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The Hope That Will *Not* Abide

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I begin this paper with the question, “What is the contrary of hope?” The answer would seem to be, not despair, but hate. Hate is the contrary of hope.

Both the word “hate” and the word “hope” shift easily in common use between verb and noun. “There is a considerable amount of hate around right now,” we might say, “And not much hope.” This paper is interested in this shift between verb and noun as a verbal fact, wanting to hold up for inspection the verbal characteristics of the word “hate” and the word “hope.” When we hold these words up for inspection in this way, their emotionality stands out. “I hate this,” we say; “I hope that ...”

The gospel of John, and one synoptic gospel, the gospel of Luke, direct “hate” in an unexpected way that rewards such inspection. Taking up the gospel of Luke first: at 14:26, Luke reads, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” The gospel of John, at 12:25, reads, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” These are odd, even visceral uses of the verb hate. They show that something more is involved in the notion of “hate” than simple “rejecting.” To hate something is not only to reject it, but to do so in a way that engages the whole person.

Luke uses “hate;” Matthew, in contrast to Luke, has Jesus state the same interdiction against familial solidarity using “love”: Matthew’s redaction is, “He who loves father or mother ... he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (10:37). Matthew’s decision to distinguish on the basis of “love” in contrast to Luke’s decision to distinguish on the basis of “hate” compares well with the way “hate” is used in 1 John. In 1 John there is a contradiction of Luke’s use and the gospel of John’s use: “He who

hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:10,11). Though it is likely the letter is referring to “brothers in faith” and not to a sibling, at bottom is a sense that “hate” is inappropriate. This use may or may not be a real contradiction of the Luke and John uses. Hate may well be appropriate in familial circumstances. Matthew and the writer of first John keep hate away from home. Luke and the gospel of John give it an active role in life and family.

The letter to the Ephesians also gives a theologically considered rejection of the very claims Luke makes: “no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:29).

Post-structural method will enable us to hold these several uses of the verb “to hate” in play with each other because post-structural method helps our resisting the attempt to rationalize or generalize any import of any of their uses beyond their literary context. It is rather a structuralist tendency to subsume “hate” within a more positive emotionality precisely because the coherence of structure rests on a coherence or connectivity in emotion. Love generally provides that coherence and connectivity. Thus, I submit, post-structural method gives us, in contrast to structuralist approaches (if we are so inclined or disciplined) an experience of the intense emotion of hate. This is all to the good, because, from my perspective, the engagement of the whole person that one experiences with hate is sympathetic to the engagement of the whole person that one experiences in hope.

What seems clear from these initial observations and comments about hate and hope is that, not only is the Bible not univocal in either the emotion of hate, or of hope, that its multi-vocality results in an opening into the emotions. They will toss us and turn us like a sea. “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters ...” Hate is not to be repressed. We cannot simply be nice people who do not hate. Yet “who hates his or her own flesh?” asks the letter to Ephesians. “No one,” is the writer’s unstated, and unequivocal, answer. As it is with our flesh, infers the writer, so it is with Christ and the church. If people are not to hate the flesh, what are they to do? Following the writer of Ephesians, they cherish the flesh, nourish it, love it. They do not *hate* it, and *they do not hope for it*.

The vibrant and vital emotion contrasted with hate and elided then by the writer of Ephesians here is not love: it is hope. Hate is placed in a position contrary to hope (love, we shall see, is in some other kind of relationship to hate). Someone who hates his family may not love his family, but he certainly hopes for his family. It follows that someone who does not hate his flesh, will not hope for his flesh. With its insistence on the general resurrection of the dead, the fundamental tone of Christian apocalyptic is, ironically, lack of hope – and hate – about the flesh. It is an ironic tone because there is a clear directive in Christian apocalyptic to love the flesh. John's gospel articulates this theme in the pericope in which the resurrected Jesus meets Mary Magdalene in the garden. The writer of John has Jesus say to Mary, "Do not touch me, I am not yet ascended to my Father who is in heaven" (John 20:17). The synoptic gospel handling of this theme is found in Jesus' reply to the Sadducees who ask whom a widow is to be married to in heaven since she has married several brothers who have all died (Matthew 22:24-30). "There is no giving and receiving in marriage in heaven," responds Jesus. So it follows that we, in fact, cherish the flesh, but we neither hate it, nor hope for it. "Do not touch me, Mary," we might suggest the risen Jesus means, "and hate me for it." There is a shift in relationship that is apocalyptic.

What strikes me as a sign of our institutional times, and more specifically, of these times in the university, is the repression of the emotion of hate. Bureaucratic repression of this very strong emotion is concomitantly a repression of the emotion of hope. When someone is impolitic enough to say that "deconstruction is hateful" and mean it, there is a flurry of rationalizations that deconstruct the saying. Hate is deconstructively repressed. Such "non-confessing" post-modern approaches, however, seem not to me to be alone in their tendency to repress hate. In the theology concerning hope I have read for this paper I find very little, if any, substantial commitment to the emotionality of hope. That is not quite accurate. What I find, whether in Jurgen Moltmann, or Rowan Greer, or Edward Farley, Johanne Baptista Metz or Ivana Dolejsova, or Paul Ricouer,¹ is the certain conviction that while hope is an emotion and a word, it is not only an emotion and a word. Because it is not only an emotion and word, but something beyond, and something more, *a concept*, hope's verbal emotionality is discounted. Because it is not only an emotion and a word, but something beyond, and something more, hope's verbality (is there such a word?) as a word

among words – including and specifically its verblatness in relationship to the verblatness of the word hate – is discounted.

I suppose, however, that careful thinkers do see their points of departure with respect to hope as intellectually sane. Their point is to be conceptually clarifying. I argue that when we talk about hope we are talking about a sanity that is more than intellectual, and anything that anyone can reasonably offer respecting the verbal emotionality of the word hope may, in fact, be offering to others the prospect of a sanity that is more than intellectual.

The imaginative terrain of hate and hope is the wilderness: the terrain of John the Baptist. John elicited strong emotional reactions of hate and hope, and expressed his hates and hopes with noteworthy vigour. The Scriptural evidence suggests that *John* hated a great deal, and hoped as much. Given this evidence, it is interesting that historical-critical method has been used to argue that the early Christian community was in all practical ways as uncomfortable with John as the gospels report Herod the tetrarch was. Some critical analysis suggests the process of redaction in every one of the gospels works to discount John the Baptist's place in the narrative of salvation.² I would in contrast suggest that it is enlightenment anxiety with the visceral emotions of both hope and hate – how else to say it? – that imposes upon the Scripture and upon John this bizarre notion that competition marks the relationship.

Take, for example, the famous, "Why, have you come here to escape the wrath to come? you brood of vipers!" John knows why the "Pharisees" and "Sadducees" of Matthew, and the "multitudes" of Luke, have come. They have come to watch, and judge. He expresses considerable hate for them, and also considerable hope. His approach with his verbal attack is to break down their judgementalness with fierce, independent good humour, so that the hope he has for them, and which he judges they may have for themselves, might be realized in their lives, whether in his baptism in the Jordan, or somehow else. He is not really concerned how it happens, nor particularly concerned that it happens. John's demeanour, John's approach, John's actions, are consistent with Ephesians' insistence on the notion that we do not hate our flesh. We do not hate our flesh: *we do not hope for it either*. Our hates and hopes have to do with our lives, values, ethics, politics. John's hope and John's hate are consistent with the early Christian community's.

John's enactment of hate and hope is emotionally and verbally coherent. John's emotional and verbal coherence, John's hate and hope are at the heart of Jesus' ministry. There are consequences for the Christian theology of hope in this emotional and verbal coherence. I focus my discussion of these consequences by commenting on a study done by John Wall on the ethical implications of Paul Ricouer's theology of hope.

In a recent article John Wall contends that Ricouer develops a theological ethics that depends on joining a teleological basis for ethics with a deontological basis.³ The teleological basis is a *faith* that *goodness* is the end by which we judge radical evil. The deontological basis is a *love* for *justice* as an overflowing duty respecting self and others. For Ricouer, hope (writes Wall) is a reconciliation of *justice* and *goodness*, and of *faith* and *love*. The reconciliation is given to us by God in a moral tragedy called real life.

Wall observes that Ricouer's views on hope are significantly less explicit than his views on faith and love. One reason his views on hope might be less explicit than his views on faith and love is that an ethics developed upon the foundations of the good as a teleological construct and justice as a deontological construct resulting in a hoped for reconciliation of both in the context of life as a moral tragedy, while impressive intellectually, misses much of what hope is about. Ricouer's system apparently negates hate by directing boundless love at it. If you negate hate, you eliminate the contrary to hope. If one develops an ethical system that does not take into account the reality of the contraries hope and hate, one must repress hope as much as one represses hate. Where hate is eliminated, thought about hope is not going to be explicit.

What caught my eye, as I pondered upon these things, was the way in which Wall had lined up *faith* in Ricouer with the question of the good, and *love* with the question of the true, and arrived at hope as a response or tonic to life that is a *moral tragedy*. At the end, Wall chooses, if Ricouer does not, an *aesthetic* category to articulate notions of *hope*. Wall's argument with respect to hope is intricately linked to a notion of the *beautiful* that he is not explicit himself about; he does not theorize "moral tragedy."

The beautiful is buried, then, in Wall, and perhaps in Ricouer. I feel there is something here of hate of the flesh in this burying of the beautiful. More specifically, in light of the relationship between hate

and hope John's preaching entailed, I do not see Wall's understanding of Ricouer's ethics developing out of the Baptist's baptism of Jesus at all. This disturbs me and interests me, as the yoking of John the Baptist with the idea of the beautiful may disturb readers.

How do Wall and (and perhaps) Ricouer get to this place? I suggest it is because neither takes into consideration that hate and hope are contraries. Their contrariness is an important aesthetic or imaginative fact because, as we can see in the case of John the Baptist, their contrariness warrants both a profound social critique and a profound sense of humour. In contrast, love and hate *negate* each other: they cancel each other out. When they are brought together, the result is not imaginative clarity, but intellectual abstraction and confusion. As I have said, Ricouer's system apparently negates hate by directing boundless love at it. If one develops an ethical system that does not take into account the reality of the contraries hope and hate, one represses hope as much as one represses hate. Hope is repressed in Ricouer's thinking. The theology is a series of negations, an *overwhelming* series of negations.

As an ordained minister working with a congregation,⁴ it matters to me if I use modes of thought that in fact repress hope. It was thus with interest that I recently read an article by Donald Capps of Princeton Seminary entitled, "The Pursuit of Unhappiness in American Congregational Life."⁵ Capps observes that he intends to examine in this article the notion of "happy and unhappy" congregations and to center his analysis specifically on the chronically unhappy congregation. He notes that there is a growing literature on "healthy and unhealthy" congregations and that it had become the primary focus of the field of congregational study. He takes a different tack. His impetus for the article was Paul Watzlawick's small book, *The Situation is Hopeless, but not Serious*.⁶ The book proposes the theory that individuals are extremely adept at making themselves unhappy. Capps felt the book might well "be viewed as a commentary on American institutional life in general, and on the congregation in particular."⁷ For my purposes here, I wonder if the questions of faith, freedom, and the academy might be considered in light of the tendency of the university as another form of (North) American institutional life to make itself unhappy?

What intrigued me in Capps' appropriation of Watzlawick is the humour of Watzlawick's book's title: *The Situation is Hopeless, but*

not Serious. That we could be in a situation that is hopeless, and yet, not serious, seems to me to be a situation most of the theology and theory of hope I have read does not entertain. The point is that we rarely imagine that *our* hopes, whatever they are and however finely intelligible, are *excessively* serious.

An approach to John the Baptist that begins from his having a remarkable sense of humour grounded in hate and hope is an approach, I argue, that, while enabling us to concede that our hopes can be excessively serious, does not run the risk of trivializing either our hopes, or us. I suggest the good-humoured glint in the eye of John the Baptist would be quite enough to safeguard us from that.

If I were to put words into John the Baptist's mouth moments before he was decapitated, they would be something like, "pity the dancing was not better." If the dancing had been better, as in, apocalyptically better, there would have been no cutting off heads out of jealous spite and intense moral anxiety around sexuality. But of course, the dancing was not better, and so far, the dancing has not been good enough anywhere else.

The words I put into John's mouth have to do with art; the hate which the whole episode reveals John expressing is hate directed toward the anxieties of sexual morality. "Pity the dancing was not better" gets at both the hope, and the hate.

In putting the words, "pity the dancing wasn't better," into John the Baptist's mouth just before he gets his head cut off, I think I am making explicit the aesthetic quality of hope, the sense that hope is the apprehension of the beautiful, however we might construct it, and that apocalyptic hope, and John's hope, is the judgement of the beautiful, expressed definitively in the Bible as consummation of the wedding feast, upon this hateful life of ours. "One is coming after me," says John, "who will be greater than I." The tone of John's comment would be a robust (with a good dose of that glint-in-the-eye humour John has), "And good luck to him, with his baptism of fire."

I think that the most intelligible way to describe hope is to identify it as that engagement of the whole person with art in a manner after the impression I have sought to give of John the Baptist. In this light, I conclude with a quotation from poet Vaclav Havel, who recently stepped down from the Presidency of the Czech Republic. He defines hope in the passage I leave you with. Please keep your ear open for the baptismal imagery of water and spirit, but also observe

how Havel's hope loses traction at the end, when he uses the word "hopeless" instead of – what I think he really means – "hateful":

Hope is ... not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.⁸

Notes

- 1 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Rowan Greer, *Christian Hope and Christian Life: Raids on the Inarticulate* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity, 1996); and Ivana Dolejsova, *Accounts Of Hope: A Problem of Method in Postmodern Apologia* (European University Studies, Series 23, Theology, vol. 726. New York: Peter Lang, 2001).
- 2 See the discussion in Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (London: Cambridge UP, 1968).
- 3 Wall, John, "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Significance for Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 29/2 (2001): 235-260.
- 4 The United Church of Canada
- 5 Capps, Donald, "The Pursuit of Unhappiness in American Congregational Life," *Pastoral Psychology*, 39/1 (1990): 3-23.
- 6 Paul Watzlawick, *The Situation is Hopeless, but not Serious: (the pursuit of unhappiness)* (New York: Norton, 1983).
- 7 Ibid., p. 3.
- 8 Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (reprint, New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 181f.