Faith, Hope and Love Abide

RICHARD MORGAN

There is a verse of the hymn by Bishop Wordsworth, 'Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost', which runs thus:

> Faith shall vanish into sight;
> Hope be emptied in delight;
> Love in heaven shall shine more bright;
> Therefore give us love.[1]

Many Christians would agree with these sentiments. Faith and hope, they assume, are for this world only; at any rate, they will be fulfilled and thus ended at the full coming of the Kingdom of God. Faith is superseded by sight when we reach the beatific vision of God; in the total establishment of God's kingdom, hope is replaced by satisfaction. Only love, in fulfilment, remains and becomes more full.

Yet surely these views contradict St. Paul's vision in I Corinthians 13:13. 'Faith, hope and love abide'—they all three remain. Probably all Christians would accept that love is eternal. 'God is love', says St. John's first epistle, and it expands on the fact that therefore to know God, to be in a true relationship to him, must mean that we love. Love is grounded in God's being, both in himself and for us. It is the centre of our faith; it is the greatest thing. So says St. Paul. Yet he ascribes eternity also to faith and hope.

There seems no reasonable doubt of his meaning. Paul has been contrasting with the love which lasts forever all those things which do not last—our present knowledge, prophecies, tongues. When he comes to clinch the contrast, Paul is moved to throw in faith and hope with love as the abiding things. Are we, however, to say that Paul was carried away in worship, that his language here is that of a transport of adoration and therefore hyperbolic, inexact, and not to be analysed for factual content? Did he only throw in, without thinking, faith and hope with love, because he was accustomed to linking the three together, since they are central to his theology? Such an argument seems implausible. After all, in the first place, Paul's words about the eternity of love are taken seriously. Why not those about faith and hope? In the second place, one would not have expected a mere gush of emotion to bring in faith and hope here—Paul has been stressing the primacy of love alone—in verse 2 even against faith. One would expect this concentration on love alone to be clinched in

verse 13. If faith and hope are introduced when Paul speaks of what lasts forever, surely this is because it was his general and sober conviction that faith and hope also are eternal.

In the third place, to discount an insight because it appears in a state of spiritual exaltation seems a highly dubious procedure. Do we in fact know God more fully by sober thought, analytical study, or in worshipping him? It was a dictum of one of the early Fathers that 'A theologian is a man who prays, and a man who prays is a theologian'. Religious exaltation, or any other form of religious experience, is not as such a guarantee of the truth of the contents of that experience. Nevertheless, God's self-revelation, God's meeting with us, will produce religious experience. Wonder and a transport of adoration will often be the experience in which the most important truths of God are received. The realisation of such truths will, indeed, *produce* adoration and exaltation as a reaction, as they did in Paul. Sober theological study has its place, but if it rejects in the name of sobriety the actual content of Paul's awed exclamations, it should beware that it is not becoming the sort of proud knowledge against which he declaims earlier in I Corinthians.

The link between worship and adoration and the eternity of faith and hope is, the writer believes, deeper than just the fact that Paul states this view in a poetic exaltation of spirit. If so, then to investigate soberly this abiding of faith and hope may lead us not only to understand our relation with God better, but to worship and adore him more fully and deeply through that understanding. Surely these are the true purposes of theology proper—words about God. We cannot just talk of God as of any object in the world. Theology, words, reasoning about God, must be a *response* to him, to his love and self-giving. Thus is theology closely linked with prayer, as mentioned above. So theology is, as Anselm of Canterbury said, faith seeking understanding, and should be also doxological, that is, a glorification of God—coming from and leading to worship and adoration, itself often a hymn of praise. It is no coincidence that some of the noblest and most concentrated theology is in our best hymns, such as those of Charles Wesley.

It is fairly easy to see how faith remains forever. Faith is *trust* in God, *reliance* on God, it is a personal relationship with God. Faith says that God grasps, holds and supports us, and not vice-versa. The *object* of faith is, in fact, the *subject* in the relationship; faith looks to its object as the one who acts, in whose power the relationship rests. Thus our faith is just the reverse side of the fact that it is God who acts, who takes the initiative in our relationship with him. Knowledge, or, as the hymn puts it, sight, cannot replace this, to all eternity. In knowledge, as the word is often used, the knower is the subject, he is the one who grasps. In seeing, the one who sees is the subject. The object of knowledge or sight is indeed an object—knowing and seeing

are done to it—it is, as such, passive, not active. It does not take the initiative. Now in eternity we will indeed know and see God. Even now, indeed, through Christ and the Spirit, we do to some extent know and see him. God graciously makes us subjects, co-subjects with him. Yet even as the *object* of our sight and knowledge, he is the *subject* of it—that is, *he gives us* the sight and the knowledge. We do not have it by any power independent of him. His grace, his free generosity, is the source of our life from eternity to eternity. Knowledge and sight, without faith, would imply a certain independence, power over God. We would become gods as Adam and Eve attempted to be, not as sons after the pattern of Christ, the eternal Son of God by nature, who himself lives eternally in response to the Father. In a sense, then, Christ himself lives eternally in faith, as he lived by trust in his Father during his earthly life. Faith, then, is part of the very life of the Godhead! How much more shall we, created beings and sons of God by adoption and grace, live eternally by faith? That is, we shall always live in reliance on God, in response to his love. So eternity will be the wonder and praise and adoration of love, as it is pictured in the Biblical visions.

Faith makes the man who lives by it humble, for it places the centre of his being in the one in whom he has faith. It is the concomitant of love. Uncertainty, in the end, is thus accidental to it. Here, in this world, faith is what overcomes our uncertainty—it is 'the substance of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1). In heaven it will be freed from that uncertainty, to blossom as gratitude in love's response to Love.

'Knowledge', said Paul, 'puffs up.' Pride goes before a fall. Lucifer, the great archangel described as falling to become the devil, had this sort of knowledge and sight of God in heaven, but without faith and love this became pride and brought only destruction. As in the Corinthian church, so in heaven to all eternity, knowledge and sight are only true knowledge and sight of God if they flow from faith and love.[2] Faith, then, lasts forever, in the presence of the infinitely great God, eternally the source of our life and love, and so the object of our praise. We will be God's own sons, God's own friends, but it is our joy that we will also be his awed, wondering worshippers to eternity.

Faith and love, then, abide for ever, but what of hope? At first sight hope seems surely time-bound. It assumes a future, and how are we to conceive of 'future' in eternity? Furthermore, it appears to presuppose a lack. Even Paul says, 'Who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience' (Romans 8:34–5). Yet we cannot think we shall suffer lack or deprivation in heaven. Heaven will be fulfilment, and hope seems to be the opposite of fulfilment. Can there then be an eternal rôle for hope?

In articles on 'elpis', hope, in Kittel's *Wordbook of the New*

Testament, Bultmann accepted that Paul meant that hope was eternal, but identified that hope with faith.[3] Of the Old Testament hope Bultmann declared, 'The difference between hope and trust fades'. Hope centres on what God will do, 'so that hope is not directed to anything specific, nor does it project its own view of the future, but consists rather in general confidence in God's protection and help.' It is thus called for even in times of blessing. It is in accordance with this Old Testament understanding, Bultmann claimed, that Paul held that hope cannot cease. For Paul the concentration of hope 'in the consummation of Christian existence' is 'in accordance with the concept of God'. Bultmann observes that for Paul hope endures because

> hope is not concerned with the realisation of a human dream of the future, but with the confidence which, directed away from the world to God, waits patiently for God's gift, and when it is received does not rest in possession but in the assurance that God will maintain what He has given.

All this is in many ways finely said. The theocentricity of hope, its centring us on God and not on our power of 'possession' is vital. Yet, if Bultmann has said here all that there is to be said about hope's eternal abiding, Paul did not actually add much new content when he joined hope to faith and love as eternal. The only specific addition made by hope in eternity seems to be the trust that God 'will maintain what He has given'. This seems to introduce some element of temporality into eternal life, but within an essentially static concept—if 'maintain' is the key word, any sense of further growth or newness seems to be lost.

In his own theology Bultmann concentrated on faith as the disclosure of valid human existence—and with it God—now. Faith and hope being 'directed away from the world' led to a stress on the existence of the individual at the expense of interest in the future of human history, and of creation. The individual human existence, indeed, tended to usurp God's place at the centre of Bultmann's theology; faith/hope could be based on an analysis of human existence in response to the gospel. Our present, rather individual existence in faith was so central that Bultmann had no real interest in any future eschatology, and tended to dismiss it as myth. Since Bultmann thus did not share Paul's sense of a coming consummation which would be different from now, we must doubt that he was able to grasp fully the significance of Paul's assertion of hope's survival in that full Kingdom of God.

Bultmann is among the theologians criticised by Jürgen Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope*, for failing to understand or value properly Christian hope. Moltmann attacks Bultmann's individualism and lack

of concern for the future of the world and history—in a word, of Creation. He says that Bultmann, and, indeed, Barth, centred on God in the wrong way.[3] He stresses that our relationship with God cannot be separated from His Kingdom, which we now *hope* for on the ground of God's promises, which thus show us both God and reality transformed according to his will.[4] We know and relate to God now from his promises of the coming of his future. Moltmann thus reinstates future eschatology, God's coming kingdom, as the overriding factor determining God's relationship to us now. He clearly hopes and expects that God's final salvation is something that will actually be achieved. While we cannot now see God in all things and all things in God, ultimately the new creation will be in God's own glory and life, and God be all in all, as I Cor. 15 promises.[5] God himself is 'to come'—Moltmann gives primacy to this word when he looks at the picture of God in Revelation as he 'who was and is, and is to come'. We live by hope now in the promises of this coming God.

Hope, then, is central for Moltmann. Yet he does not develop any vision of hope's abiding at the consummation of all things, when God will be all in all. We must ask why not.

The immediate reason seems to be that hope for Moltmann functions as the vital and central link between future consummation which is promised and our present life. Hope enables us to *anticipate* the eschaton, and to keep moving towards it. But it is not among those anticipations, love, joy, festivity, and freedom, which Moltmann sees as the content of the eschatological life itself. Hope—and suffering—are rather the *road to* the future goal—which is the end of the road. Hope is our mode of relating to the coming God in this present world of suffering. But why should this be so? Why should hope not also be part of our life in the eschatological consummation? There seems to be no compelling reason why Moltmann should not so consider it, but there are factors in his theology which predispose him against this.

We notice that Moltmann has a very strong sense of the suffering and evil of the present world. His central vision of God is as the one who overcomes all this negation. This means he stresses the difference between this age and the eschaton.

That means, however, that he is very suspicious about an immediate relationship now with God's greatness, God's majesty. He fears that this will serve as a glorification of the present age. He insists that we cannot see the glory, the greatness, the power and rule of God, what we might call God's 'vertical transcendence', apart from the future coming of his eschatological triumph. To regard them as immediately present now would be to see God as eternally present, and thus as guarantor of an 'eternal present', thus either sanctifying the status quo or leading to a flight from this world to some changeless other 'world'. This is why he is suspicious of our relating

to God through some structure of the self, God as transcendent subjectivity (Barth), or man's subjectivity (Bultmann).[6] He argues that Biblical theophanies are all oriented to God's promise, and are not self-revelation.[7] Efforts to stress God's revelation as essentially a self-revelation are to him examples of the Greek as opposed to the Hebrew/Biblical view of God. They are epiphanies of the eternal present, not the promised coming of God. He works out the implications of this for his doctrine of God in *The Crucified God.* Here he attacks theism, which he regards as the attempt to know God from the present excellence of man and creation, and seeks to work out instead a theology of God based thoroughly on the cross and resurrection. Moltmann stresses the experience and overcoming of suffering and evil in the life of God himself. He speaks of 'the Trinity as an event of love in the suffering and the death of Jesus'.[8] Identifying the immanent and economic Trinity, Moltmann thus spoke of a Trinitarian history of God, who not only brings our future but himself has a future. In a sense, God too is on the way to his own fulfilment when he will be all in all. The Trinity, says Moltmann, is 'no self contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men on earth which stems from the cross of Christ'.

> The Trinity . . . means the history of God, which in human terms is the history of love and liberation. The Trinity, understood as an event for history, therefore presses towards eschatological consummation, so that the Trinity may be all in all, or, put more simply, so that love may be all in all, so that life may triumph over death and righteousness over the hells of the negative and of all force.[9]

Thus Moltmann, stressing the enormous contrast between our world and history of suffering now and the eschatological consummation, takes this difference into his view of God himself, so that he uses temporal language, such as 'God's history' and 'God as to come' of God himself. But this temporal language seems to cease to apply at the coming of the eschatological consummation. Here Moltmann speaks of 'the completion of the Trinitarian History of God and the end of world history, the overcoming of the history of human sorrow and the fulfilment of his history of hope'.[10] Hope is temporal; like other aspects of temporality—in God and creation—it will be completed, fulfilled and ended, when the consummation comes. Suffering, history and hope are closely bound together for Moltmann. He stresses that we must accept them now, and that they are central in our relationship with God now, but they pass away. They relate to God and his creation during the Trinitarian history, not as he and it will be when God is all in all. Their existence and their passing are aspects of the contrast that Moltmann draws so strongly between our life or history now and the coming consummation. Thus the very centrality of hope now can militate against its ultimate abiding.

We may agree that Moltmann captures important biblical emphases in his refusal to treat suffering and evil lightly and his stress on the difference between our present history and the eschatological consummation. Nevertheless, perhaps he has pushed the contrast between the present and the eschatological consummation too far. Moltmann rejects any effort to concentrate on God himself apart from his eschatological salvation. In a sense, with him the eschaton, God all-in-all in creation, has become the centre of theology, rather than God himself.

We might describe this as seeing God as 'transcendent from the future' *in opposition to* seeing God as 'vertically translucent'. This is certainly the case if one lays stress on God as a Trinitarian process leading to God as all-in-all. This could be described as an eschatological panentheism which ultimately removes any separation or distinction between God and creation. This implies a rejection of theism in a wider sense than that defined by Moltmann in *The Crucified God*; this seems to follow inevitably from his rejection of our seeing God as a transcendent self or subject, or as Lord, as Barth did.

But is Moltmann correct? He believes that in doing this he is more loyal than others to a theology centred on Cross and Resurrection. Yet the cross, and indeed the incarnation of which it is the centre, 'the crux!', have traditionally been seen as the striking paradox of the great, the almighty, perfect, beautiful, overwhelmingly awe-inspiring God accepting in his Son the humility, smallness, weakness, ugliness, suffering and death of the fallen world of men. One cannot have one side of God's being without the other. In love, we see indeed that the two are not contradictory—indeed, God's suffering in Jesus becomes the key to seeing his greatness aright. This view does speak of God's present 'vertical transcendence', though it differentiates it from that of other gods, of idols.

Moltmann insists that the Biblical theophanies are all oriented to promise, not just to self-presentation. One could as well say that the self-presentation is there first, and the promises flow from it. Isaiah's temple vision begins with a view of *vertical* transcendence—the actual phrase 'high and lifted up' is used, and Isaiah's call and message spring from that. Ezekiel's vision is of God's glory before his message is given. One can criticise the Septuagint translation in the Burning Bush Story (Exodus 3) 'the one who is', and argue that 'I am who I am' should be translated, 'I will be who I will be', but the 'I am' is taken up by Jesus in the 'I am' sayings, and these have a vertical stress, especially John 8:58, where the phrase stands without further complement, to stress the eternity of God's Word that is incarnate in Jesus. God's self-presentation does not, in fact, imply exonerating this world by presenting all reality as an 'eternal present'. It rather establishes the transcendence of God from which he is able to judge

the world and give us and it a saving future. We *do* relate with God's 'self' now, and that 'self', that 'character', or 'nature' is what brings the eschaton. God is a 'vertically transcendent' subject, and we relate to him as such now. If in some sense his character or nature is inseparable from the coming eschaton, it is *prior* to it, even in our relationship with Him. That is, we relate to God primarily and to the hope of His Kingdom as a consequence—albeit the necessary consequence—of that. For the biblical witness the 'vertical transcendence' of God thus does not exclude hope, but rather establishes it.

We may accept that God is a 'Truine Self' and subject, and we must not overdo the analogy with human selves we know. But the Triune God *is a subject*—he acts to love and to liberate us, to create our relationship with himself, the Coming one, the power of the new, and so, *therefore*, in this evil world, to remake all things new in his glorious love. Thus he meets us, and gives us himself now, in faith, hope and love. His identity, his character, does not change. Moltmann himself stresses God's faithfulness.[11] Therefore the source, centre and crown of the eschaton will be enjoying fully him who is our God now, and whose will will then be fully done, so that he is fully present in us and all creation.

Moltmann's trinitarian theology contains much of value, but it needs to be held in combination with, even if in a certain tension with, a view of God as 'vertically transcendent', whether one calls that theism or not.

Moltmann could, no doubt, have accepted hope as something eternal, but his centering on the eschaton and his eschatological panentheism—God becoming inseparable from the eschaton and losing vertical transcendence in it—predisposed him against this, it seems. It intensified the need to contrast this age and the age to come, so that hope became seen exclusively as a relation to that coming age of those who have not reached it. Moltmann, then, does not give grounds for explaining the eternity of hope.

Against this, we set the centre of hope in our relationship to God himself, the Lord, the transcendent one. Still, we must ask, does this leave us with Bultmann's rather minimal interpretation of eternal hope?

Do we add any new understanding and content by saying that hope as well as faith is eternal, or does talk of the survival of hope merely repeat that we eternally live in a personal relationship to God, in dependence on him, that we live eternally by grace? The eternity of hope does indeed speak of these things, but it seems to the writer to imply more than this. Our claim that our view of hope is not to be centred on man, on an understanding of human nature or existence (as with Bultmann), nor on a future eschatology as such (as with Moltmann), but on God himself, in fact enables us to reach this conclusion.

Gregory of Nyssa, the fourth century Cappadocian theologian and bishop, may seem an odd person to whom to appeal for insights here. We are accustomed to being told that the Hellenistic world's view of reality, dominated by Plato, was very static, and almost to believe that a dynamic view of reality was lost after the time of the Bible until the modern world. In his life of Moses Gregory investigates Christian perfection by looking at the life of Moses as history and allegory. He comes to the conclusion that, for the Christian, perfection can only mean eternal progress. He bases this view on the goodness and the infinity of God.[12] His view may be somewhat moralistic, for he speaks of the Christian life as the pursuit of virtue, but he identifies virtue and the Good with God himself, so that his argument comes to rest not on some general concept of the good, but on the nature of God. His central argument is that one cannot set limits on the good, virtue, or God, for then beyond them and greater would be evil. He appeals to Paul, who, great apostle as he was, continued to 'strain forward, forgetting what is behind', and the whole book seeks to show that Moses' life is a picture of constant progress in virtue, knowledge of God. If *these* men did not reach a static fulfilment, he implies, surely it is impossible to reach one at all. Gregory's methods of arguing may not appeal to us today, but his central insight would seem to stand and be applicable to our question of hope's eternity.

If God is infinite, He and His goodness are inexhaustible. Surely this is the only view that fits well with the God revealed in the Bible? We think, for example of Isaiah 40ff. and Job 38–41, or Romans 11. Who would dare to set limits to God's being or his goodness? Thus our eternity will not mean that we have arrived at a point where we have exhaustively plumbed the being of God, where we have come to the end of His newness. If *we* could do that, we might be fully God's equals, knowing in that false, proud sense Paul denounces. God would at the least surely cease to be the object of the awe, wonder and adoration that are depicted as our eternal destiny in the Book of Revelation. So our relationship of *faith* with Him would be threatened, for faith, too, presumes his transcendence of us, and were He exhaustible, this transcendence would ultimately end, unless He in some way set an arbitrary limit on us—but that would mean his love was limited. In that case, the atheist's suspicion that 'God' is ultimately a limit to human development and fulfilment would have at least some grounds. Hope anchored first in God's infinite greatness and love, rather than a facet of human existence—even existence with God—avoids these odd results. We do not produce stress on the difficult notion 'eternal temporality' as such, but on the quality of God's relationship with us. On the other hand, as said above, the problem of a static eternity is overcome by a dynamic view,

Our view, like Bultmann's, fits Christian existence and takes it seriously; it shows, with Paul, the ultimacy of our life of faith and

hope and love. It does not, however, exclude consideration of the eschatological transformation of reality into God's glory—the final coming of God's Kingdom—as Bultmann did. His view made human existence, albeit present Christian existence, central, and demythologised what could not be reduced to it. By not absorbing hope into faith, and by centring our consideration of faith and hope firmly on God, where they surely belong, the temptation to demythologise to the measure of present existence is avoided.

The many positive points of Moltmann's treatment of hope also fit our view of eternal hope. It does not deny the importance of the future coming of God's Kingdom. It accepts God's initiative now in transforming creation and history as well as the individual—making all things new, as the power of the future, the power of the New, the One who is 'to come'.

Moltmann's description of God as 'who is to come' and the power of the new could indeed have led on to a strong statement about the eternity of hope as proclaimed by Paul, had this not been hindered by his transferring the centre of his theology from God to the eschatological consummation, and his distrust of 'vertical transcendence'.

That hope is eternal, however, requires and shows that this vertical transcendence—let us call it God's Lordship—is the truth about God in this age and the age to come. God will always remain He who was, and is, and is to come. He will always be before us, as Gregory says, coming to us, to our joy and wonder, bliss and gratitude. Our relationship to his transcendence, both 'above' and 'before' us will no doubt be transformed in the consummation of God's glory. Yet God will still be transcendent in both senses, so we shall continue to relate to Him in faith, hope and love. Thus God's character as He who is *to come*, and the one who makes all things new is revealed in the light of the eternity of hope even more strongly than Moltmann stated it. In accepting the call into God's transforming new future we indeed anticipate the kingdom, as Moltmann said, not least because hope as openness to God's newness is part of our life in that transformed future. In sum, the 'vertical' transcendence is the basis and guarantee of the 'future' transcendence now and in eternity, and so it is the ground of our hope's abiding.

Thus even the view that hope is an eternal part of man's true being can be taken up. We cannot base our view of eternal hope on this. That would be, as we said, to become man-centred rather than centred on God alone. And while we might assert that hope is obviously a necessary constituent of true human life, from some human-centred existential analysis, this could also be plausibly denied. There is no firm foundation here. The foundation of our realisation that hope is eternally part of our true being is to be found rather in God's self-giving and self-revelation to us, in Christ,

through His dealings with the Old Testament people, the incarnation, and the outpouring of His Spirit. Our eternal faith and hope and love are called out and established by this. They *respond* to God, the eternal Alpha and Omega, new beginning and final consummation, in awe, in joy, in excitement, in worship, praise, adoration—and awe, worship, adoration cannot exist without them. This worship and adoration are eternal. They are the vision of the Book of Revelation; Paul's words on the eternity of love, faith and hope show that they are his vision also.

We began with Bishop Wordsworth's hymn. We end and sum up by suggesting a rewriting of the verse we quoted, and the last verse:

> Faith will glorious be in sight,
> Hope will blossom in delight,
> Love in heaven will shine more bright,
> Therefore give us Love.

And, as love—and true sight and knowledge, and joy and delight—are inseparable from faith and hope, we might change the last line of the last verse. The verse evoked God's glory and love as our source; let it speak too of the whole centre of the response it creates:

> By the overshadowing
> Of thy gold and silver wing
> Shed on us who to thee sing
> Faith and hope and love.

RICHARD MORGAN teaches at Bishop Gwynne College, Mundri.

NOTES

1 E.g. *English Hymnal*, no.396.
2 Something of this sense of 'response' is needed even in our knowledge of the natural world, to say nothing of our knowledge of each other. We are not to put our faith in our world, but we are to see it as God's creation, and our relationship to it is to stem from and be part of our relationship with God. This will lead us to treat our fellow men and the natural world with a proper respect, even reverence. A sense of wonder in this form is no hindrance to science, and may save technology from arrogant and destructive exploitation of the environment.
3 G. Kittel, *Wordbook of the New Testament*, English translation by G. Bromiley (Eerdmans 1964), Vol.2, pp.517–23; 538–45.
4 J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, English translation (S.C.M. 1967), pp.84ff.
5 E.g. *ibid.*, p.224; J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, English translation (S.C.M. 1974), p.255.
6 *Theology of Hope*, pp.45–69.
7 *Ibid.*, pp.112ff.
8 *The Crucified God*, p. 249.
9 *Ibid.*, p.255 (see also p.266).

10 *Ibid.*, p.278.
11 E.g. *Theology of Hope*, pp.143ff.
12 Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, English translation by A. Malherbe and E. Fergusson in 'Classics of Western Spirituality' series (Paulist Press 1978), pp.17–18.