



## Hope

A theological exploration

Jan-Olav Henriksen

To cite this article: Jan-Olav Henriksen (2019) Hope, Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology, 73:2, 117-133, DOI: [10.1080/0039338X.2019.1663366](https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2019.1663366)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2019.1663366>



Published online: 12 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 356



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Hope

## *A theological exploration*

Jan-Olav Henriksen

Hope is a central topic in Christian theology. In the Nordic countries, it holds a prominent place in recent contributions. The present article discusses relevant elements related to Christian hope in a wider context of politics, other imaginaries, and constructive and critical proposals. Taking its point of departure in conceptual nuances suggested by Derrida, it discusses the recent contributions of Herms, Keller and McCord Adams with regard to how a theological explication of hope can be developed in contemporary constructive theology.

### *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

Hope is involved in the practice of prayer. Hope is protest. Hope is behind the struggle for justice. Hope is behind the #MeToo movement. Hope is in the Paris Agreement. Hope drives the “Black lives matter” movement. Hope is behind every promise of peace and justice. Hope is in the strength that allows the tired to look across the border towards a country not ridden by war. Hope is in the acceptance of forgiveness. Hope is in the lovers’ embrace. To believe in God is to believe in someone good who has not yet arrived, something good still to come, in something new and different.<sup>2</sup>

We hope for love. We hope for redemption. We hope for deliverance. We hope to be able to counter climate change. We hope for forgiveness. Hope is always for a change towards the better. Hope and the good are linked internally and intimately. Hope transforms us, and hope is about transformation. Even when some hope for things that we may disagree on, their hope is for what they assume is the better, as when they vote for Trump, for Bolsonaro, or for Brexit.

Accordingly, hope is almost always hoping for the good. Intimately connected to our desires, hope opens us to a world where not everything is determined by violence, destruction, evil or injustice. If goodness

disappears, hope may diminish. With new chances for goodness, hope may increase.

There are many forces that challenge our ability to hope and threaten to take hope away. The ties between hope and goodness are always under siege. And many are those who close the door for the destitute who knock at our door in hope. In times of darkness, we need to find reasons for hope, nonetheless. Without hope, we end up in even darker times.

\*\*\*

Following Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, theologians in the 1960s and onwards developed their various takes on theologies of hope. And it is a remarkable fact that hope continues to be a vital and essential topic in much recently developed systematic theology. We see over the last decade how a number of theologians related to the Nordic scene have been working on hope.<sup>3</sup> Hence, hope is still on the agenda! Why is this so? Or, why is hope on the agenda again? The reason is simple: We need hope in times of darkness. Despite its roots in the past, Christianity is not backward-looking, but tries to suggest a different future to those experiencing dark times. To put it in formal terms: Hope both orients human life, and it can have the effect of transforming human life. This points to the intimate relationship between hope and religion, since religion is closely linked to practices of orientation and transformation.<sup>4</sup> I will return to these effects or consequences of hope later. Here, I want to state from the beginning that from the point of view of Christian systematic theology, it is impossible for hope to be merely an instrument used for bringing about better human conditions. Hope is for all of creation, in its entanglement with its Creator. Hope is about relationships, and its content is related to relationships.

Below, I intend to bring some material forward for the discussion of the following questions: How can Christian hope be practiced? What does this hope do and what does it imply? On what terms and in what ways can hope change life and point to the recognition of new possibilities for life and faith? Are there resources in Christian faith for how hope should be practiced? When hope is not present, what impact does this absence have on human agency and on believers' faith? Are there specific practices of Christian hope? Thus, the focus is not merely on the dogmatic content of faith, as explicated in more or less speculative visions about eschatology, but on how Christian hope matters in the lives of those who hold such hope. The reason for this is that if we conceive of Christian hope as a merely eschatological hope, related to the future, we basically

admit that it has no bearings whatsoever on our relationship with the present life and present experiences. I will argue that this is not the case and that in the present world, it is more important than ever to insist on this fact. Christian hope is a resource for living here and now, and for passing judgment or evaluating the present – and not a means for fleeing into a speculative future. As we shall see later, this position may also have some bearings on how we can consider the symbol of hell productively – even though it is something for which one should not hope.

*Hope as manifesting difference and differance (Derrida)*

What do we do when we hope? What is it that hope does? Jacques Derrida may offer some help in thinking about these questions. Among his more famous approaches is his distinction between difference and differance – two words that are spelled differently but pronounced similarly.<sup>5</sup> If we try to employ this distinction with the aim of understanding what happens in hope, what hope does, what we do when we hope, then we can see how important the distinction he makes is.

To hope means to make a distinction between what is present, and what is hoped for. Thus, hope is a manifestation of difference, and of absence: That which one hopes for is absent, and is only present in hope, as something not yet there. This manifestation of the absence of the hoped for in the present shapes the perception of the present as a situation of lack, of absence: not everything is what is hoped for. Something may be missing. Without hope, this difference between what is and what one hopes for is not possible to manifest. But in hope, both the present and the future are perceived in light of the difference between present and future, what is and what is to come. If the difference is suspended, we are caught in the present, determined by the past and not provided with a view for what is still possible, but also not yet the case.

From a pragmatic point of view, this means that hope shapes the perception of reality in which one finds oneself. This is not a mere theoretical perception of what is: Hope, by making a difference, marking a difference, manifesting a difference, also provides means for orientation in the present, for passing judgment on it, assessing it, criticizing it. Hope is judgment of the present. Even when what we hope for is that the future shall be a continuation of the present, such judgment is made – because this hope is then expressing a positive affirmation of the present and the hope that it will continue.

I noted earlier, in passing, that there are two different questions at stake here. One is: What do we do when we hope? The other is about what hope does (to us and for us). By employing this distinction, we can distinguish between the active and the passive aspect in our relation to hope: Hope is not only motivation for agency, but it is also something that shapes this agency in specific ways. Moreover, hope is something that we do to ourselves – it is not only about some wished-for future state.

Hope's manifestation of difference is thus involved in a tension between activity and passivity that is notable: Hope can instigate activity, make the one who hopes active, and simultaneously shape the way she orients herself in the world and perceives of the opportunities for transformation. This *active hope* is the hope that leads to responsibility and action.

There is, however, also a passive hope, which relies on the hope that someone else will bring around the hoped-for change and transformation. This hope implies a deferral of action, a passive expectation that something will happen without our participation. Just like the active version of hope, it may imply a judgment of the present as something in need of change or transformation, but it does not instigate action.

An obvious example of the pragmatic impact of these two versions of hope is visible when we consider the responses to school shootings in the US in 2018. The seemingly religious and pious “We offer our thoughts and prayers” meant that the only practice one responded to these atrocities with, had no effect whatsoever on the political scene. On the other hand, there were those who actively marched the streets and voiced the need for change in legislation. From a critical perspective, the response that here appeared as “religious” was one that did nothing to make the hoped-for happen. This practice was not driven by an enacted hope, causing hope, pointing to a different future in which there was the chance to participate actively. It was a deferral that ignored the practice of hope expressed in the traditional and more adequate response within the Christian tradition, *ora et labora, pray and work!* Hope means work. Facing global warming, such deferral and passivity are even more important to address as the opposite of a Christian – and human – approach to the future.

The reason for choosing this example is that it expresses well one of the predicaments in which Christian faith and theology finds itself: the foundation of Christian hope is the expectation that *God will do something*. It is, simultaneously, critical toward any kind of action on the side of humans when it comes to bringing about the future hoped for, in which God's justice will rule. Thus, it defers the future hoped for by making a sharp distinction between God's agency and the agency of humans.

In one sense, we can say that hope, by its mere presence, manifests the fact that what is hoped for is deferred. This is a descriptive way of addressing the “difference of hope.” However, from another angle, one can also address this “difference” (a) from a normative and critical point of view, as something that happens when the difference (e) that hope manifests does not lead to action, or when hope is rejected. The one who makes the latter option most visible to us is Nietzsche.

Nietzsche’s most famous quote on hope is, in fact, a rejection of it. He writes, “In reality, hope is the worst of all evils because it prolongs man’s torments.”<sup>6</sup> If we read him in light of Derrida, Nietzsche’s rejection of hope means that he wants to let go of the difference that hope manifests, and that he rejects the recognition of how the hoped-for is deferred. This move has a specific purpose, which in his writings is often expressed in the statement *amor fati* – love thy fate! The one who loves his fate and sees no need for change, transformation or otherness, accepts the present as it is, and expects no more. Any expectation of something else, of otherness, means that one continues one’s own suffering in the present, since hope becomes the manifestation of what is not, and thereby adds to the experience that there is something wrong, something unacceptable in the present.

To a certain extent, it is also possible to say that Nietzsche’s recommended approach to hope also implies that he can obliterate judgment, since he holds the position that we should accept everything as it is. His stoic-like recognition of the present refers the individual back to his or her capacity for living in the present as it is, with no need for change. Thus, it is all a question of being heroic – for oneself, at least.

There are significant reasons for being critical towards Nietzsche’s rejection of hope. Admirably as it is, in its attempt to celebrate the given and to enjoy life as it presents itself, it nevertheless overlooks that there are elements in human life that are in need of transformation, improvement, changes, protests, and struggle for something different. Furthermore, his is an individualist position that says nothing about the responsibility to alleviate the sufferings and the needs of others, apart from the challenge to those who suffer to remain heroic and accept and comply with the given state of affairs. As a consequence, his position is therefore not very different from that of the one who is able to offer her thoughts and prayers in response to violence and suffering.

Anette Ejsing has some important comments that can serve as critical commentary on Nietzsche. She writes, bluntly, that one of the main questions regarding hope is this one:

How can we come to terms with the ambivalent reality that the human race is on a relentless quest for complete fulfilment of being, in spite of the opposing fact that this quest results – repeatedly and without fail – in some manner of acquiring the knowledge that such fulfilment is unattainable?<sup>7</sup>

Thus, she takes the human condition that unceasingly projects hope more seriously than does Nietzsche. Furthermore, she also takes this condition more seriously than he does when she says that theologies that articulate and engage human hope are “about endurance through suffering. Not suffering under the weight of destructive and imposed evil, but suffering under the weight of imposed promise.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, she turns Nietzsche’s view of hope on its head: Hope is a response to suffering, caused by the vision that things could be otherwise. This is also what Christianity is: not a description of the world as such, not an explanation of why things are as they are, not about accepting that our condition is fully determined by the past, but about articulating a distinction that makes it possible to orient ourselves and perceive possibilities for transformation – through hope, in hope, by means of hope. Hope may cause suffering, as Nietzsche says, but without hope, the possibilities for finding ways out of it remain absent.

### *Christian hope between activism and passivity (Herms)*

To specify further what Christian hope is and how it affects human life, we can look into one element in Eilert Herms’ recently published *Systematische Theologie*.<sup>9</sup> The main reason for choosing his work is that he explicitly connects his understanding of what this hope entails with an understanding of human activity. Thus, he avoids the outcome of mere activism or mere passivity that implicitly was suggested earlier. Furthermore, the way he spells out the content of Christian hope also shows how complex this hope is, and how much it is entangled with the whole Christian existence. Nevertheless, this does not imply that his position needs to be challenged at some points.<sup>10</sup>

In the thesis that introduces § 20 of his *Systematische Theologie*, Herms claims that the character of Christian faith is determined by an unmistakable certainty concerning both the origin and destination of the world. Thus, he connects creation and consummation, and places hope in the broader context that has to do with all of God’s work. Seen in this perspective, he claims that faith has its inner-worldly and embodied presence in the socio-historical and cosmic *becoming* of this world.

Furthermore, faith expresses itself in dedication to the truth and grace of the Creator who has promised to realize and complete the process towards full communion between the human and the divine. By virtue of the promise of life, faith is the confident hope that motivates and directs its devotion to the attainment of the goal. Thus, faith relies on the promise of the Creator to fulfil the process of becoming, in which the world and every human is involved. However, Herms does not seem to recognize, in his elaborations on these matters, that this outcome is still not clearly defined: We do not know what it will be like, there is still something ungraspable and transcending which he does not seem to be able to articulate when he simply speaks about the “unmistakable certainty.”

Nevertheless, Herms makes several notable and important decisions in his elaborations. Not only does he connect hope in the future with the previous acts of the creator, but he also sees the concrete and actual participation of humankind in the process of the world as something that is linked to the future that God has promised. Hence, hope is not merely about the future, but it orients and motivates humans in their concrete and embodied existence in the here and now. Moreover, finally, he sees human faith as that which makes the hope for the future something that makes humans devoted to the goal that God is about to bring about. Thus, God’s presence and activity are weaved together with a human life shaped by faith, hope, and love. Everything nevertheless rests on God’s promise and God’s will for community. However, he does not in any way spell out concretely what the practices of faith, hope and love mean for the struggles for justice and peace, or for the way one deals with poverty, homelessness, refugees and sexual violence, just to name some of the challenges which humankind faces. Hence, his elaborations leave something to be desired with regard to *how* Christian practices of hope can be performed. Bob Neville puts this challenge well when he writes in his recent book that, “For human beings, facing a future with possibilities of differing value places people under obligation to choose the better rather than the worse insofar as they can act to affect which possibilities are actualized and which excluded.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Herms makes an important distinction (in § 21) between the certainty of faith that rests on God’s promise and what God has done, and the *activity of faith*, which emerges from the certainty of faith and is conditioned by it. This distinction is helpful because it shows that although Christian hope means directedness towards the future, it is nevertheless based in faith in what God has already done and in what God already has promised to do. Notable in this regard is also that Herms underscores



how not only the person who believes can see herself as encompassed by God's creative and caring concern, but that everything in this world is encompassed by the same creative personal presence and one can experience oneself in faith. This inclusive way of relating to the world is of importance for an issue to which I will later return.

Hermes furthermore underscores how the certainty of the Christian hope is based on God's loving acts for us in leading us towards the reconciled and realized community with God in the life eternal. God lures us towards this goal in order to realize it, and it can be realized only in our loving response to God's will, works, and acts. Thus, God's aim for God's creation is realized in our love for God and the world. However, our love is the response to and the result of God's love for us. There is an unavoidable asymmetry between human love and God's love, despite their close interrelation. Against the backdrop of this love, and the hope that grounds and conditions it, we can discover the motive for what Hermes calls the activity of faith: It is the conviction that God has worked through us, and continues to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its abstract and generic character, Hermes' contribution helps to make visible some fundamental theological distinctions that are necessary in order to prevent the Christian hope from ending in either pure activism or in a passivity that makes it mean nothing in the present. His is a valuable contribution, and we can argue that it implies a call to further concretization by those who want to take the full implications of this theology seriously in their daily lives.

### *Open eschatology and critique of apocalypticism (Catherine Keller)*

Catherine Keller offers a different, even contrary reflection in relation to Christian hope than Hermes does, and it holds considerable critical relevance for how one addresses the topics at hand. Keller's emphasis on the profoundly relational character of everything leads her to consider what this means for the relationship between the present, past, and future.

In our global world, we can only prevent the worst or strive for the better if we recognize that humans are intimately intertwined with their surroundings and the world, with each other and God, which is precisely ignored if either a modern autonomy of the subject or a postmodern radical alterity of the other is emphasized.<sup>13</sup>

It would mean that those future possibilities that we hope for, and which we may consider impossible, “do not come from the outside, like the advent of an event, but come forth, or become, from the incalculable and inscrutable relationships that make up the being of our world.” Rick Benjamins, in his recent analysis of Keller, therefore points to how, “instead of a radical alterity, Keller adheres to an unsurveyable relatedness, for if being is in relation [...] an unrelated alterity makes no sense.”<sup>14</sup> This is a profound insight because it also allows for an understanding of the Christian hope as not so much the manifestation or the supersession of a supernatural reality, but as the graceful realization of what the created world can be.

Moreover, Keller offers some critical and self-critical reflections about the self-righteous convictions of leftist, feminist, liberationist or affiliated groups and parties. These groups usually strive for a better world and reject apocalyptic doom-scenarios. However, they may also tacitly reproduce similar patterns of thought as those they reject. Hope for a better world in the future, different from the present, may easily have the consequence that opponents of this hope are demonized for obstructing the realization of the new world. “These features contribute to an anti-apocalyptic way of thought that is still apocalyptic under the surface and can, therefore, be labelled as retro-apocalyptic or crypto-apocalyptic,”<sup>15</sup> Benjamins argues with reference to Keller. The problem with (more or less) disguised apocalyptic patterns of thought is that they

close down history by pressing it into the schemes of a fixed ideological worldview. Within these schemes resides the tacit presupposition of an ultimate triumph over the old world and its adherents. In contrast, Keller wants to “sustain resistance to destruction without expecting to triumph.” The idea of triumph might turn humans into destructive and self-righteous martyrs or victors, who precisely block the road to the better world that they strive for, ignorant of the opportunities for improvement given in the moment.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Benjamins points to how Keller develops her reflections on the apocalyptic mindset in “a postmodern critique of the modernist attempt to achieve ideals on the basis of some *arche* and *telos* of history.” This critique builds on her process theological approach that prioritizes *creativity in an open process*. This important point links together creation and the future, as Herms also insists on, and does it in a way that allows for an open future and not for conformity to an already

established pattern or ideal design. It also allows for a full relational character of the already mentioned relational character of all being.

A better world will not appear by the enforcement of our ideals, but requires that we stay in touch with the relations that make up our world as it is now, since these relations provide us with the opportunities for the better.<sup>17</sup>

There is one more element that follows from the deeply relational approach in Keller's theology that she does not develop, but which is spelled out clearly in one of the critics of process theology, of which she is a representative. Robert C. Neville has pointed to how past, present, and future must be seen as *internally related*, albeit different, in the creative act that hope rests on. Whereas the essential components of the past have to do with fixed, finished, actuality, those of the present have to do with spontaneous creativity. It is only against the backdrop of these that we can understand the components of the future as having to do with pure unity or the principles of harmony. Neville writes on the interrelation between the three *tempora* in a quote that is quite dense, but which clearly points to how both divine and human agency with regard to the future rest on conditions of the past and the present which inescapably contribute to the content of the hope for the future:

Each mode [of time] also receives conditional components from both of the others. From the past the future receives a plurality of actual things that have to be unified; hence, the future is not pure indeterminate unity but rather patterns of determinate possibilities, often containing alternatives. From the present the future receives constantly shifting demands of relevance, requiring that the future provide possibilities for decisive actualization relative to each present. Thus, the future is an ever-changing kaleidoscope of possibilities relevant to every moment as it is present.<sup>18</sup>

Neville is pointing here to something that most believers are aware of, but which is not always explicated: that the contents of this world and its former and present state is what makes hope in the future relevant, actual, and constantly changing, due to the always existing transformations, changes, disruptions, terrors and creative potentials that emerges in history. Thus, hope is never only about the present; it is also

something that provides us with assessments and optics for the potentials of the present.

*The inclusive hope for the other*

The earlier sketches of some elements in Herms' and Keller's theologies were to serve a specific purpose: to provide the basis for understanding Christian hope as an activity-shaped and faith-based hope that expresses itself in love for all humankind. In the present context, this can be explicated in a specific manner with regard to those who are addressed as *religious others*. Traditionally, this challenge has mostly been dealt with in terms of what we can call an exclusivist eschatology that deals with the faith of those without a belief in the Christian message. This position is challenged not only by the already hinted at universalist position that Herms seems to develop, but also by recent developments in interreligious dialogue, and in the practices they imply. We can say that the contemporary interreligious scene and the actual practices of community displayed there call for a reconsideration of how to articulate and understand the content of the Christian hope. In Jakob Wirén's recently published study, this comes clearly to expression. I want to offer two quotes that he gives us from the first pages of his book:

Wirén quotes Jacques Dupuis, who states:

There is, perhaps, nothing which provides interreligious dialogue with such a deep theological basis, and such true motivation, as the conviction that ... the members of different religious traditions ... are traveling together toward the fullness of the Reign, toward the new humanity willed by God for the end of time.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, Dupuis shows how the recognition of the religious other as someone who is also underway to the future of God provides a theological basis for interreligious encounters and motivation for participating in community with him/her. Accordingly, this recognition has pragmatic consequences for the practices in which believers are involved with persons who belong to other religious traditions.

Wirén also quotes Anthony Kelly, who speaks about how a "new openness or sympathy comes into play when the encounter between different faiths and spiritualities is set within a *horizon of hope* and its expectation of an ultimate communion in eternal life."<sup>20</sup> It is notable here is how Kelly speaks of a horizon of hope and thereby shows how all we do is set within a specific frame that is determined by hope. What we should

note is also how this point may relate to the earlier point about the intrinsic and intimate relationship between hope and goodness. This relationship is not a question of wishful thinking, but is linked to the notion of God as love, and founded in the promises of this God to be faithful to all of God's creation. One consequence of this approach is that we need to address and leave behind destructive imaginaries that have shaped Christian expectations of the future and compromised the content of the Christian hope. To this, we can now turn.

*Hope: not fear, but joy*

The argument so far presupposes that hope entails an expectation of the good. Thus, the effect of hope is joy and expectancy. Contrary to Nietzsche's individualism and its rejection of any difference, Christian hope is an inclusive hope for all of creation and for all God's creatures. Thus, the final consummation has to be seen as God's work, and God's work to realize and fulfil the life of God's full creation. According to this line of reasoning, to believe in God's future matters and makes a difference with regard to how I understand the person I face. Is this someone whom I will eventually lose to death, someone I can exploit or subject to my power, or do I see him or her as my *present* chance for living, loving and hoping in a world that consists of mutual and reciprocal relationships?

Christian hope implies the faith and the insistent conviction that we lose ourselves and the world God has given us if we orient ourselves from the perspective of death and acceptance of the present. Such an approach to the world closes us off from truly living in a world that is so rich with opportunities because it is so much more than an intermediate period between birth and death. To believe in God as love is a protest against the temptation to let death be the last word or the final and determinate power that guides all our efforts and activities.

This approach has profound consequences for how one needs to relate to (religious) others, and for how one employs, or doesn't, traditional conceptions of what happens to people after death. People seem to no longer find plausible conceptions of hell for those who believe otherwise or do not believe. There may be various historical and sociological reasons for the decline in that belief. However, the decline in such belief may also be related to the fact that people increasingly do their theological reasoning without reference to established religious authorities but allow themselves to think again. Then, conceptions may change. An excellent example of such renewed theological reasoning is found in

Marilyn McCord Adams' reflection on hell in her book *Christ and Horrors*, where she criticizes conceptions of hell on the basis of a specific understanding of God.<sup>21</sup> She writes:

Traditional doctrines of hell err again by supposing either that God does not get what God wants with every human being ("God wills all humans to be saved" by God's antecedent will) or that God deliberately creates some for ruin. To be sure, many human beings have conducted their *ante-mortem* lives in such a way as to become anti-social persons. Almost none of us dies with all the virtues needed to be fit for heaven. Traditional doctrines of hell suppose that God lacks the will or the patience or the resourcefulness to civilize each and all of us, to rear each and all of us up into the household of God. They conclude that God is left with the option of merely human penal systems—viz., liquidation or quarantine!<sup>22</sup>

Adams furthermore claims that

Traditional doctrines of hell go beyond failure to hatred and cruelty by imagining a God who not only acquiesces in creaturely rebellion and dysfunction, but either directly organizes or intentionally "out-sources" a concentration camp (of which Auschwitz and Soviet gulags are pale imitations) to make sure some creatures' lives are permanently deprived of positive meaning.

Against this notion of a post-mortem idea of hell, she reconstructs the conception in a way that builds on the idea that "ante-mortem horror-participation is hell enough." Humans experience how horrors "constitute the prima facie destruction of the positive meaning of our lives," and "for God to succeed, God has to defeat horrors for everyone." However, "To be good to us, God will have to establish and fit us for wholesome society, not establish institutions to guarantee that horrors last forever in the world to come!"<sup>23</sup>

McCord Adams' approach is favourable because it roots the Christian hope where it should be rooted: in God and what we hope for God to do. It is God who enables the Christian community to hold "the conviction that there is a common hope and a common vocation for human beings."<sup>24</sup> Stating the common Christian hope like this, Rowan Williams also draws out the pragmatic implications of this hope for the Christian community.

To belong to the Christian community of belief at all is to assume that the pattern of relationships between persons and between humanity and God which is displayed as a gift and possibility in the Church is open to humanity at large, *and to act on that assumption* in respect both of the internal structures and the external policy of the Church.<sup>25</sup>

These considerations have the consequence that it makes sense to talk about hope for the future exactly because God is consistently both love and empathic personal power, struggling to realize love in God's creation. This love orients us and opens us to the gifts of life through hope. In such a conception of God, the notion of hell can have no place – and the increasing realization of this is a testimony to the fact that the conception of God as love is still one that matters and is prevalent in Western societies. To face and engage in reality from the perspective of faith, love and hope is the most rewarding way to live a life. To concentrate on hell is not. Christian hope with regard to hell is that in the future, the actual hells that humans have had to endure, in Bosnia, Syria, Iraq, Darfur and elsewhere, will no longer be a possibility. Moreover, it is by understanding the creative and sustaining power that is present in all of reality, and which is struggling to come to the fore, that we can uphold a vision of the world and of life that may constantly manifest itself in new forms of community, creativity, and renewal. With the perspective of love as a basis for living, it makes sense to keep on the quest for justice, goodness, and the integrity of creation, without giving in to the powers that are threatening the efforts to achieve these aims. In short: to live as if love is the deepest meaning of it all is to live a meaningful life. It requires faith and hope, but these two are made possible from the perspective of love (cf. 1. Cor 13:13).

Accordingly, to allow such an understanding of God to come into effect – to witness to God as a God of love – is a way of making possible a specific experience of the world and of one's own life in relation to others in society. It makes it possible over against the alternative, which finds support in how life also appears to be marked by death, suffering, injustice, and the possibility of no hope at all. To hope in God is to notice a difference and make a difference in faith and action, prayer and work. Hence, to articulate that God is love allows us to see and engage with the social world in a new way, and to react to the future with hope for transformation. Thus, we can speak about the pragmatics of Christian hope. Hope engenders joy, not fear. Love expels fear. Hope opens up the future in – and of – the present world.

Jan-Olav Henriksen  
 MF Norwegian School of Theology  
 Religion and Society  
 PO Box 5144 Majorstuen  
 0302 Oslo  
 Norway  
 jan.o.henriksen@mf.no

### *Disclosure statement*

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### *Notes*

1. The present article is a slightly revised version of the author's keynote lecture at the Nordic Conference on Systematic Theology in Stavanger, Norway in January 2019.
2. Further on the logic (or rather: the phenomenology) of hope, see the brief but lucid analysis in Mühling, *Handbook*, 32–7.
3. See Teglbjærg, *Body and Hope*; Wirén, *Hope and Otherness*; Ejsing, *Theology of Anticipation*; Jeanron, *Reasons to Hope*; Hegstad, *God, the World and Hope*. Several of Ola Sigurdson's recent books also thematize hope.
4. See Henriksen, *Orientation and Transformation*.
5. E.g., Derrida, "Différance." See also for further theological development of his work on this, e.g., DeRoo, "From Deferring to Waiting."
6. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human, I*, aphorism 71.
7. See Ejsing, Preface. to her original dissertation, which differs slightly from the printed version.
8. *Ibid.*, 1.
9. Herms, *Systematische Theologie I*, 525ff. The following builds on features in §§ 20–23.
10. In fact, Herms' theoretical approach, based on an autonomous subjectivity that rest on its own ability to live in assurance of what he or she believes in, seems to downplay the relational aspect of being human that is far more elaborated in, e.g., Catherine Keller (see below). For a critical review of Herms' work as a whole, see Welker, "Jetzt rede ich."
11. Neville, *Defining Religion*, 62. This statement is a good expression of the meliorism implied in pragmatic philosophy.
12. Further on this topic, see Henriksen, "God Revealed."
13. Cf. Benjamins, "Apophatic Panentheism", 105–106.
14. Keller, *On the Mystery*, 4, 10, 11. Here quoted from Benjamins, "Apophatic Panentheism", 105.
15. Benjamins, "Apophatic Panentheism," 112, with reference to Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 7, 8.
16. Benjamins, *ibid.*, 112.
17. *Ibid.*, 113.
18. Neville, *Defining Religion*, 252–3. He elaborates these considerations further thus: "From the past, the present receives conditioning components in the form of potentialities to integrate in its creative selections, and from the future the present receives as



conditioning components the possibilities for present creativity; the dynamism of the present is the creative novelty of deciding which of the alternate possibilities will be actualized in the integration of the potentialities acquired from the past. From the future the past receives as conditioning components the formal structures that are actualized, including the value in those structures; from the present the past receives ever-growing new actualizations so that the structure of the past, including its value and meaning, are constantly changing.”

19. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 346, here after Wirén, *Hope and Otherness*, 1.
20. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 16, after Wirén, op. cit.1. My italics.
21. For the following, see McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 229–30.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 230.
24. Thus Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 20.
25. Ibid. My italics.

### Bibliography

- Benjamins, Rick. “Apophatic Panentheism: Catherine Keller’s Constructive Theology.” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 60, no. 1 (2018): 105–106.
- DeRoo, Neal. “From Deferring to Waiting (for the Messiah): Derrida’s Account of Futurity.” Chap. 8 in *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas, and Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Différance.” Chap. 1 in *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.
- Dupuis, Jacques. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997.
- Ejsing, Anette. *Theology of Anticipation: A Constructive Study of C. S. Peirce*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007.
- Hegstad, Harald. *God, the World, and Hope*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018.
- Henriksen, Jan-Olav. “God Revealed through Human Agency – Divine Agency and Embodied Practices of Faith, Hope, and Love.” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 58, no. 4 (2016): 453–472.
- Henriksen, Jan-Olav. *Religion as Orientation and Transformation: A Maximalist Theory*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017.
- Hermes, Eilert. *Systematische Theologie I: Das Wesen Des Christentums: In Wahrheit Und Aus Gnade Leben*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017.
- Jeanrond, Werner. *Reasons to Hope*. Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, Forthcoming.
- Keller, Catherine. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.
- Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008.
- Kelly, Anthony. *Eschatology and Hope*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.
- McCord Adams, Marilyn. *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Mühling, Markus. *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Eschatology*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.

- Neville, Robert C. *Defining Religion: Essays in Philosophy of Religion*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2018.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Gary J. Handwerk. *Human, All Too Human, I, The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Teglbjærg, Johanne Stubbe. *Body and Hope: A Constructive Interpretation of Recent Eschatology by Means of the Phenomenology of the Body*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015.
- Welker, Michael. "Jetzt rede ich: Eilert Herms Theorie der Religiosität." *Evangelische Theologie* 77 (2017): 306–312.
- Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology: Challenges in Contemporary Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Wirén, Jakob. *Hope and Otherness: Christian Eschatology and Interreligious Hospitality*. Brill Rodopi: Leiden, 2018.