Secular Hope or a Quest for the Phenomenon of Hope

A Response to David Newheiser’s *Hope in a Secular Age*

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In his thought-provoking book, *Hope in a Secular Age*, David Newheiser sets himself the task of thinking the reality of hope after the dawning of the secular age and its constitution of reality as bounded within an immanent frame. Without necessarily challenging the grounds of this determination of the secular, and while suspending (even if momentarily) any a priori commitment to the transcending of this immanent frame by an afterlife, he asks whether it is possible to think the question of hope from a certain common ground of shared human experience, as required by the secular. The immediate pertinence of the questioning is of course to decouple the logic of hope from its safe and unquestioned anchoring in a metaphysics of the afterlife, after the secular age has unsettled the self-evidence of such a framework and complexified the landscape with alternative and competing paradigms. The plurality of the secular sphere, particularly, the resultant non-givenness of the religious (whatever further specification that may take) framework, imposes new exigences for thinking hope. The “secular hope” to be sought, against any singularly “Christian hope,” must forego the confidence and triumphal assertiveness in an inevitable telos in order to embrace a reality of uncertainty as the shared experience of hope in the pluralistic secular. Though it is not elaborated much, Newheiser very broadly seems to aim at a certain reduction that defines for the secular age a shared horizon of experience, in a similar way, for example, as the Heideggerian and Deleuzian analytic of finitude do. In this way, the pluralities of hopes, beyond their
particular content, share a general and formal determination that is grounded in a radical contingency or open possibility of being frustrated. This therefore raises the question: When the telos (since in the secular age, this telos is no longer universal) that naturally grounds an expectant confidence in the future is removed or suspended, what remains of the attitude of hope? Is it possible to conceive of hope in the absence of this telos, which would remove its guarantee of fulfilment and expose it to the possibility of disappointment? For the proposal of a secular construct of hope, Newheiser stakes a lot on this vulnerability to disappointment of hope, because separated from its telos. He proposes that the common denominator of hope, then, is uncertainty, and to truly hope is to stand in the existential tension of this non-resolved suspended middle. These all go to defining what he insists is an “ethics of uncertainty,” to the extent that he is more interested in the motivating praxis and attitudes that attend to this uncertainty than with its purely epistemological status.

But the episteme that inspires the comportment cannot be avoided. This is because essential to the author’s intuition, the attitude of uncertainty for the Christian rests upon the fundamental unknowability and ineffability of God. God cannot be known as knowledge for he exceeds the concept and is beyond representation. The impossibility of God to fall into knowledge precipitates within the Christian tradition an alternative knowing within unknowing, systematized in the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. Negative theology defines a kind of positivity of the unknown (and unknowing) that unsettles any definitive knowledge by possession. For Newheiser, gesturing in the same direction, the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida, numbering among “theorists with no religious commitment of their own,” not only cultivates an attitude of constant deconstructive questioning into knowledge, but, as an antidote to the anxiety of uncertainty, instils a mentality that is comfortable and accepting of this deconstructive instability of knowledge. I think what Newheiser proposes is an episteme of indeterminacy and uncertainty as the shared, neutral ground of the secular, and hope as a placed solidly on this foundation. This motivates him to double down on Derrida’s deconstruction as the philosophical and ethical attitude to secure just this openness and fluidity. So that, at the very point of entering into an excluding and dogmatic determination, the deconstructive élan auto-corrects through a continuous self-critique to restore the posture of indeterminacy. In this regard, the author manages to make Derrida’s dry pessimism and Dionysius’s seeming other-worldly mysticism work in tandem in the employ of a contemporary and hopeful ethic.

In what follows, my aim is not so much to engage the details of the readings made of Dionysius and Derrida nor to evaluate the success or not of the rapprochement made between negative theology and deconstruction, nor yet the
specifics of the political theology worked out from Dionysian negativity. Rather, it is to briefly interrogate more generally “the discipline of hope” as Newheiser explores it, along with the basis for its entry into the secular age.

The question of hope has a long philosophical-intellectual history in the Western tradition that goes from Ancient Greek thought, through Christianity and Medieval treatments to early modern and contemporary explorations. We know of the ambivalence of hope as Hesiod presents it in the myth of Pandora and as it unfolds throughout the tradition. There is the recurring question of whether hope is a good thing vis-à-vis human agency and its ability to confront difficulties, or, whether it is a negative thing by providing false securities and militating against the exercise of courage. A major inflection point on hope, which Newheiser engages, is its theological definition by Christianity in terms of certainty and confidence because anchored in God and beyond the contingency and temporary limitations of the hopeful person. This hope is not founded on any evidential certainty, or epistemology, strictly speaking, and yet is not for that devoid of its own intelligibility; nor, as St. Paul make clear, does it preclude a real experience of the present as suffering. St. Augustine, in his City of God (book XV, §XXI) derives a thoroughgoing political theology out of the transformed Christian understanding of hope as the confident expectation of the promise of a heavenly city in the future. The Christian hope, then, is always connected to faith and to the love of God, forming the well-known Medieval triad of virtues.

In this light, Newheiser opposes an acceptation of hope as a dogmatism that arrogates to itself a handle on the future with a ring of confident finality. He takes much of his analysis starting from the questioning of post-Kantian existentialism, taking very seriously the pessimistic charge of Albert Camus that hope deceptively tends to absolve a person from facing the raw vicissitudes of existence and at the same time the more optimistic positions of Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel that see in hope the overcoming of the anxiety and angst of everyday life. That is, on one hand, insisting, against Camus, on the crucial importance of hope against despair but, on the other hand, not conceding to Kierkegaard and Marcel on the metaphysics that makes hope a guarantor of certainty. But given this tension, it still remains the case that in order to concretely hope, there must be some kind of prehension of the possibility of a desired future. Analytic philosophers, such as Adrienne Martin in How We Hope, have argued that there is an assent of reason to

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the conditions of possibility of contingent futurities that in turn serves as the basis for the practically engaged willing of hope. This argues against the acceptation of hope as passive expectation. The outline is from Thomas Aquinas (Summa Theologicae I-II, Q. 40), who had similarly set himself the task of thinking hope in the absence of faith (even though this is not his own final position), but whose rich analyses remain absent from Newheiser’s treatment. Newheiser agrees that “hope is not simply a passive emotion” but insists that it is “wrong to locate its active dimension in reason” (79). Let us pose the question with him, then: What is the active dimension of hope grounded in? We can go along with the author in flagging the rationalist determination of the possible (in Martin’s account) as problematic but no so far in the consequences he draws from this. He affirms, “Hope is a resolute desire that persists in the face of uncertainty” (82). Even more strongly, “hope is a decision added to desire: a discipline of the will, not the conclusion of a proof.” By these proposals, there is an overcoming will-to-hope that rises to the occasion against the anxiety of uncertainty. Hope as actively anchored in the will not reason, yes. But what remains unquestioned is why this hope should arise in the first place. It seems that implicit in the insistence upon the will as the active component of hope is the idea that the will may will beyond the possible – at least beyond what may be known by reason to be possible. Because on this account, the will does not wait on reason for an assessment of what is possible as its object. As a result, hope would spring from a more fundamental and spontaneous movement of the will.

The language and concept of “uncertainty” perhaps meets a challenge of its own at this point. For while Newheiser insists that the active dimension of hope rooted in the will does not require reason’s assessment of the possibility of an outcome for its operation, what he achieves is to place the subject of hope in an agnostic attitude to future outcome. The uncertainty paradigm, it seems, requires not only the subject not to be able to positively say whether the object of hope is possible or not, but by the same token to not be able to positively say that it is impossible either. And perhaps this agnosticism robs hope of some of its most radical dimension, namely, hope in the face of the certainty of impossibility. Newheiser rightly makes the point about hope’s orientation to outcomes that “have no chance of occurring” but immediately translates this as implying “the uncertainty of this belief” (79). Yet, a consideration of apocalyptic understandings of hope, for example, suggest to us that hope sustains, with certainty and zeal, a belief in objects that are impossible as such. More so, the object of such hope is so ‘extreme’ as to sometimes include within itself not merely a cataclysmic event in the future but the end of history itself and therefore the conclusion of every reckoning of futurity. Such hope, far from encouraging passivity vis-à-vis the present, has done the exact opposite. Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology of Hope and The Coming of God have achieved much in highlighting how hope can itself be a theory of time in such a way that the constantly
assumed linearity of past-present-future gives way to the priority and primacy of the future over the present. The future on this reckoning is not the set of actualisable possibilities but a primordial, originary made present. At the risk of dismissing this sense of hope as merely ‘religious’ hope without a place in the secular age, Ernst Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* and extensive *Principle of Hope* have shown the extent to which there is more to the very phenomenon of hope as such, hope that reaches to the impossible. This highlights that essential to hope is the relation of the future to the present and the account of temporality that holds both together.

Ultimately, the Christian hope is hope for an ‘impossibility’. It is not a held certainty in the eventual arrival of a possible object, which would situate hope merely as the futurity of what already is for possibility. So, the pressure point in the Christian hope is not so much between certainty and uncertainty but between possibility and impossibility. For, if this hope is elicited by a longing for something that is ordinarily impossible, the desire for something which all the causal forces of history cannot proffer, then, there is necessarily within this hope both the kind of unknowing that Newheiser suggests is essential to hope (but here intensified) and much more. This hope is not so much that the progression of history brings ultimate hope to a culminative conclusion but that hope itself is what brings history to a conclusion. Thus, hope understood as the arrival of this impossible invigorates every aspect of the now with purpose.

These considerations raise the suspicion that, first, Newheiser’s account by which religious hope was reckoned to reside in a posture of certainty anchored in the transcendent may be too hasty, for it misses the crucial proleptic and retroactive dimensions of the phenomenon of hope. Second, one may raise again the overall project of deciding hope in the secular age as the question of an ethics of uncertainty. Newheiser is right that after the removal of the theological object and surety of hope (at least its non-unanimous status in the secular age), it is of vital importance to weave into the analysis hope’s vulnerability to disappointment. This raises the question of whether certainty and uncertainty, knowing and unknowing as well as the foundations (or absence thereof) for their determination represent the most robust basis for a universal experience of the phenomenon of hope in the secular age. Does the “affinity” between religious and secular hope fully play out here? The challenge at hand is to decide what philosophical strategies might be required to better bring out the universality of the phenomenon of hope. Perhaps instead of interrogating hope as a concept – whether in the religious or secular – a more phenomenological questioning might be called for in order to understand this spontaneity of the will to hope. If hope, as Aquinas reckoned, is born from the desire for something difficult to attain or even impossible to attain by my own resources, then, the discipline of hope might also require an investigation integrated with the dynamism of will, desire and human action. For, even without necessarily reaching
his conclusions, “hope attains the supreme rule of human actions” (ST II-II, Qu. 18, Art. 5).

What Newheiser achieves here is really, in my estimation, the successful first proposal and invitation to think hope in the secular age as a shared horizon of experience. He has taken up the question by attempting a generalized, universal concept or account of hope. It remains up to the reader to decide whether the specifics of the approach go as far as it could potentially go. In interest of more strongly situating the important contribution and originality of Newheiser’s project, one would have wished the book had included a fairly detailed intellectual historical account of hope, the important inflexion points of its development, in order to better understand the merits of the secular determination that the author so centrally envisions for it. Overall, this is a serious work of significant intellectual daring in its creative reading of Dionysius and Derrida, constructive of dialogue between negative theology and deconstruction, as well as the fascinating imagination a negative political theology. It definitely opens many avenues for further stimulating discussion.