

The Mystery of Hope: A Response to the Tragic

NGTT DEEL 55, SUPPLEMENTUM 1, 2014

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ABSTRACT

The tragic is undeniable and pervasive in our world. Our responses to it differ, ranging from despair, anger and disillusionment to hope that arises in the human spirit, despite tragic circumstances. This paper begins by looking briefly at the tragic, followed by a discussion of the elusive nature of hope that emerges in situations of suffering and adversity. The last section suggests that attempting to understand the mystery of hope in such circumstances entails embracing mystery as integral to religious experience. Finally, consideration is given to prayers of lament that name the suffering, followed by the willingness to wait in silence upon a possible encounter with the Holy One that will speak into situations otherwise inexplicable.

KEYWORDS

Tragic, Hope, Experience, Prayer

TREFWOORDE

Tragies, Hoop, Ervaring, Gebed

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NOTE

Paper presented at a conference in honour of John de Gruchy, Stellenbosch University, 4th September, 2014



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1. INTRODUCTION

The shadow of the tragic hangs over our world. The litany of human suffering and need seems endless and barely a single life is left untouched. Thousands of Palestinians have died over the last two months, killed by bombs and collapsing buildings while at the same time young Israel soldiers and some civilians die in a cause that appears to have no end. Fundamentalist sects are perpetrating obscene brutality on civilians in Middle Eastern countries; Christians are killing Muslims and vice versa in the Central African Republic while war rages in the southern Ukraine. Our citizens are plagued by poverty, violence and unmet basic needs. The wounds of our history and their ever-present consequences are deeply laced with tragedy.

And yet, through the shadow of the tragic hope casts rays of light. How is this possible and how can hope be revived and maintained in the human spirit in adverse circumstances? This paper seeks to reflect on the mystery of hope as a response to the tragic in life. It is unashamedly a theological perspective on aspects of Christian spirituality, as a contribution to the celebration of John de Gruchy's 75th birthday. John, writing on the subject of the spirituality of Christian humanism, says: "While costly, such spirituality is not dehumanizing but liberating, a spirituality of grace that sets us free to be more fully human as persons on a journey to greater wholeness".¹ The goal of becoming more fully human is one I share with John.

2. NAMING THE TRAGIC

In naming the tragic three rather brief and obvious facts require mentioning. Firstly, the tragic is an unavoidable reality in human history. Our circumstances differ; our gender, race, contexts and history are not of our choosing. Tragic events can be caused by inappropriate even wicked human choices, while the tragic can also be thrust upon the innocent. Whatever the reasons, the tragic is real.

Secondly, deep distress and human suffering always accompany the tragic. Loss and deprivation, and events beyond our control dog human lives. On this subject, noted French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil writing about suffering, says: "In the realm of suffering, affliction is something apart, specific and irreducible". She continues to explain:

The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction. It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured even driven from their country, and made destitute or reduced to slavery... It is not surprising that

1 John W.de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006), p. 162.

disease is the cause of long-sufferings, which paralyse life into an image of death. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and take possession of them as their sovereign lord.²

Surprising indeed! Weil here raises the enigmatic paradox of the suffering of the innocent. She analyses suffering in terms of three components: psychological, physical, and social. Affliction, she concludes, involves all three.

Weil's view leads me to a third aspect of the tragic. The tragic demands a response. The futility of the question: "Why suffering?" must rather give way to: "How do we deal with the tragic in life?" and "How can we stand in solidarity with those who are afflicted?"³ Despair is one response. Anger and feelings of retribution are others. But there is an alternative response to the tragic that says "yes" to life, that affirms the presence of God in times of suffering and places trust in God's love and compassion to sustain us.

This response can only be described as a mysterious gift that silently sneaks up on the human heart pulsing gently yet constantly until a tender song of hope is heard. This cannot be explained rationally, or laid hold of at will. It can only be waited for trustingly, prayerfully and faithfully as a way of choosing life over despair and death.

3. BRIEF STORIES OF HOPE

Hope occurs in human beings in very different ways. The following brief stories illustrate this point. Sister Marie, a sixty year old, diminutive, quietly spoken Irish nun spends five mornings a week at Pollsmoor prison with men serving maximum sentences. When asked what she did there she replied: "I listen to them because you see nobody does." She tells of a thirty-five year old man, convicted for armed robbery and murder, who attends her discussion group. One day, quite unexpectedly, he says: "My name is no longer *persona non grata*. My name is Hope". A woman standing in the ruins of her shack in an informal settlement says: "I hope for my children's future". The mother at the graveside of her raped and murdered four-year-old daughter cries out, "*Here waar was jy? Ek hoop jy is by haar.*"⁴

2 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1974), 76, 78-79.

3 Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*. tr. ER Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 19.

4 "Lord, where were you? I hope you are with her".

4. HOPE IN THE NOW

These brief stories illustrate the bewilderingly inexplicable and mysterious nature of hope in very different circumstances. I know that the word “mystery” is often used as an escape hatch for theologians when we encounter what we cannot understand. Thank goodness! Too ready answers about the nature of God or God’s ways are in danger of edging towards fundamentalism. We dare not shy away from mystery when speaking about the Transcendent. As Albert Einstein said: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious”.⁵

The following passage, written by early church historian Francine Cardman, describes the baffling and contradictory nature of hope.

Hope is an elusive virtue, whether theological or practical. It calls us; draw[s] us on, fades into shadows, dies. It bears us up and lets us down. It disappoints and it emboldens. It can be hard to find, harder still to grasp. Theologically, it is, after all, hope *in things not seen* and yet to come. Practically, it is hope that things seen to be awry, unjust, life threatening can be transformed through a vision of what could be possible now.⁶

If in the face of the tragic bearing down on us if we do not give in to despair, we are compelled to speak of hope. We do after all believe that having faith is synonymous with having hope. What might hope in the life of faith look like?⁷

First, our theological understanding of hope in what is unseen and yet to come is fundamental to our faith. We hope for salvation and for a future that is lived with God. This we affirm in our creeds.

Our hope in a future with God cannot, however, be separated from how we live in the here and now. We are called to live hope in the present in a manner that affirms our faith in God. Refuge in the apocalyptic, or once-and-for-all thinking and wish fulfilment, is a travesty of our faith. As Brazilian theologian and philosopher Ruben Alves says: “Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance it”.⁸ The dance is now.

5 From Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the 4 Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 16.

6 Francine Cardman, “Practicing hope” in *Healing God’s People: Theological and Pastoral Approaches. A Reconciliation Reader*, Thomas A Kane CSP (ed.) (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 215.

7 For a more detailed look at hope see, Denise M Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2014), 132-136.

8 [http://www. imagequotes/authors/ruben-alves](http://www.imagequotes/authors/ruben-alves)

Second, our theological understanding of hope as a lived practical reality includes the profound pain of personal suffering as well as the suffering caused by unjust structures and practices that perpetuate tragic circumstances in people's lives. There is no way of escaping the truth that the way we hope should be the way we live. To live hope is to try to make that which we hope for come about.

Third, to live hope is to risk disappointment. Hope is risky because hope is fragile, disappointment is ever present and there are no guarantees. Jürgen Moltmann speaks of 'the experiment of hope' because it can lead to disappointment, as well as surprise.⁹ Our history of opposing apartheid has taught us just how risky hope can be. Practising hope means to be in solidarity with those who suffer, and to have the courage to resist injustice.

Fourth, hope requires patience and endurance. As Paul reminds the Romans (8:36): "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience". Endurance requires patience and resistance to the void of hopelessness, not resignation. We wait, hoping to be surprised and sustained by a "passion for the possible". Waiting expectantly is resistance to a world that wants instant answers.

Fifth, prayer is our greatest tool for holding on to hope. I have written elsewhere:

Conversing with God about our hopes, lamenting before God about those that are shattered, confessing impatience and moments of hopelessness, petitioning for what seems impossible, and meditating on God's faithfulness, are Spirit-led moments that nurture hope.¹⁰

Prayers are both communal and personal and are nurtured by the prayers of others in the community faith. This is so because God is the common ground of our hope. We trust in God who is not an abstract figurehead pulling strings in some random manner, but ever present in human history and most arrestingly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5. EXPERIENCING THE MYSTERY OF HOPE IN THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

How can hope, that "elusive virtue", be born in hearts that are rent by affliction when the tragic threatens to overwhelm us? American poet Emily Dickinson, wrote:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches on the soul,

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man*, 36.

And sings the tune without the word,
And never stops at all.¹¹

How does hope perch upon the soul and give rise to a song that “never stops at all”? My contention is that this happens in the practice of prayer. To give flesh to this statement, first some thoughts on acknowledging mystery are followed by looking at the phenomenon of religious experience. I conclude with a few brief comments on the nature of prayer and the mysterious nature of hope in prayer.

a) Experiencing mystery

The word “mystery” conjures up different responses. I hold as a theological truth that God is mystery, that life itself is laced with mystery, and that we human beings are even a mystery unto ourselves. Karl Rahner acknowledges the presence of mystery in the life of faith. He writes: “First of all, being constituted as transcendental subject, he [i.e. the human being] is in the presence of being as mystery, a mystery which constantly reveals itself and at the same time conceals itself”.¹² Being in relationship with God is permeated by mystery. It can be described as a *living encounter with the Holy One*, an experience of subjectivity which Rahner describes as follows: “By its very nature subjectivity is always a transcendence which listens, which does not control, which is overwhelmed by mystery and opened up by mystery”.¹³

Mystery is *experienced*.¹⁴ It is subjective knowledge, given by God in Christ. So Paul can write to the Colossians (2:2) how he desires that they may have “all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”.

b) Religious experience¹⁵

As I said, mystery is experienced. Christian faith grounded in experience has a long history. In the beginning the disciples came to believe in Jesus and to trust him

11 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. TH Johnson (New York: Backbay Books, 1961), 116.

12 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, tr. WV Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 42.

13 Rahner, *Foundations*, 58.

14 See also Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), 256 who refers to the language of mystery in Ephesians.

15 I prefer the phrase “the experience of faith”, however this is the description used in the literature.

through their experience of him, not through knowledge of preconceived doctrines or prepositions. In the early church and through the Middle Ages, religious experience was accepted as foundational for theology and spirituality. Subsequently theology evolved into a discipline that shied away from religious experience as too subjective and unscriptural. However, today there is a radical shift towards the recognition of religious interiority; hence the recognition of spirituality as a descriptive-critical discipline in the academy.¹⁶ This shift is important when arguing for the practice of prayer as the way to *experiencing* the mystery of hope. Religious experience cannot be discounted because every aspect of our humanness is involved in the venture of faith – our minds, hearts, spirits and souls.

Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan in his work *Method in Theology*¹⁷ explains that our experience of the transcendental is material for the theological methods we employ. Our theological methods require the experience of believing that God actually responds to and communicates with us in love and knowledge. This truth cannot be reduced to shallow arguments for objectivity versus subjectivity. Lonergan points out that subjective reality does not deny rational thought that he labels as attentive, intelligent, and reasonable. However, he argues, the blending of all aspects of our reality is not easily achieved without an authentic conversion first. For Lonergan we are changed through that mysterious encounter with mercy, joy and forgiveness we name conversion.

Lonergan qualifies experience. According to him, it is the experience of being in love with God. He writes: “Religious experience is at its roots the experience of unconditional and unrestricted being in love. But what we are in love with we have to find out”.¹⁸ Thus Lonergan’s theological method is not grounded in the first instance in theological deductions from some set of first propositions, but rather on the religious experience of conversion understood as “being in love with God”.¹⁹ Lonergan makes clear that the foundations for systematic and pastoral theology are not premises, but converted people, including converted theologians.

Lonergan’s definition of religious experience leads to two important conclusions. First, religious experience is not something esoteric, or outside ordinary human

16 See Sandra M Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy” in Kenneth J Collins (ed.). *Exploring Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 249-270.

17 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

18 William Johnston, *Being in Love: The Practice of Christian Prayer* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1988), 12.

19 See William A. Barry & William J Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1972), 21.

experience. We are made for experiencing the transcendent. It is not utterly exceptional or a holy luxury. Second, it is also not concerned with fidelity to laws, rules or regulations or formulas of doctrine. It is an inner movement of the human soul for which the Holy Spirit is responsible.

c) The Practice of Prayer

Being in love is about relationship. We pray because we are in relationship with God, a relationship of reciprocal love. Our relationship with God is primal as it is established in the creation of the human person. Whether we respond to this truth about our humanity or not, is our choice. But God nonetheless continues to care and communicate with us – we are free to listen or not to, to respond or not to. Prayer is the expression of mutual relationship with God. It is holy conversation. We speak and we listen to the Beloved.

Speaking about prayer is a minefield. It is a subject that has no fixed rules or recipes; it is deeply personal and communal, ritualised and spontaneous.²⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to appropriate the Word, and what is more, to accept in one’s personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations”.²¹ John de Gruchy describes the journey towards becoming fully human as “participating in the Christian story through prayer, reading and reflection on the Scriptures, sharing together in the Eucharistic meal, and embodying the story in our daily lives”.²²

Trappist monk Thomas Merton describes prayer as a “simple yearning for the presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for the capacity to hear and obey him”.²³ Key here is the word “yearning”. Prayers should express our deepest longing for an encounter with the Holy - being heard and responded to. We pray because we long for an encounter with God. We long for God because it is in our divine DNA. Our longing for God is planted in us in us through the Spirit of God who, as Paul tells us, “dwells “ in us (Rom. 8:9b). Our longing is ground for our hope.

20 There are as many different understandings and ways of praying as there are people of faith: Discursive prayer, meditative prayer, silent prayer, communal prayer, personal prayer, and contemplative prayer.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. JW Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1949), 64.

22 de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p.163.

23 Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton. Longman and Todd, 1969), 82.

However, when prayers arise from circumstances that are deeply painful, when the tragic threatens to hold the soul to ransom, we long for relief, for change, and ultimately for hope. While we cannot deny our fundamental longing for God, the tragic can overwhelm us and understandably translate our prayer into a longing for answers, for solutions, and for comfort. We hear only our pain. Tears and cries, often incoherent, accompany such prayers. This prayer is lament. We have a long and rich tradition of lament, particularly in the psalms that speaks truth to God in a forthright and often accusing manner when fear, distress and suffering invade us.

I have described lament as:

... a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, a desire for vengeance, for forgiveness and healing that beats against the heart of God ... Lament should be generous not grudging, explicit not general, unafraid to contain petitions and confident that they will be heard.²⁴

Lamenting in prayer is a response to the tragic. We seek to encounter God in all things – in the tragic, in the joyful, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Surely this is what it means to “live, and move and have our being in Christ” (Acts 17:28)?

We lament and then we move to waiting silently on God. From the earliest Christian times the practice of prayerful listening to God has been an accepted way of seeking to encounter God. Syrian theologian Isaac of Nineveh (d.c.700) said: “If you love truth, be a lover of silence ...”²⁵ This silent listening is an expression of trust because we believe that God is present, and God cares.²⁶ In this quiet waiting on God we are awakened to wonder at the all-embracing Presence that includes not only our own experience but also responds to the needs of the world around us. We adopt a contemplative attitude that grounds our presence in the world before our God. Our cries of lament make way for a wordless waiting, an open inner space of quiet where we may just hear that mysterious tune of hope that perches on the soul and sings “a tune without a word and never stops at all”.

I want to end the topic of silence with a story recounted to me by Michael Welker. On the opening evening of a conference in Heidelberg, Germany, to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of renowned biblical scholar Gerhard von

24 Denise M Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003), 111.

25 B Kadloubovsky and GEH Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia, 6th impression* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 86.

26 The symbiotic relationship between faith, hope and love is fundamental to the Christian faith (1 Cor 13:12).

Rad (1901-1971), philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (then aged 101) stood up and said of von Rad: “There was a silence in him that came out of a deep listening”.²⁷ Everyone who knew von Rad attested to the truth of this statement.

d) The mystery of hope that perches on the soul

In conclusion, my attempts to look at hope as a response to the tragic, leaves me with one certainty: it defies rational understanding. It is a mystery. Mystery does not mean something unintelligible, incoherent or jumbled. The mystery of hope does not provide “solutions”; rather it draws us ever deeper into the Paschal journey, a journey that will inevitably be accompanied by suffering. This mysterious elusive virtue, this thing with feathers that perches upon the soul, is a godly gift. When and how God enables us to hope cannot be managed by us. The willingness to pray truth in the agony of the tragic and then to be prepared to wait, trusting God, can enable us to sing that song “that never stops at all”.

Hoping despite tragic circumstances needs discernment (*diakrisis*) that intentional and self-reflective process that probes our inmost longing. When the going is tough it is sustained by persistence, patience and passion. We long to hear the Holy One because we long for healing – the healing of ourselves and the world in which we live. We rely on and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit who accompanies us on our journey to the cross and beyond. Throughout we are sustained by prayer that is unafraid to confess, lament, petition and intercede, while being willing to listen in silence for that song that never ends at all.

The mystery of hope breaks open our inner being and leaves us with an experience that is deeper than language, deeper than our religious symbols and rites. This longing that gives rise to hope is not quietism but rather a critical theory of hope.

Hope is the infinity of love, writes Kevin Hughes who continues:

Hope is the longing itself for the deeper reality of a love that is beyond all loves, for the beauty that lays beneath, before, behind, above, and within those symbolic, evocative visions, for the time when “God will be all in all”.²⁸

27 Ackermann, *Surprised*, 186. See also Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 59.

28 Kevin L Hughes, The crossing of hope, or apocalyptic eschatology, in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, Miroslav Volf & William Katenberg (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 124.