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THE MANUFACTURE OF HOPE: RELIGION, ESCHATOLOGY AND THE CULTURE OF OPTIMISM

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on earlier research, which concludes that societies cannot sustain themselves without cultures of optimism. These cultures are reproduced by a complex of 'optimism promoters', all of which can be seen to be engaged in a kind of unstated or 'implicit' cultural policy, with the production of optimism as one of its goals. The institution of religion is part of this complex. Its role in the production of optimism is the focus of this article, with particular reference to soteriology (theories of salvation) and eschatology. From a 'detached' and 'functionalist' perspective, it analyses how religions manufacture hope through (1) the production of meaning; (2) through their models of divine justice; and (3) through theories of ultimate destiny. These matters are discussed in relation to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The article concludes that the optimisms of religion are of a quite different order from those promoted by other institutions.

Keywords: religion, optimism, implicit cultural policy, cultural policy, eschatology, soteriology

Optimism as Cultural Policy

In an article recently published in *Cultural Sociology*, I explored the production and function of optimism in contemporary societies (Bennett, 2010). The article acknowledged the widespread manifestation of pessimism amongst intellectuals and, indeed, saw pessimism as a more or less constant feature of Western intellectual history. However, it went on to argue that, regardless of how pervasive this kind of pessimism had become, there nevertheless existed an 'optimism of everyday life',

which performed very significant social functions. Indeed, it was proposed that the social function of optimism was so important that, without it, a society or civilisation would be unable to sustain itself.

Drawing on evidence from social and evolutionary psychology, the article suggested that an 'optimism of everyday life' was widely distributed within almost all human populations, even when people were living under the most adverse conditions. Although such optimism could be described simply as a tendency to hold positive expectations of the future, there were of course many variables in what was actually expected. The specific futures imagined were not neutral but inextricably bound up with what a person desired or valued. One person's optimism could be another's pessimism. However, these optimisms all shared a particular *mode* of viewing the future, the functions of which could be considered separately from the variety of its expressions.

The article went on to examine these functions. Optimism was found to be closely associated with both psychological and physical health; it was necessary for the proper functioning of family and social relationships; and it underpinned achievement in many different domains, such as education, business and politics. The biological basis of optimism was also examined, with particular reference to the evidence put forward by anthropologists that optimism, manifest in all human cultures, had been central to the process of human evolution.

Whilst optimism might have a biological foundation, this did not explain the various processes through which cultures of optimism continued to be mediated and

reproduced. The article concluded that the social necessity of optimism had given rise to a complex of ‘optimism promoters’,¹ which all participated in the reproduction of this culture. The family, business and political leaders, religious institutions and the medical profession were amongst those involved. This diverse range of agencies could all be seen to be engaged in a kind of unstated or ‘implicit’ cultural policy, with the production of optimism as one of its goals.²

The purpose of the article presented here is to explore in greater depth how one of these agencies, namely the institution of religion, contributes to this cultural policy of optimism. Whatever one’s view of religious institutions may be, it has to be conceded that the ‘secularisation paradigm’ so far remains speculative and that religions continue to play a major role in the life of billions of people around the world (Bennett, 2009).

The Optimisms of Religion

The Oxford theologian, Alistair McGrath, has observed that definitions of religion show a marked tendency to depend on the particular purposes and prejudices of individual scholars (2007, 447). However, whilst no universally accepted definition has emerged, McGrath suggests that there is at least now some measure of agreement that religion involves belief and behaviour linked with a supernatural realm of divine or spiritual beings. This is consistent with the useful definition of religion offered by the sociologist, Steve Bruce, which I follow here. Bruce defines religion as ‘beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers possessed of moral

purposes (the Hindu notion of Karma, for example), which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs' (2002, 2).

Whilst this definition can encompass all of the major religions extant today (and indeed many of those that are now extinct), what it should not be taken to imply is that all religions are variations on the same theme. As David Tracy has put it, 'there is no single essence, no one content of enlightenment or revelation, no one way of emancipation or liberation, to be found in all that plurality' (quoted in McGrath, 2007, 456). However, what is proposed here is that all religions offer optimism and hope,³ albeit only to some people under certain conditions, in the face of the most intractable problems of human existence. These problems, as we shall see, may be attributed to very different causes, and these, in turn, suggest an equally diverse range of religious solutions. But it can be plausibly argued that religions share a great deal of common ground as far as ends are concerned, although the means of reaching them are of course not only different but logically incompatible (Guthrie, 1995).

It should be clear from these preliminary observations that my approach to the study of religion is what might be called 'detached' and 'functionalist'. In other words, I do not approach it from the perspective of faith but out of an interest in the functions that religions perform for both society and the individual. This is territory that has been widely explored within both the sociology and psychology of religion, where religion is usually seen as a function of some other social or psychological determinant. The approach taken here is consistent with this, insofar as religion is seen as a function of the social and biological necessity of hope. However, the particular contribution that

this article will bring is its analysis of what actually constitutes religious optimism within some of the major religions.

This is clearly a very large topic that cannot be covered exhaustively in the space of one article. But it will be possible to outline the contours of the types of optimism that various religions offer and which to some extent they share. I will be focusing, in particular, on theories of salvation (soteriology) and on the associated network of beliefs relating to the end of life and history, which come under the general rubric of eschatology. For a proper understanding of these, it will be necessary to engage at some level with the theological assumptions on which such theories are based. The analysis will be conducted in relation to three themes, namely, the production of meaning, models of divine justice and theories of ultimate destiny. These themes provide a useful framework for the comparative analysis of eschatology across different religions.

THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

It is one of the ironies of intellectual history that humankind's arguably greatest achievement, namely the advance of science, has come at the cost of reducing human significance. The more we have discovered about the universe we inhabit, the more it has appeared to be cold, impersonal and utterly devoid of meaning. As the cosmologist, Paul Davies, observed, 'one of the depressing things about the last three hundred years of science is the way that it has tended to marginalise, even trivialise human beings' (1995, 85). Where humans had once stood at the centre of the universe, they now appeared to be no more than the product of a chemical accident. For Richard Dawkins, the discovery of DNA in 1953 was the final nail in the coffin of

any lingering belief that there might be something irreducibly mysterious in the living protoplasm. With undisguised triumphalism, Dawkins declared that even those disposed towards a mechanistic view of life ‘would not have dared for such fulfilment of their wildest dreams’ (1995, 17).

Of course, such challenges to the status of human life came not only from within science. The arbitrary annihilation of thousands of people through natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and plagues, had always tested the conviction that human life and history were possessed of special meaning or significance. But the terrible events of the twentieth century, involving two world wars, industrial-scale slaughter and the ensuing threat of nuclear annihilation, arguably tested it to an unprecedented degree. It certainly took its toll on Enlightenment optimism, with its promises of indefinite human progress (Bennett, 2001, 1-4). As Adorno famously observed in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘after the catastrophes that have happened and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it’ (1990, 320).

Ontological and historical pessimism of this kind continue to be pervasive (Bennett, 2001). To be sure, it is sometimes challenged, as in Raymond Tallis’s magisterial critique of counter-Enlightenment thinking in *Enemies of Hope* (1997); or, more recently, in Matt Ridley’s vision of an unceasing expansion of a bottom-up ‘catallaxy’⁴ in *The Rational Optimist* (2010). But in setting themselves up as contrary voices, these writers have the effect of underlining how widespread anxieties around human purpose and significance have become. At the private level, such anxieties can

often intensify as the prospect of one's own death comes closer; or in the aftermath of the death of a partner, child or close friend (Kübler-Ross, 2005).

It is the special preserve of religious institutions to offer hope in the face of these profound questions of human existence. This is not to suggest, of course, that it is only religion that has the capacity to endow human beings with a sense of meaning and purpose. But it is to suggest that only religions can hold out the prospect of a purposeful destiny that transcends both individual death and the confines of the physical world. This is what distinguishes religion from the many other institutions and activities from which human beings attempt to derive meaning.

Take Hinduism, for example. In all Hindu traditions, the concept of human life could hardly be further removed from that of a random accident culminating in the finality of death. For in Hinduism, a person's life can never be considered arbitrary or meaningless because it is always governed by the principle of *karma*. This is a universal principle of cause and effect, whereby the thoughts and actions of any individual rebound to produce a corresponding effect on the individual that produced them. This effect is proportionate to the degree of virtue or wickedness embodied in the original action: the former bringing rewards, the latter suffering. *Karma* can be seen to operate with or without the intervention of gods, depending upon the specific traditions of Hinduism that apply.

Whilst the principal of *karma* can be related to causes and effects within a single lifetime, its real power comes from a conceptualisation of human life as cyclical, in which the life of the individual is but one in a series of many lives. Life and death are

simply seen as points on a continuum, so that when one life terminates another commences (with or without a delay in between). In the *Bhagavad Gita*,⁵ one of the key texts of the Hindu faith, this process is compared to a changing of clothes: ‘As a man leaves an old garment and puts on one that is new, the Spirit leaves his mortal body and then puts on one that is new’ (1962, 11).

The operation of *karma* is intimately bound up with this cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). Indeed, in Hindu theology, it is the accumulation of *karma* across many lives that not only impacts on present and future lives but also fuels the process of *samsara* itself. As we shall see below, it is ignorance of the self’s true nature (*atman*) that leads to false attachments and desires, and these desires generate consequences that can only be experienced in future lives. In other words, multiple past lives produce a storehouse of effects that require future lives in order for them to be ‘paid off’. In the course of those future lives, the effects of further actions are added to the storehouse of *karma* and the cycle of death and rebirth is thus perpetuated.

A key consequence of this doctrine is, of course, the normalisation of death. Death is no longer a one-off event of terrifying finality, but merely an often repeated experience leading to new life. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, another of Hinduism’s sacred texts, death is represented as a natural process that is no more threatening than a ripe fruit separating from its stalk (Rambachan, 1997, 74). Indeed, in Hinduism, it is not an escape from death that is longed for but, on the contrary, an escape from the relentless treadmill of endless rebirths. This is the hope that Hinduism holds out – a final salvation or liberation (*moksa*), through which the self (*atman*) comes to know its true nature and to realise its identity with the divine (*brahman*).

Hindu concepts of salvation have much in common with Buddhism, which also incorporates the twin principles of *karma* and *samsara* (multiple rebirths). Both religions see release from *samsara* as the ultimate goal,⁶ although there are significant differences between them on what actually constitutes the self that is to be released.⁷

This is not the place to explore these ontological complexities further or to set out the various paths to *moksa* (*nirvana* in Buddhism) prescribed by the many different schools of Hinduism and Buddhism (see Coward, 2002, 89-160; Brandon, 1967, 165-177; Neumaier-Dargyay, 1997). However, what can be noted here is the grounds for optimism that these doctrines offer. On the one hand, human beings are represented not as insignificant creatures stranded in an indifferent world, but as inhabitants of a moral universe underpinned by the unshakeable laws of *karma*; and on the other, death is viewed not as a final annihilation but as a stepping-stone on the road to a higher destiny. Of course, optimism is not the entitlement of everyone and, as we shall see, Hindu and Buddhist eschatologies reflect concepts of supernatural justice that punish as well as reward. But what they indisputably do is bestow on human beings an intrinsic sense of significance that death not only cannot destroy but plays a part in enhancing.

If we turn to Christianity, we find much the same process at work, although of course the eschatological narratives are very different. Often couched in terms of ‘the doctrine of hope’ or, simply, the ‘Christian Hope’, these narratives, like Hinduism and Buddhism, also have the effect of endowing human life with an intrinsic purpose that transcends death. In so doing, they can offer highly optimistic visions of the future, which can either be personal or, more broadly, what Christian theologians refer to as

‘corporate’ – in other words, affecting the entire body of Christian believers and indeed, in some theological readings, the whole of humanity itself.

‘Corporate eschatology’ offers a big picture of cosmic redemption, which accounts not only for the fate of each individual life but for the ultimate destiny of the entire world. It is a kind of futurology of the world-to-come. As biblical accounts of it are necessarily allusive and in some respects contradictory, they have given rise to many different interpretations and embellishments. However, there is a sequence of events that they all broadly share: at some point in the future, history is expected to come to an end and the existing world to be replaced by an entirely new creation that is the final realisation of the Kingdom of God.

Of course, the how, where and when of these events have been subject to a huge amount of theological speculation throughout the history of Christian thought. One consequence of this has been the construction of countless apocalyptic scenarios, in which the world is violently destroyed, the righteous saved and the unrighteous condemned to the eternal fires of hell.⁸ Augustine of Hippo has to bear some responsibility for this, for it was in his highly influential writings in the fifth century that the definition of death was changed from a state of final oblivion to one in which the terrible torments of hell could be experienced for eternity (Hughes, 1989, 404-5).

During and after the Enlightenment, corporate eschatology was to some extent eclipsed by the optimistic conviction that human beings might be moving towards moral and societal perfection within this world rather than in the world to come. These ideas were underpinned by liberal theories of progress, which, in the nineteenth

century, appeared to resonate with the newly discovered mechanisms of evolution. In this climate of intellectual optimism, where human history, like all human life, appeared to be leading towards higher forms, an eschatological vision that foresaw the destruction and replacement of the existing world seemed curiously out of place (McGrath, 2007, 472).

However, after the terrible events of the twentieth century, alluded to above, it was the idea of continuing human progress that came to seem implausible; and within Christian thinking corporate eschatology made something of a comeback. A key figure in this was the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, who argued in his *Theology of Hope* that eschatology was not just some footnote to Christian dogmatics but was actually of central importance to Christian thinking. 'From first to last', he wrote 'Christianity is eschatology, is hope...The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set' (1993, 2).

One of Moltmann's key theoretical achievements was to acknowledge the secular impulse towards a better future, which lay behind the ideology of progress, and to harness it to the eschatological idea of the world-to-come. So, in other words, although the Kingdom of God at the end of history remained the final destiny of human existence, the journey towards it had nevertheless started within history, under the guidance of God, with the ameliorative efforts of Christians. For Moltmann, this was the central vision of corporate Christian hope: it provided meaning and purpose in the present life; and it offered a revelation of the future world to come.

It is this idea of ‘inaugurated’ eschatology that now commands the greatest support within contemporary Christian theology (McGrath, 2007, 473). In a recent elaboration of it, the current Anglican Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, argues that there are always going to be limits to human progress, because humanity itself is inherently flawed. Nevertheless, like Moltmann, he argues that the Kingdom of God was ‘inaugurated’ with the coming of Christ, and that it is the calling of Christians to continue his work on earth, in preparation for the ‘new creation’ to come. Wright’s vision of this coming world involves a final ‘burst of God’s creative energy’, after which ‘God will fill the Earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made’ (2007, 277).

From these brief observations, we can see how eschatological belief works to invest human life with a meaning that transcends death. Of course, the *post-mortem* scenarios that are promulgated vary from religion to religion, as we have seen in the cases of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. There are also many different *post-mortem* inflections within these religions. But as a broad generalisation, Judaism, Christianity and Islam can all be said to adopt a linear concept of time, where each life is lived once and once only, before moving to its *post-mortem* existence. In Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, life follows a cyclical pattern, and each individual life is just one of an infinite series of lives (Brandon, 1967, 176-7).

Although religions can thus all be seen, in their various ways, to offer meaning in the face of great existential questions, it does not necessarily follow that the meanings offered will produce hope and optimism for all. For there is another attribute that

many religions share: a system of divine justice through which actions in this lifetime impact on the nature of one's *post-mortem* fate.

DIVINE JUSTICE

For believers to be optimistic about the future that awaits them after death, it is usually necessary for certain conditions to be met. In Islamic eschatology, as in Judaism and Christianity, every person faces a Day of Judgement, after which they may either be condemned to the torments of hell or released into the gardens of paradise.⁹ The descriptions in the *Koran* of the damned are particularly vivid, as the following example suggests:

Verily those who have disbelieved Our signs, we shall roast in fire. Whenever their skins are cooked to a turn, We shall substitute new skins for them, that they may feel the punishment; verily, Allah is sublime, wise (4:56, quoted in Brandon, 1967, 143).

Comparisons can be drawn here with the efforts made by Augustine of Hippo, referred to above, to change the status of death in order to prove that the torments of hell could be experienced in perpetuity.

In his study of sin and salvation in world religions, Harold Coward points to the particularly powerful resonance of the idea of hell in Islam and suggests that salvation (*najat*) can be seen primarily in terms of escaping damnation. However, who actually gets to escape it has been subject to a great deal of theological debate, as indeed has been the case within Christianity.¹⁰ Certainly, belief in Allah and a commitment to following his guidance (*huda*) is an essential prerequisite. Indeed, in another comparative study, Brandon has suggested that Islam, even more than Christianity, has made 'proper faith in God rather than moral virtue the supreme criterion for salvation at the Last Judgement' (Brandon, 1967, 148).

Nevertheless, Islam offers no guarantees and Muslims are taught that salvation ultimately depends upon the will or the mercy of Allah. However, where there is disagreement is over the extent to which this can be attributed to predestination. As Coward has pointed out, Muhammed was not a systematic theologian and there are a variety of sometimes contradictory statements about predestination in both the *Koran* and the *Hadith* (sayings and accounts of Muhammed and his companions) (2003, 71). On the one hand, God is represented as the omnipotent creator of the universe, who even determines the choices that each individual makes; on the other, he is shown to have endowed humans with free will, which allows them to exercise a genuine freedom of choice. This is a paradox that can also be found in other monotheistic religions.

In the case of Islam, it is probably correct to say that most orthodox mullahs would agree with the distinguished tenth century theologian, Al-Ash'ari, who had elaborated the view that Allah pre-determined who and who was not to be saved. This view is reflected in the creeds of orthodox Islam, such as the Creed of al-Nasafi, which states that 'Allah is the Creator of all the actions of his creatures, whether of Unbelief or of Belief, of obedience or disobedience' (Miller, 1980, 153-4). Nevertheless, the *Koran* does offer some grounds of hope that an individual's profession of faith will actually be rewarded, particularly if it is accompanied by a lifetime of 'good works'. These must include the 'five pillars' of confession, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage. Thus, according to the *Koran*, 'Those that have faith and do good works, attend to their prayers and render the alms levy, will be rewarded by their Lord and will have nothing to fear or regret' (2:276). The *Koran* also suggests in a number of

places that martyrdom to the cause of Islam provides another route to salvation. For example: ‘As for those who are slain in the cause of God, He will not allow their works to perish...He will admit them to Paradise’ (47:3).

In the light of these observations, it is reasonable to suggest that those who accept Islamic faith and live according to its precepts are entitled to feel cautiously optimistic about their eschatological destiny. As Coward concludes in his study, it is the view of most ordinary Muslims that they can help to shape this destiny through the way they live their lives, whilst acknowledging at the same time that the final outcome lies in God’s hands (2003, 88). Such optimism, however, is clearly not the entitlement of non-believers, nor of those who follow other faiths,¹¹ although, as we shall see, those faiths offer entitlements of their own. Islamic soteriology thus embodies a form of divine justice, through which those who profess the faith are offered the possibility of salvation, whilst those who reject or oppose it are taught to fear retribution in the life to come.

To some extent, Christianity offers a similar system of ‘justice’, offering eschatological rewards to those who put their faith in God and denying them (or worse) to those who do not. Christian theology has also been much exercised by the question of God’s omnipotence and of whether or not human beings themselves have the power to affect their *post-mortem* destiny. This debate goes back to an early fifth century dispute between two Christian scholars, Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo, over the relationship of ‘merit’ to one’s prospects of salvation. Put briefly, Pelagius argued that salvation was the just reward for only those who had merited it through

their own actions, whilst Augustine saw salvation as a free and unmerited gift that was entirely dependent upon God's grace.

It was Augustine's view of 'salvation by grace' that prevailed within the Western theological tradition. On one level, this had the effect of suggesting a much lower bar to salvation than that proposed by Pelagius, by emphasising the willingness of God to embrace all, regardless of sin. However, at the same time, it also had the effect of suggesting that humans were helpless in the matter of their own salvation and could do nothing to influence God's will. So, whilst Augustine's victory over Pelagius theoretically widened the constituency of the saved, it also discouraged anyone from believing that their own actions could affect the final outcome.

The downside to this (for those seeking salvation) was that although everyone, in principle, could thus be saved, not everyone *would* be saved. Just as God was free to bestow grace as he saw fit, so, according to Augustine, was he free to withhold it. If human action played no part in this, then a full-blown doctrine of predestination was the logical implication, as John Calvin subsequently demonstrated. However, as McGrath points out, this doctrine was never at the centre of Calvin's theological system and should be seen more as the by-product of an attempt to understand why some people responded to the message of the gospel while others did not (2007, 381).

Christians today tend to take a more optimistic view of the operations of divine justice. For example, in an extensive statement of his own beliefs, published in 1994, Pope John Paul II reminded readers that the word 'gospel' meant 'good news' and, in the course of his statement, proceeded to refer to this 'Good News' eight times (John

Paul II, 1994). Declaring that *God is the primary source of joy and hope for man* (his italics), the Pope cited the Gospel of St John, in which God was said to have ‘so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life’ (1994, 20). It is a message frequently repeated by populist evangelical preachers, such as J. John,¹² who writes that ‘[t]he good news is that true happiness, salvation and relationship with God are made available to all humanity through Jesus Christ’. He adds that ‘the name Jesus actually means “God to the rescue”’ (2009, 23).

The clear implication here is that although faith itself may be a gift of God, once this faith is acquired, and provided life is lived in accordance with its demands, then the believer is entitled to feel optimistic about his or her eschatological future. This, of course, raises the question of the destiny of those who are not possessed of faith or of those whose lives are characterised by unrepentant iniquity. Here, the old debate between Origen and Augustine about who actually gets to be saved has never really been resolved. For on the one hand, there are those, particularly of a more fundamentalist mindset, who embrace Augustine’s exclusivist doctrine of salvation only for the faithful. On the other hand, there are many of a ‘universalist’ perspective, who, like Origen, find it difficult to reconcile the idea of a loving God with exclusivity and, in particular, with a continuing and vindictive punishment of the unfaithful. In a modern elaboration of this view, the radical, English theologian, John A.T. Robinson, has expressed his incredulity at the idea of hell, observing that ‘in a universe of love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors’ (1968, 133).

What constitutes ‘the faithful’, of course, has also been subject to a great deal of debate. As early as the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas had come up with the concept of ‘implicit faith’ to describe the attributes of those who had not yet heard the gospel but would have embraced it if they had. In a similar vein, the twentieth century Catholic theologian, Karl Rhaner, developed the term ‘anonymous Christians’ to refer to those who had experienced divine grace without necessarily knowing it (McGrath, 2007, 446-58). Adherents of other religions were thus seen to be not necessarily excluded from the possibilities of salvation.

Nevertheless, however broadly ‘the faithful’ are defined, leading figures within the Church are still unwilling to let go of a concept of divine justice that reserves the hope of eschatological reward to itself, whilst meting out punishment to those seen to deserve it. ‘Is not God who is Love also ultimate Justice?’ asks Pope John Paul II. ‘Isn’t final punishment in some way necessary in order to re-establish moral equilibrium in the complex history of humanity’ (1994, 186)? The Bishop of Durham puts it more directly:

I find it quite impossible, reading the New Testament on the one hand and the newspaper on the other, to suppose there will be no ultimate condemnation, no final loss, no human beings to whom...God will eventually say ‘*Thy* will be done. I wish it were otherwise, but one cannot for ever whistle ‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy’ (Wright, 2007, 192-3).

The eschatological ideas of divine justice that modern Christianity thus promotes seem to range from selective entry to the Kingdom of Heaven, primarily through the saving grace of faith, to a more comprehensive system through which no one is excluded. In the case of the former, the penalties of exclusion vary in severity, depending upon which theological authority is cited. In the case of the latter, everyone

is finally admitted, as a result of God's universal salvific intentions. Support for both of these positions, each of which offers hope to Christians (albeit on different grounds) can be found in the *New Testament*.¹³

The workings of divine justice in Hinduism and Buddhism also offer grounds for optimism to their adherents. However, within these religions it is not 'sin' from which human beings stand to be redeemed, as in Christianity, but 'ignorance'. According to the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, which have been influential in both Hinduism and Buddhism, ignorance (*avidya*) can be manifested in four different ways: through a confusion of the temporary with the eternal; in identifying the impure with the pure; through the mistaken belief that there is joy in evil; and in believing that the physical self is the 'true' self (Coward, 2003, 89; Stiles, 2002). It is these forms of ignorance that are said to generate false attachments and desires, which, in turn, are seen as the fundamental causes of human suffering (what Buddhists call *dukkha*). Ignorance thus produces the karmic forces that perpetuate the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*) that was discussed above.

The system of 'justice' that this represents is relatively straightforward. As we saw above, a storehouse of karmic effects is believed to build up over a series of past lives, which are then added to by further thoughts and actions in the present life. If the karmic effects of these are positive, then the self (or whatever entity it is that survives death) progresses up the ladder of rebirth towards a higher form of human life. Conversely, if the effects are negative, then the self is reborn lower down the ladder until, in the case of persistent bad *karma*, it is reborn in animal form. This is not, however, an eternal punishment, for after a period of suffering, which is more or less

equated with the lot of animal life, the accumulated bad *karma* is ‘burnt off’ and the individual is once again reborn into human form. The cycle then restarts, with the individual once more free to exercise his or her will, thus producing further karmic effects.

Strictly speaking, this system of *karma-samsara* cannot be said to function through ‘divine’ agency (although it can accommodate the existence of deities), as in both Hinduism and Buddhism *karma* is represented as an impersonal force that operates throughout the universe, much like gravity. Nevertheless, unlike gravity, it has to be understood as a supernatural phenomenon, given that no theory of physics postulates either a doctrine of reincarnation or a universal mechanism of unceasing moral evaluation. As Brandon has pointed out, the laws of *karma* have ‘the unique distinction of accounting exactly for the condition of the individual at every moment of his or her existence’ (Brandon, 1967, 177). At the same time, because all suffering is seen to have a cause, it does away entirely with a problem that has troubled many other religions, namely, the random suffering of the innocent.

What gives Hindus and Buddhists grounds for eschatological optimism is the conviction that they can, through their own actions, rid themselves of ignorance and progress towards the ultimate goal of *moksa* or *nirvana*. It is a compassionate system of ‘justice’ that rewards those who follow the path to enlightenment, whilst always offering another chance to those who do not. The paths that may be followed vary according to the many different schools of Hinduism and Buddhism,¹⁴ but they all point towards a similar destination: a destination that perhaps has more in common with that promised by Christianity and Islam than might at first be supposed.

FINAL DESTINATIONS

If a discussion of eschatological optimism is to be followed through to its logical conclusion, then it is necessary to ask what it is that religions invite believers to hope for if and when they reach their final destination. In other words, what is actually represented as the *post-mortem* salvation experience? This question has presented theologians with a number of epistemological problems, not least the absence of an evidence base and the formidable difficulties of trying to conceptualise the ineffable. Within Hinduism, the 'final destination' in any case gets a lot less theological attention than in monotheistic religions and in some schools of Buddhism (for example, the Madhyamaka school within the Mahayana tradition), language is actually seen as antithetical to the understanding of ultimate realities. This is what is taken to be the true significance of the 'Silence of the Buddha' (Chandrakanthan, 1988). Within Zen Buddhism, the use of koans, or riddles, as a teaching tool is designed to awaken in students precisely this appreciation of the inadequacies of analytical discourse for the understanding or communication of enlightenment (*satori*).

Nevertheless, problematic as it may be, attempts have been made by religious authorities to use language to convey to believers what their final destiny may be. So, for example, in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, we read that:

As rivers, flowing into the ocean find their final peace and their name and form disappear, even so the wise become free from name and form and enter into radiance of the Supreme Spirit who is greater than all greatness (The *Upanishads*, 1965, 81).

Or, in the same vein, readers of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* learn that when the goal of the Hindu spiritual quest is finally realised, ‘the self becomes disembodied and immortal, becomes the Supreme Self, Brahman, The Light’ (IV.iv.7).

These passages refer to the condition attained by *moksa*, when all the *karmas* of ignorance have been removed and the cycle of rebirths (*samara*) at last comes to an end. The nature of the true self (*atman*) is finally understood and it is discovered to be identical with *Brahman* - the principle of true reality. As Coward has pointed out, this presents a highly optimistic vision of the perfectibility of human nature: through the direct experience of realising oneness with God, human beings themselves actually become divine. In the words of the *Mundaka Upanishad*, ‘In truth, who knows God becomes God’ (*The Upanishads*, 1965, 81).

As we have seen, Buddhism, like Hinduism, also promises the possibility of release (*nirvana*) from the wearisome cycle of rebirths, and in so doing, offers a similarly optimistic vision of human perfectibility. Every person is seen to have within them the capacity to become a Buddha and this can be achieved by attending to the ‘Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path’, which reputedly convey the essence of Gautama Buddha’s teachings.¹⁵ However, Buddha himself is not associated with divinity and, indeed, is seen by Buddhists to be only one in an infinite series of Buddhas. The condition of *nirvana*, like *moksa*, signifies the complete liberation from all desires and is associated both with perfection and a kind of cosmic tranquillity. But Buddhist scriptures have relatively little to say about the post-death destination of those who have achieved *nirvana* (*parinirvana*), as this is considered to be beyond the capacity of human imagination.

Christians, on the other hand, have had no such inhibitions in imagining their final destinies. We have already seen the big picture of cosmic redemption offered by ‘corporate’ eschatology. What remains to be sketched out here is the vision of hope offered by Christian eschatology at the personal level; and while one should be cautious of making too much of this, it is nevertheless worth noting how the articulation of this vision resonates with what we have just explored within the Hindu tradition. So, for example, while Hindus envisage a final identification with *Brahman* at the attainment of *moksa*, Christians anticipate union with God upon their *post-mortem* entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the ‘beatific vision’ hinted at by St Paul, through which Christians experience a face-to-face encounter with the Divine Being.¹⁶ For Stephen Smalley, the Anglican Dean Emeritus of Chester, this encounter is the culmination of a Christian life, ‘when death simply removes the barriers of space and time in a direct revelation of God’ (2005, 10).

It is possible to see further connections with Hindu soteriology in the account of the ‘beatific vision’ put forward by Pope John Paul II. In the *post-mortem* union with God that he anticipates, Christians will not only experience ‘eternal happiness’, but also the ‘*absolute fullness of truth*’ [his italics]. Just as *moksa* is attained in Hinduism with the removal of all the *karmas* of ignorance, so does the ‘beatific vision’ of Christianity carry with it ‘the ultimate attainment of man’s aspiration to truth’ (1994, 71). For evangelical preachers, such as the hugely popular J. John, the Kingdom of Heaven is presented in rather more straightforward terms. In heaven, according to John, ‘even the deepest and darkest night will end and grief will be replaced by joy...happiness will be eternal, unlimited and invulnerable to change’ (2009, 44, 151).

It has already been suggested above that salvation (*najat*) in Islam can be seen primarily in terms of escaping damnation at the Day of Judgement. We have also seen a particularly vivid description in the *Koran* of the fate that awaits those who are condemned. Nevertheless, references in the *Koran* to Paradise outnumber those to Hell and these are presented in equally vivid terms. For example, in one much-quoted passage, no doubt reflecting the tastes of the text's presumably male authors, those favoured by Allah are promised:

Two gardens planted with shady trees. Each is watered by a flowering spring. Each bears every kind of fruit in pairs. They shall recline on couches lined with thick brocade, and within reach will hang the fruits of both gardens. Therein are bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinnee have touched before. Virgins as fair as corals and rubies. Shall the reward of goodness be anything but good? (*Koran* 55:48-60).

In his commentary on this passage, Hanna Kassis, Professor of Islamic Studies at British Columbia University, regrets that it has so often been taken literally, when in his view it should be read instead as a metaphor for the mercy and compassion that Allah bestows on the faithful at the Day of Judgement (1997, 61). The *Koran* also offers its own version of the 'beatific vision' (75:22-23) and, in the view of some scholars, it is this vision of God that the *Koran* represents as the supreme good of Paradise (Coward, 2003, 88).

Conclusion

This article began with the proposition that societies cannot sustain themselves without cultures of optimism. Whilst there was evidence to suggest that hope and optimism had biological foundations, this did not explain how cultures of optimism continued to be mediated and reproduced. This process could be understood by

examining a complex of ‘optimism promoters’, all of which can be seen to be engaged in a kind of unstated or ‘implicit’ cultural policy, with the production of optimism as one of its goals. The institution of religion was part of this complex.

The role of religion in the production of optimism has thus been the focus of this article. With particular reference to soteriology and eschatology, it has analysed how religions manufacture hope through the production of meaning; through its models of divine justice; and through theories of ultimate destiny. These matters have been discussed in relation to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The discussion could, of course, have been extended to other religions, both extant and extinct, but limitations of space have necessitated exclusions. However, from the references made to these four major religions, it is possible to see how the argument might be generalised further.

On the other hand, some readers may consider that the argument is already over-extended and that the nuances of the different doctrines discussed cannot possibly be brought out in the space of one article. However, the purpose of the paper has not been to deliver a theological exegesis ‘from within’, but rather to explore in broad terms from a cultural policy perspective how religions contribute to the manufacture of hope. This, of course, is not at all to suggest that the function of religion can be reduced to a single dimension.

Nor is it to suggest that the only optimisms that religions offer are those relating to the transcendence of death. For many people of faith, religion brings the hope of more immediate rewards. A particularly striking example of this can be found in the

writings of Helen Keller, whose religious faith appears to have sustained her in the face of severe and debilitating misfortune. Having lost all vision and hearing at the age of eighteen months, probably due to scarlet fever, Keller, against all odds, acquired language and became a prolific author, public-speaker and political activist, committing herself, amongst other things, to the suffragette movement, pacifism and radical socialism. In her essay, *Optimism*, which she wrote in 1903 as a young woman of twenty-three, Keller reflected that ‘deep, solemn optimism’, of the kind that enabled her to escape from ‘the depth where no hope was,’ was derived from a firm belief in the presence of God (1903, 13, 29). In more recent times, the connections between optimism, faith and happiness have been identified in a growing number of empirical studies (Myers, 2000, 331-333).

The lifetime rewards of religion are now often also presented in terms that are almost indistinguishable from those of therapy programmes. For example, *Alpha News* (the newspaper associated with the evangelical Anglican programme, known as *Alpha*¹⁷) recently ran a story by a young woman who had been helped by the *Alpha* programme to overcome bulimia, low self-esteem and other obsessive disorders (Messina, 2010). Published under the headline, ‘I was miserable for years then one day I typed ‘God’ into iTunes’, the message was clear: her new Christian lifestyle had succeeded where other therapies had failed.

In a similar vein, the practice of yoga, which, as we saw earlier, represented one of the four main Hindu paths to *moksa*, has now become a worldwide industry, promoted largely on the grounds of its reputed health benefits. For example, the website, [health and yoga.com](http://healthand.yoga.com), tells its visitors that ‘yoga has postures & breathing techniques for

almost all diseases, health disorders, allergies, pains etc'. The site recommends yoga postures for a large number of illnesses, ranging from heart disease to bronchitis to depression (2010).

Given the myriad of ways in which religion can be seen to offer more immediate and substantial rewards to those who live their lives according to its demands, it may seem curious to have focused in this article on the necessarily speculative and, to the secular mind, often bizarre scenarios associated with eschatology. Eschatological narratives were, after all, conceived many hundreds of years ago, inextricably bound up with the ancient cultures from which they arose.¹⁸ Yet they also have the status of 'revealed knowledge', and, by virtue of this status, carry with them truth claims that are believed to transcend their cultural or historical origins. For this reason they continue to occupy a central, if problematic, position within most religious traditions, as many of the references in this article have indicated.

Not only does it therefore seem difficult to disagree with Jurgen Moltmann's conclusion that eschatology is 'the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set'; it seems justifiable to apply it to other religions as well. For what would be left of Hinduism without *karma* or *samsara*? Or of Islam without its Day of Judgement? Detach eschatology from core religious beliefs and it soon becomes apparent that what remains is much reduced in both power and meaning. For the hope that is central to all religions is the prospect of salvation, however variously conceptualised, and it is eschatology that always provides its final consummation. The forms of optimism that religions are thus able to offer are of a quite different order from those promoted by other kinds of institution.

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NOTES

¹ This phrase was first coined by Lionel Tiger in *The Biology of Hope* (1995, xxi)

² For an extensive exploration of this, see Bennett (2013, forthcoming).

³ As Gilham et al have pointed out, optimism can be seen as a stronger version of hope, with which it is often used interchangeably (2000, 62).

⁴ ‘Catallaxy’ is the term used by the Austrian economist, Friedrich von Hayek, to describe ‘the order brought about by the mutual adjustment of many individual economies in a market’ (1976, 108-9).

⁵ The *Bhagavad Gita* is a small excerpt from the *Mahabharata*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of India, composed between 500BCE and 500CE.

⁶ In Mahayanam Buddhism, this goal is deferred through the ‘*Bodhisattva* vow’, whereby final release (*nirvana*) is delayed until it has been achieved by all other beings (Coward, 2003, 151).

⁷ Buddha considered the Hindu concept of a permanently existing self (*atman*) to be a delusion and countered it with the idea of *anatman* or ‘no-self’. The *anatman* however was still subject to the laws of *karma* and *samsara* (Coward, 2003, 139-144).

⁸ See Thompson (1996) for an extensive account of apocalyptic cults.

⁹ Muhammed's eschatology also involves a physical resurrection of the dead. Since there is no evidence of such beliefs in pre-Islamic Arabia, the idea was almost certainly derived from Judaism or Christianity (Brandon, 1967, 143).

¹⁰It should be noted here that, at the level of lived experience, *fear* of damnation can outweigh the hope of salvation and result more in pessimism than optimism. In extreme cases, a religion-induced preoccupation with sin and guilt can lead to psychiatric disorders that require professional treatment (see Rachman (2003) and Bhugra & Bhui (2007)).

¹¹ Although there are major theological differences between Islam, Judaism and Christianity, Jews and Christians are accepted as believers in the *Koran*, since Moses and Jesus are acknowledged as authentic prophets.

¹² John has own ministry, known as the Philo Trust, which aims to 'show how faith in Jesus Christ is not only reasonable, but relevant and vitally important'. According to the Trust's website, John has to date completed thousands of speaking engagements in 54 countries on 6 continents. He is said to have authored over 50 titles and to have over a million copies of his books in print in thirteen languages (Philo Trust, 2010).

¹³ See, for example, the so-called parable of the 'sheep and goats' in Matt. 25:31-46 and, alternatively, the reference to God's universalist intentions in Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁴ For a useful introduction to this, see Coward, 2003, 104 -123 & 141-160. Coward focuses on the four main Hindu pathways (*marga*) to *moksa*, as set out in the *Bhagavad Gita*: knowledge (*jnana marga*), action (*karma marga*), devotion (*bhakti marga*) and self-discipline (*yoga marga*). Paths to enlightenment within Buddhism are discussed in relation to the two major sects of Theravada and Mahayana.

¹⁵ The Buddha, like Jesus Christ, wrote nothing himself and his teachings were not recorded in written form until hundreds of years after his death in around 483 BC.

¹⁶ See I Corinthians 13:12

¹⁷ Although originating from the Evangelical Anglican tradition, *Alpha* now attracts support across all the major denominations for its introductory programmes in Christianity. Starting in London in the late 1970s, it expanded rapidly in the 1990s and now reports that 15 million people worldwide have attended over 33,500 courses in 163 countries (Alpha, 2010).

¹⁸ This of course explains the many varieties of eschatological narrative within and across different religions, including contrasting patterns of inclusion/exclusion. Subsequent theological elaborations can no doubt also be related to the historical circumstances in which they were produced. However, this is a larger topic that is beyond the scope of this article.

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