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CHRISTIAN HOPE IN REFLECTING THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Perspectives from ECEN

Peter Pavlovic

16.1 Theology of Hope Revisited

Hope as the shaping category of theological vocabulary has recently become a frequently used term. This in reacting to multiple crises and calamities of the world we have to face nowadays. Climate change has a prominent place among them. The UN Climate conference in Paris was the focal place for the culmination of climate action in a political and diplomatic arena, as well as the place for manifold contributions from civil society. Churches were part of these efforts. The word “hope” has become one of the most frequently used terms in different contributions to climate talks. It was marked as the key theological building element in phrasing the Christian response to the challenge of climate change. It is, therefore, worthwhile to look at what sense can hope, as the theological category, contribute to framing churches’ response to climate change. The challenge theology has to face in this respect is twofold. On the one hand there is the task to avoid linking hope with elements not having support in Christian resources and thus capitulate to

secular and other influences. On the other side there is the challenge to really use the genuine richness which Christian insights offer on issues of climate change, it would be failure if we do not do so.

The outcomes of the Paris conference, in spite of positive reactions from different stakeholders all over the world has prompted, nevertheless, reactions coming especially from the scientific community that curbed overall enthusiasm. Steffen Kallbekken, Director of the Centre for International Climate and Energy Policy was in this respect clear: *'To have a two-thirds chance of limiting warming to 2C, emissions have to fall 40-70% by 2050. To have even a prayer of respecting the 1.5 C target, those mid-century cuts would have to be even deeper: 70-95%. These are dizzyingly difficult goals which effectively require the total decarbonisation of the world economy within four decades..... By the time the current pledges enter into force in 2020, we will probably have exhausted the entire carbon budget for the 1.5°C degrees target.'* Kevin Anderson, Deputy Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in Manchester was, in this respect, even more direct when saying: *'the current text is not consistent with science.'*

Against this background the question which cannot be avoided is: what is exactly the substance of Christian hope in facing climate change? In the follow-up of Paris it might be worth some efforts to return to the roots and get firm ground under our feet. Then we can specify in what sense we talk about Christian hope when linking this specific virtue with our reflection of climate change.

16.2 Biblical Prophecies on Guard against False Hope, Wishful Optimism and Utopia

The need of an active personal approach is underlined in elaborating on the distinction between hope and utopia. What do we hope for cannot be just expected. Jürgen Moltmann underlines that Christian hope is shaped by life, acting and by personal capacity for overcoming troubles and tribulations. The mission of Christians is not exhausted by spreading hope and faith, but by actually encouraging the change of life and current customs and practises. This includes active efforts on changing of existing social, economic and juridical structures. It is in this respect that Moltmann speaks about present and realised eschatology. '*Present eschatology means nothing else than creative expectation (schöpferische Erwartung)*'.²³⁰ Theology of hope is an invitation to act. For Christians it means an invitation to a very specific type of an action marked by *metanoia* and calling, which refers to a specific wording of theology of reformation.

It may be particularly refreshing in this regard to read those texts written on the theology of hope at its apex, which focus on careful differentiation of hope from an earthly utopia. Jürgen Moltmann is in this respect clearly differentiating between salvation positivism (Heilpositivismus) and Christian hope: '*Christian hope is not utopia of faith*'.²³¹ He is in this regard very careful to distinguish Christian hope especially from Marxist ideology of achieving a wishful utopia though societal progress. The need of an active personal approach – a call for transformation is a substantial aspect of a distinction between hope and utopia.

²³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope*, 304 ff.

²³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope*, 333.

In applying this approach and relating hope to the actual situation of the climate change narrative, doubts about the Paris outcomes cannot be avoided. Although many will argue that an idea of transformation is implicitly present in the final wording of the generally praised Paris agreement, the simple reality is that the term ‘transformation’ was carefully edited out of the final text. The document drafts initially proposed ‘pursuing of a transformation towards sustainable development’ as one of key aims of the agreement and the follow-up process, which the agreement was supposed to generate. However, in the final stages of the negotiations all instances in which transformation, similarly as justice or decarbonisation have been mentioned, were carefully edited out of the text. Commitment to transformation has been replaced by the commitment to mobilise financial funds for climate resilient developments. In an occasional commentary on the text this was even expressed as a positive step forward, while arguing that it is preferential to have a concrete text on financial transfers rather than something as vague as transformation. Even if a number of other reflections on the Paris outcomes would argue that the idea of transformation is present in the text, although not expressed verbally, suspicions remain. Is this narrowing down in wording indeed a correct reflection of the need of how climate change has to be faced?

A theological approach based on hope needs to be aware of this argument. Transformation, *metanoia*, needs to be an inseparable accompaniment of every Christian argument related to hope. The task is to be vocal about the need for transformation. If wanting to interpret outcomes of Paris positively, precisely this element must achieve a prominent position, not only for political and practical purposes. It is for the utmost theological reasons. There is no way to achieve what we hope for without *metanoia*, transformation. This is a theological experience, anchored in the sacred texts. In facing challenges of climate change,

added to which come insights of the science of climate change which offers warnings as well.

For faith communities reacting to climate change has become one of the popular strategies to call for temperance. This is a welcomed and encouraging step, especially for offering a frame for a meaningful personal action. A Christian response to climate change, a response taking into account the full concept of hope needs to go beyond it. Against this background the care for creation is more than simply a 'green theology.' It is a new and fresh look at theology, in which eschatology, in the sense of describing not only what will happen at the end of time, but which takes time seriously as a description of everyday reality, needs to be part of it. Theology developed in these terms is that of a realised eschatology. It is a counter dose in the society of spectacle, dominated by consumerism and cynicism. It is an incarnational theology which links 'word' with 'action;' the 'word' which is not just a sound, but the substance of the life of Jesus Christ, who is the word incarnated.

Incarnational theology of creation needs to look seriously at all aspects of life. Consequently, while seeking real signs of characterising such a community it leads then to the conclusion that it is not only openness, activity and responsibility which should play a role in this regard. Christian action is a call for transformation. But this cannot be just a transformation of external structures. It needs to take into account personal responsibility, not limiting itself to the acceptance of an abstract structural evil, or some kind of a mistake. The consequence of such an attitude will be a cultivation of gratitude and respect for others as well as to nature, and a cultivation of the link of the material (spacious) and the non-material (temporal). Jenson in this respect is underlining the importance of repentance, and, especially, the importance of the close relationship between the need for transformation

and the reality of God's judgment.²³² Talking about hope nowadays without taking into consideration all of these is neither credible, nor sincere and trustworthy from the theological perspective. As much as we cannot say anything else than hope is the one element without which the Christian message would lose its substance, at the same time this statement cannot go without the second part of the same sentence: hope without repentance, without transformation and without taking seriously the reality of God's judgment cannot be the Christian understanding of hope.

In order to stay consequent in talking about hope this might be perhaps the most demanding challenge: in a culture of a consumer society facing climate change to remind and to communicate the reality of God's judgment. This is, though, an unavoidable and substantial component of all biblical prophetic narratives about hope.

Care for creation is inseparable from taking care about the other. Ecological concerns of a Christian are not exhausted by taking care of nature. It is about the relationship to other persons and to God.

16.3 Where do we Stand

The close link between theology and concrete action, characterised by prayer, engagement and transformation is the core task reflected in the works of European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN).²³³ As an example offering guidance for the ECEN community we can offer a quotation from the key note speech of Bishop James Jones which was presented at the last major gathering of ECEN in 2014.²³⁴ Bishop Jones

²³² Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 2.

²³³ See: <http://www.ecen.org/>

²³⁴ See: <http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/JJ-address-ECEN-2014.pdf>

in outlining a strategy for Christian action on care for creation offers a consolidated package of five simple points related to the church's tasks and responsibilities facing the challenges of climate change:

- Prayer - at the heart of the Lord's Prayer is the petition that God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. This is a prayer for the earthing of heaven.
- Personal – Christians are encouraged to follow the example of Our Lord and teach the faithful to live accountable lives. We contribute to these ecological impacts through the choices we make as citizens and customers day by day about energy, food, water and transport..
- Parochial – Christians are encouraged to teach the second great commandment to love our neighbour as our self. Global issues can seem beyond the reach of the individual. Yet local Christian communities are set in neighbourhoods where we can show the love of God in action through caring for creation and restoring the local environment. It is at the parochial level in our local parishes that we can live out the Covenant between God and all the creatures of his creation (Gen 9,12). The Parish is where we localise the earthing of heaven.
- Political – Christians are encouraged to demonstrate through word and action that there is an inextricable link between the doctrine of justification by faith and the ethics of doing justice in the world. Lactantius, a 4th Century North African theologian, defined justice as: "The whole point of justice consists precisely in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our family through affection."
- Planet – Christians are encouraged to enter into local alliances with Imams and Rabbis and other religious leaders, with members of other faith communities, and lead their

congregations into friendships that find common ground from our sacred texts about our shared responsibility for the future of the Earth.²³⁵

This is why Christian climate action can count on a growing number of positive examples spreading out in parishes and local communities as hopeful responses to 'end' resisting denial or despair. Disinvestment by churches and religious organisations from fossil fuels, the change of the consumerist attitude towards nature and living in gratefulness and respect have become a crucial priority for Messianic witness to climate justice in this regard. This is where the link to theology has to be visible.

There is no doubt that hope is unavoidable in Christian action related to care for creation. Hope, however, in a shape of hope which is reflected and qualified. Without taking hope in all its intricacy, it is then a very short distance to its degenerated face, or to cheap substitutes bearing the same name. Thus the content can be lost and instead of fulfilling a positive function it can become a misleading factor guiding towards a mistaken direction. We should not fall into this trap.

²³⁵ Bishop James Jones, ECEN Assembly 2014