected with Christianity for a hundred years. A filter of disrespect for Christian convictions has infected Europe. This is primarily the legacy of the Enlightenment. The question is whether we can penetrate this filter of disrespect, doubt and mockery, being inspired by what Christians of the past accomplished by bringing the light of the Gospel to an incredibly dark Europe.

In AD 324, Constantine declared Christianity to be the official faith of Rome but Roman intelligentsia remained very sceptical and the pagans remained. It was only 18 years before the Sack of Rome in 476 that the final pagan temples were abolished. There then

began a great struggle over centuries to transform a dark, barbaric Europe, peopled by merciless warriors. The only centres of culture and learning during these Dark Ages were Christian. And gradually, the saintly lives of holy men made an impact and the peasantry converted. According to Dawson, "The conversion of Europe was achieved not so much by the teaching of the new doctrine as by the manifestations of a new power which invaded and subdued the barbarians of the west as it had already subdued the civilised lands of the Mediterranean". God was working through supernatural power. Take for example Saint Boniface (675 - 753) who was spreading the gospel in France and Germany at the same time as the Arabs were invading France.

Europe was then overrun by the well-organised invasions of the Vikings, almost wiping out any Christian advances. In 845, Hamburg and Paris were sacked by the Vikings, Rome by the Arabs. But the monasteries did not give up. If 99 out of 100 were destroyed, the remaining one would start again to multiply. And, in the end, the invaders adopted and took back the Christian faith.

Feudal Europe grew partly out of an attempt by the Church to establish its independence from state power in a time of political chaos. Christian communities played an important role in governing, particularly in the realm of education. They founded the universities. In the 12th century, Roger Bacon had the idea of unifying all of scientific knowledge in the service of the gospel because he believed that the search for knowledge would end in faith.

Every time that the Church, and particularly the Papacy, entered a period of decline or of corruption, there arose some sort of reform movement. When finally the Reformation happened, at first, this was a disaster for the Roman Catholics. But in the end, blessing came for the Reformation led to the Catholic reaction, the Counter-Reformation. And from that came the greatest upsurge of Roman Catholic missionary zeal ever, in particular with the Jesuits, the most learned men, going all over the world.

In England, the Reformation brought about the Church of England and then the Puritan Revolution. The Puritans were tremendously hopeful.. William Gurnall (1617-1679) wrote "The hope of salvation supports the believer in the greatest afflictions. The Christian's patience is his back where he carries his burdens. Some afflictions are so heavy that he needs a broad back to carry them. But, if hope does not lay the pillow of the promise between his back and his burden, the least cross will prove too much. Therefore, this is called the patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Puritans' hope was mainly in two things.

- 1) Jesus is coming back but, before this, the knowledge of the glory of God will fill the earth.
- 2) Jesus is coming back but, before this, the Jews will believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

This hope propelled their missionary effort.

In 1648, twelve Puritans declared to the House of Commons, "The utmost ends of the Earth are designed and promised to be in the possession of Christ. This little we see is something in hand to earnest to us those things which are in hope, something in possession to assure us of the rest in promise when the ends of the Earth shall see his glory, the kingdoms of the world shall become kingdoms of the Lord and his Christ, when he shall have dominion from sea to sea. And they that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him."

John Howe, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell said, "Plain it is that there is not a more stupefying, benumbing thing in all the world than mere despair. To look upon such a sad face and aspect of things through the world as we have before our eyes, to look upon it despairingly and with apprehension that it never will, never can be better, nothing can more stupefy and bind up the powers of our soul and sink us into a desponding meanness of spirit." Since those hope-filled times, Christian attitudes have changed.

The Puritans were swept away by the decadent Restoration Age but their hope inspired John Wesley in the 1730s, and led to the Great Awakening in America. Hope led to the creation of the great missionary societies in the 1790s, while France was quaking with

revolution. William Carey, the missionary to India said "Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God". He had hope. In 1796, aged 26, William Wilberforce wrote, "God has set before me two great purposes in life, the first, the abolition of the slave trade, the second, the reformation of manners in England." Three days before Wilberforce died in 1833, slavery was abolished. Also by 1833, the entire fabric of Victorian society was in place, with literature, art, music, everything being suffused with the Christian message. In 1800, London was completely corrupt with terrible crime and alcohol problems. By 1820, it was much improved, thanks largely to the work of the Evangelical Clapham Sect. All these Christians had hope. They did not worry about how bad things were, they just got on with it.

So what went wrong?

1. The continued disaffection of the intelligentsia in continental Europe from Christianity after the Enlightenment.
2. The infection of the established Protestant churches by the virus of Higher Biblical Criticism. Hearts stopped glowing.
3. The great prophetic divide in Evangelicalism. The encroaching power of pre-millennial dispensationalism, championed by Darby and the Brethren. In 1840, Darby declared, "What we are about to consider will tend to show that, instead of permitting ourselves to hope for a continued progress of good, we must expect a progress of evil, and that hope of the Earth being filled with the knowledge of the Lord, before the exercise of his judgement and the consummation of his judgement on Earth, is delusive." The Great Divide also led to anti-intellectualism. Evangelical hope and self-esteem were smothered.

There is, in fact, a connection between pre-millennial pessimism and Higher Biblical Criticism. Frederic Engels went through a Christian experience when he was 16 but the Lutheran pastor to whom he turned for advice was unable to answer any of his questions about the Bible. And so Engels rejected his faith, became a militant atheist and teamed up with Karl Marx. Thus was born the false hope of utopian Marxism.

What must be grasped to re-establish hope in Christians?

What is God's will for Europe? Is it that Europe is a washed-out stalking horse for the Anti-Christ? Or is it that Europeans will acknowledge the Lordship of Christ? Surely, God wishes to see the virus of the Gospel reinfect Europe.

Europe has given so much to the world. But the engine room of its morality, standards and goals for learning was the engine room of the Gospel. So how could the engine room be fired up again?

1. Community. Historically, Christians with hope demonstrated how to live in community successfully. They showed the counterpart of what is going wrong in the world. So, in our era of people being alienated from the workplace, intimacy breaking down in social relationships of every kind, of truth being subjective etc., Christian community could show the opposite. They will know we are Christians by our love, not necessarily our doctrine. Let us give fellow believers the benefit of the doubt on some doctrinal issues as we discern the true Body of Christ. Community will also mean that we reach out to the lowest of the low, the outcasts. We need to offer hope to them.

2. Learning. We are collapsing under the weight of information overload. Who has time to read all that they need or want to? But we need a new Roger Bacon. Christians are the only people who have a unified view of science, creation and humanities. They are the only people who can really make sense of all knowledge in terms of the purpose and direction of all things. If Christians will not seek to do this, someone else will try.

Hope has changed the world again and again. Sometimes hope has been extinguished but God has plans for Europe now as he did in the Dark Ages. And his power is real.. We will see Europe change as we move forward in our ministries.

Additional Reading:

Hope, the Heart's Great Quest - David Aikman

David Aikman covered foreign affairs for Time Magazine for over twenty years. The author of "When the Almond Tree Blossoms" and "Hope, the Heart's Great Quest", Aikman holds a Ph.D. in Russian and Chinese history, and currently makes his home in Burke, Virginia. This paper is adapted from his address to the 1997 New Europe Forum (NEF) in Brussels, an annual event.

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